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Columnist Frances Henry: Shine light onto the causes of bad behavior

By FRANCES HENRY

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Last month, Savannah Guthrie admitted what surely many in America now feel. She commented on her reaction to learning that her co-host on "Today," Matt Lauer, had been fired by NBC for sexual misconduct: "How do you reconcile your love for someone with the revelation that they have behaved badly? I don't know the answer for that."

Trying to reconcile bad behavior with beloved people defines the human condition. It does not help to judge the behavior as primarily an individual's problem. What we might want to have seen as a trickle (think Bill Cosby) must now be defined as a torrent. The Gazette has detailed allegations about Senator Stanley Rosenberg's husband. The New York Times reported an allegation against beloved conductor James Levine. Can you count how many people have fallen from their pedestals?

We will take time to hear the allegations, sort through evidence, and determine the facts as best we can. We need to act based on what seems true. But we must do more.

Nearly 30 years ago, I founded an organization to bring awareness of child sexual abuse, but more importantly to prevent it. Stop It Now! uses public health messages to reach people who perpetrate sexual harm and those who know them.

Why is this important? If you understand the risks of smoking or drinking or the use of seat belts, hand washing, consuming vegetables and fruits, and getting flu and childhood vaccines, you understand the power of public health. In my life spanning the last half century, every one of these behaviors has been altered for the public's benefit because science showed that people live longer, healthier lives if you and I change our behavior. And we have. We have extended the human life by more than a decade because of these and similar changes.

With sexual behavior, we refuse to live in the modern age. You'd think we are in ancient times, so challenging it is to talk openly about it. Do you know the facts of male and female sexuality? Probably not, as knowledge about sexual hormones and drive and their

influence on behavior stays locked in scientists' papers in professional journals. Similarly, what we know about social attitudes and behavior in sexuality rarely makes it to public discourse.

I know how profoundly ignorant we are in matters of sexuality because I met men in prison for sexual offending who had no idea why they committed the crimes they did. Many said the warning signs of their behavior were present, but they did not know what to do about it. And no one around them noticed or knew what to do either.

Given my own history, these statements rang true. My father sexually assaulted me for four years, from the time I was 12 until I was 16. Once I had organized Stop It Now! 25 years later, I asked him and my mother if he could explain his abuse of me. He could not, but I was able to learn more about his childhood experiences.

During his lifetime, I never told what I learned then, as it was his story, not mine, to tell. Now I'm free to write that he had been abused by an older woman in his neighborhood, a friend of my grandmother, his single mother. The woman who assaulted him said she was giving him a "jump ahead" on sex at his then 10 years. The justifications of my father's abuser became a travesty from which I suffered greatly. But it becomes a nightmare when the same ignorance is lived out nearly 100 years later in a swath of our population.

We still leave people vulnerable — children and adults alike, females and males alike — to the bad behavior of people who themselves have pitifully little understanding of the harm they cause. That is why I named the organization Stop It Now!, in response to Anita Hill's answer to why she had not reported sexual harassment by Clarence Thomas: "I just wanted it to stop."

If we all could stop long enough to hold people accountable but look with the lens of compassion at what causes their behavior, we would find the keys to preventing this scourge. We could see the role each one of us has in understanding sexuality and being able to talk about it. We could educate and enlighten our way back from the torrent of abuse to a trickle.

In doing our very best to shine light onto the causes of bad behavior, we could help ourselves reconcile this common, tragic aspect of our shared human condition.

Frances Henry, of Cummington, advocates for the prevention of violence and founded Stop It Now! in 1992.