

When a child is sexually abused within the context of a trusted institution, such as a school or church, the way the institution responds is predictive of how the child will fare. The institution's response has the power to exacerbate or mitigate the harm of the original trauma. When institutions respond with denial, silencing, shaming, or ostracization, the child experiences this breach of trust as a profound betrayal that research shows causes psychological and even physical harm.

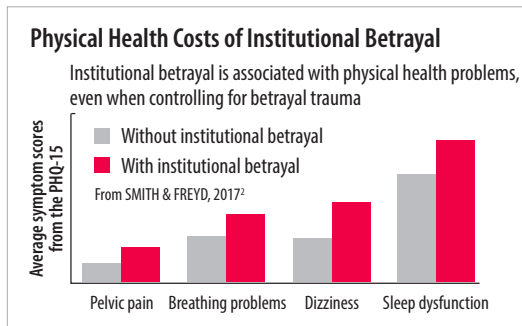
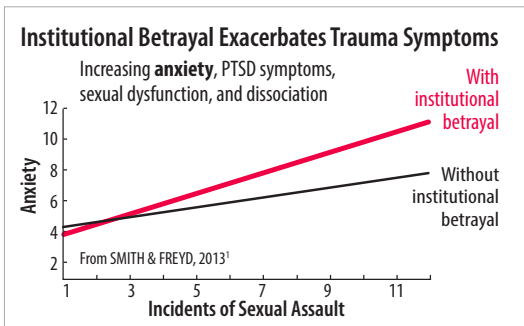
# Institutional Betrayal

All too often, institutions fail the very people they should protect.

**Institutional betrayal** is a concept described by psychologist Jennifer Freyd referring to “wrongdoings perpetrated by an institution upon individuals dependent on that institution, including failure to prevent or respond supportively to wrongdoings by individuals (e.g. sexual assault) committed within the context of the institution.” In a landmark study, Carly P. Smith and Jennifer Freyd (2013) documented psychological harm caused by institutional betrayal. When institutions cover up violations such as child sexual abuse, this institutional betrayal undermines survivors’ recovery, increasing anxiety, PTSD symptoms, sexual dysfunction, and dissociation.

## Common examples

- Failure to prevent abuse
- Normalizing abusive contexts
- Difficult reporting procedures
- Inadequate responses
- Covering up the abuse
- Denying the abuse
- Punishing the child
- Suggesting the child's experience might affect the reputation of the institution
- Creating an environment where the child no longer feels like a valued member of the institution
- Creating an environment where continued membership is difficult for the child.



<sup>1</sup>Smith, C.P. & Freyd, J.J. (2013). Dangerous Safe Havens: Institutional Betrayal Exacerbates Sexual Trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 26, 119-124.

<sup>2</sup>Smith, C. P., & Freyd, J.J. (2017). Insult, then injury: Interpersonal and institutional betrayal linked to health and dissociation. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, & Trauma*, 26, 1117-1131.

*INSTITUTIONAL DARVO is a particularly aggressive form of institutional betrayal.*

**DARVO stands for “Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender.”**

It refers to a reaction perpetrators, particularly sexual offenders, or institutions that protect perpetrators and themselves may display in response to being held accountable. The perpetrator/institution may Deny the behavior, Attack the individual doing the confronting, and Reverse the roles of Victim and Offender such that the perpetrator/institution assumes the victim role and turns the true victim, or the whistle-blower, into an alleged offender. **DARVO not only exacerbates the original harm, it also inflicts another entirely separate one, often in ways that are ongoing in the victim’s life.**

This short video is a powerful depiction of institutional betrayal in action with aspects of DARVO



Copy link into your browser: <https://vimeo.com/337408766>

**Institutional betrayal is one reason why many victims delay reporting of sexual abuse.** While reporting can lead to a good outcome, **reporting can be risky.** A bad response can make things worse for the victim. A bad response can be a new betrayal trauma. Often times survivors hold off reporting until they are strong enough to weather the blowback of an unsupportive response.