

## MONTH 2: FEBRUARY

### Understanding Grooming: Recognizing Patterns That Weren't Your Fault

Word Count: ~850 words

*[Content Warning: This article discusses grooming tactics in general terms. If you need to step away at any point, that's completely okay. Your comfort matters more than finishing this article.]*

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"How did I not see this coming?"

If you've asked yourself this question, please know: that's exactly how grooming is designed to work.

Grooming isn't your failure to recognize danger. It's a deliberate process of building trust, creating dependency, and normalizing boundary violations — all while making you feel special, chosen, or spiritually connected.

You didn't miss red flags. You were systematically manipulated by someone who knew how to exploit spiritual authority.

Let me walk you through what grooming can look like — not to make you relive anything, but to help you understand: this wasn't random. And it wasn't your fault.

#### WHAT GROOMING MEANS

Grooming is a process some people use to:

- Gain trust
- Lower resistance to inappropriate behavior
- Make boundary violations seem normal or even special
- Create isolation from people who might notice what's happening

In clergy contexts, this often involves spiritual language and framing that makes everything seem divinely guided. Many survivors describe finally understanding grooming as the moment they stopped blaming themselves.

## COMMON PATTERNS (NOT ALL GROOMING LOOKS THE SAME)

Some survivors have noticed these patterns in their experiences. You might recognize some, all, or none of these. Every situation is different.

### **Pattern 1: Special Attention**

This might look like: • Being singled out for "spiritual mentorship" • Excessive compliments about your faith or maturity • Private meetings that feel different from regular pastoral care • Comments like "You understand things others don't" or "God has placed you on my heart" Many survivors remember feeling seen and valued in ways that felt good at first.

### **Pattern 2: Increasing Isolation**

This might include: • Meetings becoming more frequent or private • Being discouraged from seeking other counsel ("They won't understand our connection") • Creating an "us vs. them" dynamic • Positioning themselves as your primary spiritual authority Isolation often happens so gradually you don't notice until you look back.

### **Pattern 3: Boundary Testing**

This can involve: • Sharing personal struggles or marriage problems with you • Physical touch that increases over time • Conversations that become more personal or intimate • Spiritual language used to justify closeness Each boundary crossed might feel small at the time. But together, they create a pattern.

### **Pattern 4: Normalizing Sexual Contact**

This might be framed as: • "Spiritual connection that others wouldn't understand" • "God brought us together in a special way" • "This is part of deeper spiritual intimacy" Often accompanied by secrecy: "This is sacred and private" or "People wouldn't understand what God is doing" If you experienced any of this, please hear: the spiritual framing doesn't make it okay. It makes it manipulation.

## WHY GROOMING WORKS

Grooming is effective because: • It happens gradually — no single moment feels obviously wrong • It exploits your desire for spiritual growth and connection • It uses your trust in spiritual authority • It isolates you from people who might recognize what's happening • It

makes you feel responsible for what's happening You didn't fail to protect yourself. You were systematically manipulated.

### IF YOU'RE RECOGNIZING THESE PATTERNS

Many survivors describe conflicting feelings when they first understand grooming: Relief: "I'm not crazy. This explains so much." Anger: "I was manipulated and didn't even know it." Grief: "I trusted him with my spiritual life." Shame: "How did I not see this?" (Please know: this isn't your fault) All of these feelings can exist at once. All of them are valid.

### WHAT THIS UNDERSTANDING MIGHT OFFER YOU

Recognizing grooming doesn't erase what happened. But for many survivors, it:

- Reduces self-blame
- Explains the confusion they've been feeling
- Validates that something wrong happened, even if they can't fully articulate what
- Provides language to describe their experience

You might find this helpful. You might not. Both are okay.

### YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO ANYTHING WITH THIS INFORMATION

Some survivors:

- Use this understanding in therapy
- Share it with trusted people to help them understand
- Find it clarifies their decision to report (or not to report)
- Simply sit with it as they process

There's no right next step. This is just information, offered in case it's helpful.

### MOVING FORWARD (AT YOUR PACE)

If understanding grooming brings clarity, you might consider:

- Talking to a trauma-informed therapist who understands these dynamics
- Reading more about manipulation tactics (only if it feels helpful, not triggering)
- Connecting with other survivors who've had similar experiences
- Giving yourself permission to reframe how you see what happened

Or you might simply:

- Acknowledge that you were manipulated
- Release some of the self-blame you've been carrying
- Continue healing at your own pace

Both paths are valid.

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IF THIS ARTICLE BROUGHT UP DIFFICULT FEELINGS: Grounding technique:

- Put your feet flat on the floor
- Press them down and notice the sensation
- Take three slow, deep breaths
- Say out loud: "I am safe right now. I am in control of this moment."

You can stop reading anytime. Your wellbeing comes first.

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RESOURCES (Optional): Crisis support (24/7): • RAINN: 1-800-656-4673 • Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741 Information (no pressure): • Chapter 2 of "Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse" discusses grooming in more depth • \*\*Gentle reminder:\*\* Understanding what happened doesn't mean you have to do anything about it right now. You can sit with this knowledge and decide what, if anything, feels right for you. You're not responsible for what was done to you. You're allowed to heal at your own pace. Take gentle care. ❤️ --- 📖 For more information about grooming, power dynamics, and healing: available at your preferred retailer. [Only if you want it. No pressure.]