

How to Cope if You're Sexually Harassed by a Powerful Abuser

Speak up right away and seek support.

By [Ruben Castaneda](#), Staff Writer | Nov. 9, 2017, at 11:50 a.m.



Writing about your feelings and joining a support group can help with coping. (Getty Images)

Some of the dozens of women who allege they were [sexually harassed or assaulted](#) by movie mogul Harvey Weinstein say their encounters with the Hollywood titan left them feeling bewildered, embarrassed and even guilty that they didn't fight back harder against someone who had a huge physical advantage.

In an interview published in *The New Yorker*, actress Annabella Sciorra alleged that she opened the door at her apartment one night, and Weinstein pushed his way in. She told him to leave. But the much larger Weinstein shoved her onto her bed and got on top of her, Sciorra recounted. "I kicked and yelled," but Weinstein forced her to have sexual intercourse, she alleges. The actress didn't tell anyone about the incident in the months that followed. "Like most of these women, I was so ashamed of what happened," she told *The New Yorker*. She thought, "Why did I open that door? Who opens the door at that time of

night? I felt disgusting. I felt like I had [bleeped] up.” In the wake of the numerous allegations, Weinstein has issued a broad apology for his behavior while maintaining he never forced anyone to have sex with him.

Sciorra’s self-blaming response is common among victims of sexual harassment and assault, says Anita Gadhia-Smith, a psychotherapist who practices in the District of Columbia and Maryland. “Victims of predatory behavior often grapple with mixed feelings – a combination of anger, hurt, guilt and confusion,” she says. “While victims know that they did not cause the act to occur on a conscious level, it is not uncommon for victims of a sexual predator to feel shame and blame themselves for what happened. They may ask themselves questions like ‘Did I do anything to invite this?’ or ‘Was there something I could’ve done to stop this?’” Many victims of sexual misconduct experience [anxiety](#), [depression](#) and interrupted sleep, she says.

The issue of sexual harassment and predatory behavior by powerful men burst into the public consciousness in recent weeks with press reports of harassing behavior and other sexual misconduct by Weinstein and others. Actresses Asia Argento and Rose McGowan accused Weinstein of sexual assault and rape, respectively. As the Weinstein story was exploding, The New York Times reported that former Fox News host Bill O’Reilly settled allegations of sexual harassment and a nonconsensual sexual relationship levied by a Fox News contributor for \$32 million. On the heels of that, NBC News dropped political journalist Mark Halperin days after CNN and other news outlets reported he sexually harassed at least a dozen women when he worked at ABC News, with accounts stretching from the 1990s into the mid-2000s. Halperin apologized for his behavior and denied committing sexual assault, as some of his accusers alleged. Days after the Halperin story broke, Michael Oreskes, the top editor at National Public Radio, resigned after The Washington Post reported he made unwanted sexual advances to two women who were seeking jobs at The New York Times in the 1990s, when he was a high-ranking editor at the paper.

The account by one of the women who accused Oreskes of sexual misconduct illustrates the potential psychological damage that can be inflicted by a harasser who has the power to affect a victim’s career. The woman, who declined to be identified by name, told the Post that Oreskes kissed her and put his tongue into her mouth after they shared a cab from an airport into New York City. “The worst part of my whole encounter with Oreskes wasn’t the weird offers of room service lunch or the tongue kiss but the fact he utterly destroyed my ambition,” she said.

The woman’s despairing reaction could reflect [a feeling of hopelessness](#) that some victims of sexual misconduct experience, says Dr. Renee Binder, director of the psychiatry and law program at the University of California, San Francisco, and past president of the American Psychiatric Association. Such encounters can harm a victim’s self-image and self-esteem, she says. Some victims conclude, “If I have to do this to get ahead, forget it, I won’t be participating,” Binder says. Being reduced to a sexual object can be “profoundly damaging,” adds William Wiener, a clinical psychologist in New York City. “The message is that it’s not

about your talent and perseverance, but about who you will allow to touch your body parts.”

Such anxieties are legitimate, says Lisa Bloom, a Los Angeles attorney who has represented countless sexual harassment and assault victims for more than 30 years. (Bloom has represented several women with allegations against O'Reilly, and advised Weinstein for a brief time this fall as the first wave of allegations against him broke.) “Influential harassers can also call up their friends and tell them not to hire someone,” she says. “Everything is amplified when the abuser is powerful.”

To cope with harassment or an assault by a powerful abuser, experts recommend these strategies:

Talk to someone about the abuse. “Allow yourself to have and experience all those confusing emotions,” Gadhia-Smith says. “Bring those emotions out by talking through them. The more you get those feelings out, the less power they will have over you. It’s our secrets that keep us stuck in shame. Telling the truth and speaking honestly about what happened is the greatest shame-buster that there is.” Writing about your feelings can also be therapeutic, she says. Close relatives, trusted friends and spiritual advisors are good people to talk to, she says. Don’t be cowed by the perpetrator’s perceived power and influence, she advises. “Do not give them any special status or cover up for them,” she says. If the harasser or attacker is a work supervisor or co-worker, “contact human resources or [a] supervisor. Do not let anyone take your power away from you.”

Look for a support group. Sharing your trauma with other people who’ve experienced similar pain can be useful, Wiener says. “Talking about what you’re going through with others who have had similar experiences can be a healing and positive way to cope,” he says. Listening to others who have gone through [similar traumas](#) can help destigmatize the experience. In this kind of setting, victims can learn that such experiences are bigger than them. “It’s a social ill,” Wiener says. If you can’t find a [support group](#) for people who’ve experienced sexual misconduct in your area, look for an online community.

Consider seeking professional help. If you experience ongoing symptoms – such as [depression](#), [nightmares](#) and anxiety – consider seeing a mental health professional, Binder advises. “If there’s something that continues to bother you that is getting in the way of your day-to-day functioning, go get some help,” she says. You can get referrals from friends, relatives and your primary care physician. The American Psychiatric Association also has a tool on its website to help patients find a psychiatrist in their area.