

MONTH 3: MARCH

When Reporting Doesn't Go as Expected: Understanding Institutional Responses

Word Count: ~850 words

[Content Warning: This article discusses how institutions sometimes respond to reports of abuse. It may be validating for some and difficult for others. Please take care of yourself as you read. You can stop anytime.]

Maybe you gathered the courage to report what happened.

Maybe you told church leadership, believing they would help.

And maybe, instead of support, you experienced: • Being questioned intensely about your own behavior • Hearing explanations for why what happened "wasn't that bad" • Watching the focus shift to protecting the accused person • Feeling like you became the problem instead of being heard

If this happened to you, I'm sorry. You deserved so much better.

And I want you to know: this is a recognizable pattern. It has a name. And it's not your fault.

A COMMON PATTERN IN INSTITUTIONS

When people report misconduct to institutions (churches, organizations, etc.), sometimes the institution responds in ways that protect itself rather than addressing the harm.

This can include: • Denying that the reported events happened • Questioning the credibility of the person reporting • Shifting focus to the impact on the accused person or institution

Researchers have identified this pattern and given it a name: DARVO.

It stands for: Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender.

Understanding this pattern has helped many survivors recognize: the response they received wasn't about truth. It was about institutional self-protection.

WHAT THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE

Denial might sound like:

• "We've investigated and found no evidence" • "That's not how we remember it" • "This was a misunderstanding" • "We don't believe this happened"

Questioning credibility might sound like:

• "Have you been struggling with your mental health?" • "Why didn't you say something sooner?" • "Other people haven't reported similar experiences" • "Are you sure you're remembering correctly?"

Reversing victim and offender might sound like:

• "Think about what this accusation is doing to his family" • "He's devastated by these false claims" • "You're tearing apart this community" • "We need to protect him from slander"

If you heard any of these responses, please know: this is about institutional protection, not about truth or your credibility.

WHY INSTITUTIONS RESPOND THIS WAY

Please understand: I'm not excusing this behavior. I'm explaining it.

Institutions sometimes respond this way because:

- Acknowledging abuse means potential legal liability
- Protecting a valued member (especially a leader) protects the institution's reputation
- Investigating thoroughly requires resources and could reveal systemic problems
- Taking the report seriously might mean making difficult changes

None of this is your fault. None of this means you weren't telling the truth. It means the institution chose self-preservation over accountability.

IF YOU EXPERIENCED THIS

Many survivors describe feeling:

- Confused: "Did I misunderstand what happened?"
- Angry: "They cared more about protecting him than hearing me"
- Isolated: "No one believes me"
- Defeated: "There's no point in speaking up"

These feelings make sense. You were harmed, and then the system that should have helped you caused additional harm. This is sometimes called "institutional betrayal" — when an institution you trusted fails to respond appropriately to harm.

WHAT THIS DOESN'T MEAN

An institutional response like this does NOT mean:

- You were lying
- What happened wasn't serious
- You shouldn't have reported
- You have no other options
- Your voice doesn't matter

It means the institution failed you. That's on them, not you.

WHAT YOU MIGHT CONSIDER (IF YOU WANT TO)

Some survivors, after experiencing this kind of institutional response, have found it helpful to:

- Talk to a trauma-informed therapist about what happened
- Connect with advocacy organizations that understand these patterns
- Learn about options outside the institution (legal reporting, civil action, etc.)
- Seek support from people who believe them

Others have chosen to:

- Step back and focus on their own healing first
- Accept that the institution won't provide accountability
- Build a life separate from that community

Both paths are valid. There's no "right" response to being failed by an institution.

YOU GET TO DECIDE WHAT'S NEXT

You might:

- Pursue external reporting (police, civil lawsuit, licensing boards)
- Focus on healing without seeking institutional accountability
- Wait until you have more resources or support
- Decide that your wellbeing matters more than fighting the institution

All of these choices are okay. You don't have to keep fighting if it's harming your healing. You also don't have to give up if pursuing justice feels important to you.

PROTECTING YOURSELF MOVING FORWARD

If you're considering reporting (or have already reported):

- Document everything in writing
- Bring a support person to meetings
- Don't assume the institution will act in your best interest
- Know that external options exist (you don't have to rely on internal processes)
- Prioritize your safety and wellbeing above everything else

And please remember: you don't owe the institution anything. Not your silence. Not your patience. Not your forgiveness.

IF THIS ARTICLE BROUGHT UP PAINFUL MEMORIES: Grounding: • Name 3 things you can see right now • Name 2 things you can hear • Name 1 thing you can physically feel (your feet on the floor, your back against the chair) You're here. You're safe in this moment. You survived.

RESOURCES (If helpful): Crisis support: • RAINN: 1-800-656-4673 (24/7) • Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741 Information and advocacy: (Survivors Network): [snapnetwork.org](https://www.snapnetwork.org) • Faith Trust Institute: [faithtrustinstitute.org](https://www.faithtrustinstitute.org) For more on institutional responses and your options: • Chapters 3, 6, and 7 of "Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse" discuss these patterns in detail **Gentle reminder:** The institution's failure to respond well doesn't mean you failed. You deserved to be heard, believed, and supported. That they didn't provide that is their failing, not yours. You still have options. You still have worth. You still matter. Take care of yourself. ❤️ --- 📖 For information about external reporting options and institutional accountability: available at your preferred retailer. [Only if it feels right for you.]