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Where to train? For therapists who want to work with people at risk of committing a sexual offence



By Juliet Grayson

Working with people who have committed (or might commit) a sexual offence is a specialised field. At the very least, therapists need to:

- Think about how to keep themselves safe
- Know the basics of the laws around sexual offending and the legal requirements about reporting illegal behaviour
- Develop a proportionate response to risk
- Think about the ethical issues involved in this work including reporting (and not reporting)
- Consider their own reaction to working with sex offenders, including arousal, disgust, and vicarious trauma
- Understand the dynamics of working with these clients, some of whom are experts at manipulation and grooming
- Be aware of the criminogenic and other factors that research suggests will reduce sexual reoffending
- Know what is within their competence and when to refer on

Will you always know when one of these clients walks through your door?

Not necessarily! Whilst your client *might* be direct that the reason for therapy is to address sexually inappropriate behaviour, many will be too ashamed or scared. They may present with a different problem, only revealing the actual reason for accessing therapy once they have established sufficient trust. So, every therapist might encounter a client who is bringing these issues. For example, a client who starts therapy for his depression, and after three months admits that he has been looking at child abuse images as a way of calming himself down. Because of this possibility, I recommend that all therapists have some continuous Professional Development (CPD) to prepare themselves for that situation.

The training that StopSO offers

StopSO, The Specialist Treatment Organisation for the Perpetrators and Survivors of Sexual Offences, offers therapists a Foundation Training consisting of three days, (if preferred, therapists can just attend one or two of these days). StopSO also offers a ten-day Certificate in Therapeutic

Practice with Sex Offenders, and various ad-hoc training days, 'good practice days', and peer supervision days.

The StopSO Foundation Training

This consists of three one-day workshops which are accredited for CPD by the College of Sex and Relationship Therapists (COSRT):

- **Crossing the Line Day:** Provides legal and ethical position when treating those at risk of committing a sexual offence, foundational knowledge about how and why individuals commit sexual offences, and explores the emotional demands of working with this client group. This includes making the distinction between the duties of care to the sex-offender-client, as opposed to the child or adult that (s)he might harm. Therapists need to know where the legal line is, and to choose where they place their ethical line. They may have to break confidentiality to report a client, so having a clear contract and procedure for this is vital.
- **Assessing Risk Day:** Provides a framework for assessing individuals accused or convicted of a sexual offence, in order to help therapists make informed decisions about whether they are competent to work with a given client, deciding whether or not to maintain or break confidentiality and report a client, and helping therapists to make case formulations based on relevant risk and criminogenic factors. The day also covers the risk to the client of suicide.
- **Treatment Interventions Day:** Provides a historical perspective on treatment intervention for this client group, and explores how a range of therapeutic models and approaches can be applied to working with individuals who pose a sexual risk. The day offers a chance to role-play working with a client. Participants are taught about the criminogenic factors that are empirically proven to work with sex offenders.

For those who want a deeper training in this topic

StopSO offers the Certificate in Therapeutic Practice with Sex Offenders, which is also accredited for CPD by COSRT. This is open to those who have already completed the three- day Foundation training. This ten-day course covers:

- 1) Emotional issues for practitioners
- 2) Attachment and trauma issues
- 3) Power and control issues and paraphilias
- 4) Sexual assault and rape
- 5) Working with female offenders
- 6) Paedophiles: offending and non-offending
- 7) Working with adolescents
- 8) Internet offending and sexual addiction
- 9) Working with family members
- 10) Couple work

Writing court reports and making full risk assessments

Therapists need to be aware that some clients will seek therapy when they have been arrested, in the hope that it might lessen their sentence. Sometimes, their main reason for attending therapy is *not* to work on the issues, but to persuade the therapist to write a report for the court. Glyn Hudson Allez, forensic psychologist (retired) told me, "I always tell them in the first session that I do not

write court reports. The clients who are coming solely for that, and who don't really want to change, don't come back. That way I get to work with clients who are motivated to change. I use that to 'weed out' the ones who are serious about attending therapy."

Doing a full risk assessment, or writing a court report for the criminal justice system is a specialist skill. Some therapists naively assume that StopSO's one-day Risk Assessment workshop will provide them with the skills required. This is not so. Writing a formal risk assessment for a court often takes some 15-20 hours per client and costs many thousands of pounds. It requires an understanding of social services, the criminal justice system, child protection, and the various protocols used.

Other trainings that are available

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation runs training days for professionals on topics such as child protection, sexual offending and exploitation prevention. These are aimed at social workers, police officers, probation officers, health visitors and school nurses, as well as psychologists.

The National Organisation for the Treatment of Abusers offers one-day training workshops and conferences on the topics related to sexual offending. However, they do not offer trainings aimed specifically at therapists and counsellors.

For those who want to specialise in Forensic Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, the NHS Portman Clinic offers a 2-year training leading to a qualification with the British Psychoanalytic Council as a psychodynamic psychotherapist. They also run shorter courses looking at forensic issues such as sexual violence, risk, etc

Various universities offer courses in Forensic Psychology and Criminology courses.

Related courses: sexual addiction

Some people who view underage images online may be struggling with an addiction to pornography in general, and the offending may be more connected to an escalation of their addiction, than an attraction to minors.

The Institute for Sex Addiction Training provide an Accredited Diploma in Sex Addiction Counselling which includes training on how to work with people with addiction who offend.

The Marylebone centre offers an Accredited Diploma in Sex Addiction Training which includes sections on forensic work.

Report writing for courts

Bond Solon offer a five-day Expert Witness Training for people who want to write court reports and appear as an expert witness. However, it is worth noting that being able to write a court report is not essential if you plan to work with sex offenders. In fact, StopSO recommends that the person who sees the client for therapy is *not* the same person who writes their report. This is due to the challenge of remaining truly impartial. As an example, although I have worked with people who have committed sexual offences for ten years, I do not feel that I have the required skills to write these reports. Instead, I tell my clients that I will write a simple letter that informs the reader (often the court) about the number of sessions and the level of engagement of the client.

Should training be on all psychotherapy courses?

Many therapists will decide not to work with sex offenders and that is a valid choice. However, it is important for them to know where to refer clients who are struggling with sexually inappropriate behaviour. Although there is not time to cover forensic training in depth on all psychotherapy courses, an awareness of this as a specialist field of psychotherapy should be introduced into all basic psychotherapeutic trainings. Students, and indeed all therapists, would be wise to think about how they will respond to the client who presents with depression, but then three months into therapy admits to looking at child abuse images.

JULIET GRAYSON BIOGRAPHY

Juliet Grayson is a co-founder and chair of StopSO. She is a UKCP registered Psychotherapist, and author of *Landscapes of the Heart: The working world of a sex and relationship therapist* published by Jessica Kingsley Publishing. Juliet runs a group for sex offenders in South Wales using the Pesso Boyden System of Psychotherapy. She also offers a 12-day training for therapists called *How to Work With Couples* (accredited by COSRT). www.therapyandcounselling.co.uk juliet@stopso.org.uk