

## LOUIS C.K.: WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?

By Daniel Watter, PhD. LMFT



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It is virtually impossible today to turn on the news without encountering a story of a man who has behaved badly sexually. Understandably, the initial response of many of us is to be offended, angry, repulsed, and/or demanding he be punished. However, it concerns me that our reactions can be so swift, punitive and judgmental, especially for those of in the mental health field.

Full disclosure: I am a practicing clinical and forensic psychologist, and marriage and family therapist. Every day I evaluate and treat men who have transgressed the line of mainstream sexual behavior. I have personally never evaluated, treated, or even met comedian Louis C.K. though I am a big fan of his work.

This year, the general public has become aware of multiple instances of Louis CK's propensity to masturbate in the presence of non-consenting women. Even though Louis has admitted that these allegations are true, has expressed remorse, and expressed a desire to better understand and control his sexual behavior, the reaction to his offensive behavior has been fast and furious. The scheduled release of his new movie has been canceled, he has been dismissed from most all of his television projects, and he has been abandoned by his management company and his publicist. While these reactions may seem understandable, they represent our strong desire to punish those whose behavior crosses acceptable boundaries.

Often, we look to punishments as a first course of action because the behaviors (especially when they are sexual behaviors) can be frightening. Problematic sexual behaviors create a sense of anxiety that we look to quash as soon as possible. Anxiety (and fear) may be the most distressing emotions we humans face. *I have long believed that the desire to escape anxiety may represent the greatest of all human motivations.* When we encounter a situation that makes us feel anxious, we naturally look to shut it down as soon as we are able. It provides us a sense of control, correctness and stability. However, as in the case of Louis C.K., our desire to feel more in control over the unacceptable sexual behavior of men often leads us as marriage and family therapists to neglect a critically important question.

In the world of Trauma-Informed Therapy, there is an increasing recognition that the narrative need be changed from the pathology focused, "What's wrong with you?" to the more compassion- focused, "What happened to you?" Our anxiety often propels us to find answers that are overly simplistic, reductionistic, and allow us to close the door on the matter swiftly. We are quick to say that Louis C.K. is entitled, aggressive, narcissistic, insensitive, controlling, manipulative, and/or ill. While any, or all of these descriptors may be true, we as MFT professionals, need to consider the possibility that none of them is true. How do we know that Louis C.K. has not been exposed to some trauma in his past that significantly impacts the way he lives his life, or conducts his relationships? How do we know that the real trauma "victims" here are not the women whom Louis C.K. behaved badly towards, but Louis C.K. himself? Please be clear-I am not excusing, justifying, or condoning Louis C.K.'s behavior. Quite the contrary, I agree with those who may have found his actions offensive and intrusive. There is a difference between an attempt to explain or understand, and an attempt to excuse or pardon. However, what we know about Louis C.K.'s actions is quite different from what we are hearing about the actions of, say, Harvey Weinstein. To me, Louis C.K. appears much less "entitled" than he appears to have been "injured".

Louis C.K. is representative of the men that I, and many of you, sit with every day. These men are often confused, frustrated, humiliated and contemptuous of their own behaviors. They do not know why they do what they do, but most all are relieved to be stopped. Such men are often in great pain, and desperately hide their true selves from others. I view Louis C.K.'s situation through a lens of compassionate curiosity and a desire to understand, "What happened to you, Louis?" "Have you experienced significant trauma that may be amenable to treatment and resolution?"

Perhaps we, along with the general public, have judged Louis C.K. too quickly and too harshly. Perhaps we should re-think the strategy of punishment and abandonment, and learn to better tolerate our own sense of anxiety, discomfort, and vulnerability? Perhaps we need to set aside our feelings of anger and consider the possibility that people who behave badly may need treatment as opposed to punishment and sanction?" Perhaps one of us in the MFT profession may someday be able to help Louis C.K. learn the answer to the question, "What happened to you Louis C.K.?"

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