

Dressed to Heal

[Working in the field of sexual abuse treatment, whether with offenders or with other family, brings into focus more acutely certain issues about each individual staff. One specific issue, clothing, can project a variety of impressions. My program struggled with the issue of providing some guidance on this issue without dictating a dress code. This piece of guidance is applied to all levels of staff. The document, below, is provided for assistance to others who may also struggle with the issue.]

The Central Los Angeles Sexual Abuse Unit (CLASAU) does not maintain a dress code. We do ask that you:

- Think about what you wear
- Dress to project a positive professional image
- Dress to meet the client

As a CLASAU therapist, you are part of a team that is focused on healing sexual trauma. The image that you project (an aspect of use of self), which includes dress and grooming, has an impact on the clients as they work to correct cognitive distortions and develop healthy self-images. The therapy begins the minute you walk in the room.

Sexuality is an aspect of dress. What would clothes, that accent a therapist's sexuality, do for a highly sexualized client? At the same time appropriate sexual expression in clothing is appropriate and can be a corrective experience for the client.

When you look at yourself in the mirror, are you pleased with the person that looks back at you? If you feel good about yourself, then your good feelings will transfer to the client.

CLASAU does recommend that those therapists, who work with children, not wear any clothing that may possibly be ruined by interaction with the children. Remember very young children like and respond positively to bright colors. Young children also are comfortable playing on the floor.

Dress can be a very powerful image and can be stimuli for powerful memories. One example is a four-year-old girl, who remembered the dress she was wearing when she was touched. She asked the therapist, who had gone to the home to complete an intake assessment interview, "Do you want to see the dress I had on when my father touched me?"