

Wait, Was That... Sexual Grooming!?!

blogs.psychcentral.com/narcissism/2017/07/wait-was-that-sexual-grooming

July 25, 2017



Last week, I queried my Facebook friends, most of whom are narcissistic abuse survivors, on the subject of grooming. I asked them if they felt they had been “groomed” by the narcissist(s) in their life to accept unwanted and perhaps even inappropriate physical contact. I called it “lite grooming” because 1) it may not have been *overtly* sexual in nature and 2) it may never have cumulated in actual molestation or a sexual act.

The response was an overwhelming “YES!” with a few “110%’s” and “Write-An-Article’s” thrown in for good measure. Several friends shared specific stories as well. The conclusion seemed to be that “lite grooming” was systemic to narcissistic lack-of-boundaries resulting in their children having either *zero* physical boundaries OR mile-high, barbed-wire topped physical boundaries.

Is It “Lite Grooming” or Just Weirdness?

Call it dumb luck or Divine Intervention, but I was lucky enough to find myself in therapy last year with a psychologist who had defended his doctoral dissertation on this very topic: grooming. The subject was a passion for him and an area of great interest for me. As I shared my life story with him, I stressed that I was raised to be a perfect little lady. Say “no”

and push hands away from the “No Touch” zones. Run from strangers offering candy and all of that. Parties, sleepovers, play dates, field trips...anything like that were largely forbidden “so you don’t get sexually molested.” And yet, there seemed to be an asterisk, a footnote, a loophole in this *excellent* and careful training.

For example, as a little girl I complained to my parent that I felt violated when my grandmother habitually patted my chest, definitely a “No Touch” according to my parents’ teaching. I was assured they would “speak to Grandma about it.” But nothing changed. So I complained again and was told, “Grandma doesn’t mean anything by it. She won’t stop so just put up with it.”

This loophole led to other loopholes in my girlhood. I learned to “suck it up” when playtime got too rough and caused me physical pain. I wasn’t allowed to become solely responsible for bathing myself until I was in third grade. When I was tickled until I screamed, I was sternly ordered, “Quiet down! Do you want the neighbors to call the police!?” When I tried to dodge my parent’s probing tongue, my shoulders were held as I was forced to accept both ears being thoroughly licked. And then there was the hard, painful slapping to make my childish thighs jiggle. By the age of five, I was already suffering from the floating sensation of depersonalization and what I believe are called “body memories.” A horrible sensation in the skin. All I could do was curl up in the fetal position until the feeling dissipated.

I hated spooning with Mom when I was little, but she loved it. We thought nothing of always sharing a public bathroom stall and fitting room together well into my twenties. At fifteen, when I removed my bra and asked my mother to take a quick look to see if I was developing normally as a woman, why did she ask to *touch!?! (WTF!?! Of course, I couldn’t say “no.”)* And, of course, there was always the fear of my feet being grabbed and the soles tickled and sadistically slapped hard and painfully. I was surprised at age twelve to be told that my parent had been in my room while I was sleeping and seen “too much” cause my nightdress had “ridden up.” All of these things troubled me, but it was also “normal.”

I vividly recall walking through a shopping mall, my parent’s swinging hand “accidentally” hitting my butt with each step as they walked, staring straight ahead as if completely unaware of what their hand was doing. It was the facial expression, *or rather lack thereof*, that I would remember and notice on others decades later when they *were* doing wrong.

Thankfully, all of these problems resolved themselves as I left girlhood behind and entered puberty. But new problems emerged. I was accused of flaunting menstrual blood. Then one day, my mother cornered me in the kitchen, stripped me naked from the waist up and, to my horror and shame, used masking tape to fashion a stick-on bra with a towel. Thus skimpily clad, I was marched out for both parents to examine my back for signs of scoliosis because, as they said, “We don’t trust the back doctor to notice all your curvature-of-the-spine symptoms.”

But it didn't end even after I'd grown-up. My monthly cycle was tracked clearly on the kitchen calendar for all to see. And my bedroom door wouldn't shut unless you put your shoulder into it. *Creeeeeek!* The peek-a-boo cracks around the door always made changing nerve-wracking. And, of course, I was *never* allowed to shut my door at night, even into my thirties. I could hear them standing outside my door at night, listening.

There were the times, oh so many times, when someone leaned over my bed to kiss me good morning and I was forced to quickly turn on my side or wrap my arms across my chest to avoid an "accidental boob graze." Day after day, year after year. And I wondered, was it purposeful or merely naive? Of course, "accidents" did happen.. And when they did, I was expected to 'fess up, be yelled at, lectured on "protecting myself" and then..*forgiven*. Forgiven...for what someone else had done. Major mind f***.

And, despite many requests, my mother *refused* to stop "nibbling" my earlobes until I married (age: 32) (and wouldn't let me get pierced ears). And she constantly "forgot" and came into my bedroom while I was getting dressed despite repeated reminders to, "Please wait until I have my lingerie on first."

Nor will I forget being in my mid-twenties when one parent suddenly asked me if the other parent had ever molested me. If you knew it to be impossible, *why would you even ask!?!?* Why did you make me be alone with them all the time? All those plumbing projects? All those house-upkeep projects where they *always* brought up the topic of sex. ***What the hell were y'all thinking!?!?***

That's why I found myself asking my therapist, "Wait. Was all of this 'lite grooming' or just stupidity?" Because it never got worse. The "lite grooming" had no particular goal and no culmination in overt sexuality. Nonetheless, the unspoken message was clear:

We parents retain the right to have loopholes in your physical boundaries.

Say "no" to everyone else...but not us. Never to us.

We brought you into this world and we can do whatever we want to you.

Ya got that, kid?

Confusion

Where many of my Facebook friends who experienced similar "lite grooming" responded by erecting razor-wire topped Physical Boundaries, several of my Facebook friends and I went to the opposite extreme. Some of my friends shared that they unwillingly slept with men because they couldn't say "no" or didn't want to hurt the guy's feelings. Or they were

so shocked and flattered that *anyone* would actually want to have sex with them that they always said “yes” whether they wanted to have sex, were in the mood, whatever!!! Personally, I entered my twenties boundary-less, confused, terrified of everyone...and toting pepper mace.

But why?

Even my mother asked me, “Why do you let everyone touch you?”. And this from the same woman who said, and I quote verbatim, “If I’d had a puppy, I would’ve made them *very* comfortable with being touched so they didn’t get stand-offish. But I never had a puppy. Ha, ha, ha. I just had you!”

Why indeed, Mom.

Certainly, the trauma and PTSD of my teen years didn’t help. As the old cliché goes, “I couldn’t say boo to a goose.” In fact, my self-esteem was so low that I came to believe I would be perfectly safe in a dark alley from a lurking rapist. “Yuck! Not her!” I imagined him saying to himself. Yes, a girl’s self-esteem can get *that* low if her authority figures play their cards right.

*Logically then, if I were to say “No!” to an inappropriate touch, I was terrified of hearing the soul destroying retort of, “It was just a mistake! Don’t flatter yourself! Like I’d want to touch you. Yuck! I didn’t mean anything by it.” And I couldn’t bear to hear that. After all, if the accidental “boob grazes” at home were merely accidental and if it was sick of **me** to think otherwise, certainly when it happened outside the house it was merely accidental too...right?*

“Lite grooming” leaves the victims confused and deeply in denial. Why won’t my coworker make eye contact...up here, y’know, where my eyes are located? Is that overly smiley guy at the Dollar Store flirting with me? Was that “boob graze” actually an inappropriate touch or just a mistake? After all, the perpetrator is staring into space with that *familiar* somber expression, so is he *really* copping a feel with his forearm? After all, he’s not using his *hands!* Is he clever...or just clumsy? I could never figure it out. **So I always froze, pretending nothing was happening while my eyes went backwards and forwards wildly in an EMDResque manner.** (In retrospect, that ballroom dance instructor was having a helluva a good time!)

In some ways, getting married made it worse. Contrary to my expectations, it didn’t give me the confidence in my desirability to spot flirting or a forward pass when it happens. Even when my fiancé (now husband) massaged my neck or gave me a playful slap on the derrière, it felt familiar. I’d experience it all before in the bosom of my family. So...was it platonic back then but romantic now? Or was it inappropriate back then and platonic now? Or, or, or....

I still freeze. I'm still in denial. My eyes still do the EMDResque back-and-forth thing.

Like I said, *confusion*.

Over-Reacting

At some point, you start over-reacting. Several of my friends report “freaking out” when a co-worker touched their shoulder. I too yelled at a co-worker when he grabbed my shoulders. After all, at a previous company the HR staff had put his arm around me while sarcastically handing me a Sexual Harassment Training Manual.

When you finally grow a pair or have people in your life who *respect* your boundaries, it's easy to over-react. To compensate for never saying “no” before by setting boundaries too enthusiastically now because the *change* is so enjoyable. To *bask* in the power of *finally* saying “NO!” in a safe environment.

To this day, anyone who touches my ears will hear “Don't you *ever* do that again!” yelled in their face. After all, when I finally Googled “ear licking,” all I got was million porn sites. That was a real wake-up call! And as an extra measure of protection, any potential nibbler will get a mouthful of sharp metal piercings!

Anyone walking by the foot of my bed will notice me instinctively jerking my feet away from the footboard for protection. And if you tickle me too much, I'm not responsible for my actions!

But even married and almost forty years old, I still feel naïve and confused. When the mail driver flirted with me last week, I pretended nothing was happening, turn crimson and fled. It's still my *modus operandi*. Only later did I ask myself, “Wait...*was he...flirting!?! With me!?!*” Why? Am I...*pretty? Really?* I'm never sure. That's the legacy of “lite grooming.”

Things became clearer when one of the perpetrators of my grooming pouted during my wedding, treated me like a sullied woman afterward and flew into a silent jealous rage if my husband kissed me. That treatment finally opened my eyes to a dynamic that should *not* have existed: covert incest. Incest of the emotions that is never consummated. After all, “If it looks like jealousy, talks like jealousy and walks like jealousy, ***it is freakin' jealousy.***” So, then, I'm also forced to conclude it was indeed freakin' grooming.

A wise Facebook friend gave me a Rule of Thumb regarding inappropriate touches:

If the perpetrator is embarrassed and apologizes, it was (hopefully!) an honest accident.

If they don't apologize and act as if nothing happened, it was done on purpose.

Another litmus test is to ask myself, "Would I ever do this to a child of mine?"

And the answer comes booming back, "***NEVER!***"

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Site last updated: 26 Oct 2020

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