
SNAP

Survivors Network *of those* Abused by Priests

New England Chapter
Phil Saviano, Regional Coord.

Why is Confidentiality Important to SNAP?

Confidentiality is the basis to any interaction between a SNAP leader and a victim of clergy sexual abuse. For anyone who has lived in silence for many years, it takes great courage to speak to another person about the abuse that caused him or her so much shame, guilt and fear. They would not come to SNAP if there were concerns that the private information they reveal could be passed along to a third party, especially to lawyers for the church.

Children who are sexually abused by clergy have lifelong struggles with trust. To the child or adolescent, the priest is seen as an all good, all powerful, benevolent being—as close to God as a human can be. Consequently, the molestation is not just an abuse of the body, it is an abuse of the soul. Victims feel a tremendous sense of confusion, betrayal and shame that has a dramatic effect on their ability to trust others, and achieve emotional intimacy later in life. Victims may spend years learning to open up and trust other people, trying to regain a sense of control over their lives and working hard to dispel feelings of shame and guilt.

For those victims who reach out to the SNAP network, the process of recovery often begins with the first phone call to a local SNAP leader. The victim finds the courage to move from many years of secrecy and shame and turns to SNAP for advice and emotional support. Often, these calls come from individuals who have been harboring the secret for decades. They have been so embarrassed and so traumatized by their abuse, that most have never confided in even their closest friends or relatives.

They choose to confide in SNAP because we offer a safe and secure environment, and because of our many years of collective knowledge and experience about this issue. But few would seek our support unless we also offered confidentiality.

Victims know they can share their secret with us, and it will go no further. This issue almost always comes up during the first conversation. The victim says something like, "This is confidential, right? I don't want anyone else to know about this." That is the basis of the interaction. Once a level of trust is established regarding confidentiality, then the victim can begin to open up, reveal his or her experience, and start to get the help he needs to overcome it. The first calls generally last from 45 minutes to well over an hour. At the beginning the victim may feel great anxiety, is often tearful, but the mood lifts dramatically as the connection is made and the victim begins to feel a sense of trust with the SNAP leader. The security of that first interaction is crucial, and it sets the stage for the entire healing process.

OVER

From there, the victim is often able to take a series of gradual steps. These can include calling back a second time, or agreeing to be in contact with another person in the SNAP network, either by phone or by e-mail. Eventually, he may want to reach out to another victim of the same priest. But the confidentiality of all of the discussions, and the trust and security of the network, remain essential to the victim's willingness to speak out.

The next big step is showing up at a support group meeting. Here, too, confidentiality is a key element. Meetings are open only to survivors and one close relative or supporter of the survivor. Meetings are known to be a safe place where victims don't have to worry about being seen by outsiders or news reporters or spies for the church. The need for confidentiality is a written part of the meeting guidelines that are handed out to each new member and discussed periodically at the beginning of each session. Essentially, what is said at the meeting stays within the group.

At the meetings, there is strength in numbers. Being able to network with other victims is an essential element to healing from this sort of childhood experience. This involves sharing concerns about the emotional after-effects of abuse, seeking guidance on legal ways to seek accountability, reaching out for support after being rejected by one's family. No one would enter into the discussion if he had concerns that the information he revealed in the group could one day be used against him.

Emotional healing is based on trust. Trust is based on confidentiality. The effectiveness of SNAP's outreach to victims depends upon our ability to have records regarding who comes to us for help, and when, and why, and to keep them both private and secure.

#