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SCAMS & FRAUD

Anyone Can Become a Target for Sextortion

Scammers elicit compromising photos online, then try to extort money from victims

By Matt Alderton, AARP
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Among recent callers to the AARP Fraud Watch Network Helpline was a Missouri man who sent nude pictures of himself to an online love interest. The person on the other end turned out to be a scammer who threatened to publish the photos online, extorting the man for $2,500.

It didn't end there. Someone else claiming to be the police contacted the Missouri man, threatening to prosecute him for supposed offenses related to the pictures. This person knew where the man worked and threatened to send information to his employer unless he sent more money.

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The Missouri man was 70 years old.

While sextortion scams have become disturbingly common among young people, some of these scams target older people. Amy Nofsizer, AARP's director of fraud victim support, says the Helpline receives a steady stream of calls from older sextortion victims. An estimated one in seven adults worldwide has experienced someone threatening to share their intimate images, according to a 2024 report in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior* by researchers at Australia's RMIT University, in partnership with Google, based on a survey of more than 16,000 adult respondents. Lead researcher and RMIT professor Nicola Henry says, "Sextortion is an evolving and pernicious form of image-based abuse … that happens against children, against adolescents and against adults — including adults over age 50."

What is sextortion?

Sextortion is "making threats to share nude or sexual photos or videos to coerce the victim into complying with certain behavioral or financial demands," Henry explains.

It can take many forms, adds Sam Wilmoth, senior manager of consulting at RAINN Consulting Group, part of the anti-sexual violence organization Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN):

- Perpetrators might illegally obtain private pictures or videos that already exist of the victim — for example, through hacking of a phone, computer or webcam — and use them as coercive currency.
- Perpetrators may assume a fake identity on a dating app or social media site, then persuade the victim to send sexual images or videos that they later use as leverage.
- Sometimes, the extortionists are people victims know in real life — for example, spouses, partners or caregivers — who acquire or take compromising pictures and use them for purposes of control or exploitation.

Sextortion victims

Sextortion discourse often revolves around children and teens. From October 2021 to March 2023, the FBI and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security received more than 13,000 reports of online sextortion of minors. In a single six-month period — from October 2022 to March 2023 — the FBI observed a year-over-year increase of at least 20 percent in reported sextortion incidents involving minor victims.

But, as Jean's experience demonstrates, older adults also can be victims: 7.6 percent of adults ages 50 to 64 and 8.4 percent of adults ages 65 and older say they've experienced sextortion, according to Henry's survey.

The numbers are probably much higher, posits victims' rights attorney Carrie Goldberg, author of the 2019 book *Nobody's Victim: Fighting Psychos, Stalkers, Pervs and Trolls*. "The crime is notoriously underreported because people are embarrassed to report it," she says.

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Notes Wilmoth, "There's a particular stigma here. Because honestly, one of the clearest ways that ageism expresses itself in our culture is a hesitance to even speak about anything involving the sexual lives of older adults."

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No matter one's age, the consequences of sextortion can include feelings of shame and embarrassment, job loss and adverse mental health outcomes, such as suicidal thoughts, depression and anxiety. "And that doesn't even include any potential financial consequences that might come from someone making payments to a scammer in an effort to stop the coercion," explains Wilmoth, who recalls a survivor describing sextortion as "torture for the soul."

He adds, "I'll never forget that phrase because it really captures the depth of the harm here."

Signs of sextortion

Wilmoth and Goldberg say there are red flags that could help you identify scammers before engaging in online relationships with them:

- **Things don't add up (or do add up — too much):** When you make a romantic connection online, you may notice inconsistencies or discrepancies in their biography, statements, pictures or voice. That could indicate the person you're talking to isn't authentic. But it's also suspicious if a stranger lists your same interests in their dating profile or social media page, follows identical people and accounts, or suddenly becomes connected to your family and friends. It's even more suspect if their profile is new or if mutual interests and connections were only recently added. Likewise, think twice if a potential suitor is unrealistically young or attractive.
- **They make excuses:** If an online connection is consistently evasive — if they refuse to talk on the phone, for example, or ask you to turn on your webcam but claim theirs is broken — they might be hiding something.
- **They try to deepen the relationship quickly:** It should give you pause if someone attempts to progress the relationship too quickly. For instance, if casual flirting escalates rapidly to asking for nude photos or a video chat, beware. Or if a new connection is overly assertive and asks for personal information without first getting to know you, that could indicate predatory intentions.
- **They play with your emotions:** Imagine an online connection asks for a nude photo, and you decline, at which point they say something like, "I guess we're not as compatible as I thought." If an online connection at any point tries to make you feel guilty, ashamed or afraid, they may be trying to manipulate you.

How to protect yourself from sextortion

A tempting piece of advice is to avoid sending nude photos and videos altogether and to opt out of flirtatious or sexually explicit chats. But that ignores an important reality: Regardless of age, it's both normal and healthy to be interested in sex and romance — including on the Internet.

"In all adult age groups, a range of sexual behaviors is, in fact, normal. And judging people for consensual sexual behaviors never really accomplishes anything good from a public health perspective," notes Wilmoth, who adds that advice to "just don't do it" perpetuates victim blaming and shame.

Instead of suppressing sexual desires and romantic instincts, focus on finding safe ways to nurture them. Best practices include:

- **Refuse friend requests from strangers:** On social media, be wary of friend requests from people you haven't met face-to-face. "Mainstream social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram are where most scams happen. So, my first piece of advice is to practice stranger danger," Goldberg says. "Most of these platforms don't have any process for confirming identity, so it's very easy to impersonate other people." Change your privacy settings so you only share with people you trust.
- **Talk about sex more openly:** If sex makes you blush, it might be a good idea to speak more candidly about it with friends and loved ones, according to Wilmoth, who says freely discussing sexual partners and activities with others can help you build sexual literacy and make it easier to recognize "red flag" behavior. "Having more open conversations about sexuality later in life can be a preventative measure for all kinds of sexual misconduct," Wilmoth notes.
- **Improve your digital literacy:** Digital literacy can be as helpful as sexual literacy for detecting romance scammers, according to Wilmoth. He says that seeking education and training might be a good idea if you're uncomfortable with technology or specific applications — for example, dating apps or social media. You can find classes at public libraries, community centers and even YouTube. You can also check out the AARP Virtual Community Center or Senior Planet from AARP.
- **Prioritize intimacy with trusted partners:** Flesh-and-blood dating partners and even spouses can be perpetrators of sextortion. Nevertheless, you can minimize risk by reserving intimate images, videos and texts for your most trusted connections. "People across all ages are using the internet for healthy sexual expression. But what's key is to do it with people you trust — people you know and have actually met," Goldberg says.

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What to do if you're a sextortion victim

If someone threatens to use intimate images or video against you, try not to panic, Goldberg advises. "About 75 percent of the time, they do not follow through. And, sometimes, they don't even have material. They're bluffing," she says, adding that victims should cut off contact at the first hint of sextortion. "The worst thing you can do is succumb to their demands. Because once you pay, they know… you have the money and are susceptible to this kind of blackmail, which only makes them demand more."

In the Helpline caller's case, the volunteer advised the victim to cease all payments and delete the person from social media and any other form of communication.

The Helpline also tells victims to report the crime to the police and IC3.gov because whether or not perpetrators follow through with threats, sextortion is illegal. "To demand money, pictures or something of value if you don't do XYZ is extortion," Goldberg continues. "Extortion is criminal and reportable."

Wilmoth recommends preserving evidence if possible. "I don't mean preserving the nude photos that were so humiliating in the first place. I mean preserving documentation of what the scammer has done and said — maybe through screenshots, for example," he says. "That can be really helpful if there's any kind of law enforcement response down the road."

Also notify the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center at IC3.gov. Crime reports help them identify patterns; they have successfully caught many sextortionists in recent years, including four Delaware men who were arrested last year after stealing a total of $1.9 million from multiple sextortion victims.

Unfortunately, law enforcement agencies and prosecutors don't always have the expertise or resources to prosecute internet crimes — particularly when perpetrators are located abroad, notes Laura Palumbo, communications director for the National Sexual Violence Resource Center. Regardless, she adds, "You can always reach out for the emotional support and counseling that's available to individuals through either a local crisis center or through the National Sexual Assault Hotline," Palumbo says. Operated by RAINN, the National Sexual Assault Hotline is confidential and available 24/7 at 1-800-656-HOPE (4673).

The AARP Fraud Watch Network offers free, confidential discussion and support groups for fraud victims and their loved ones. Its Helpline can be reached at 877-908-3360.

Finally, remember this: You did nothing wrong. "If you have experienced online sexual abuse, it is not your fault," Palumbo stresses. "What happened to you was not OK."

A word about kids and grandkids

Even if they're not victims of sextortion, older adults can be educators about it, according to Wilmoth, who says parents, grandparents and other relatives can help young people navigate online sexual abuse by talking openly about it. "Our culture has stigmatized what, in my view, should be very normal conversations about sex and sexuality. But it doesn't have to be that way," he notes.

Start by signaling to the young people in your life a willingness to talk frankly and openly about sex and relationships. "The way to do that is to say … something like, 'Hey, I just want you to know that if you ever want to talk about your relationships or anything that feels difficult to talk to me about, I love you and would never judge you.' That message doesn't have to be explicitly about sextortion, but it lays the foundation for you to be a nonjudgmental resource for them," Wilmoth continues.

Therein lies the key. "Whether it's a high-profile case that's in the news or a person in your life who comes forward to share their own terrible experience, what you need to do above all else is avoid conveying judgment," Wilmoth concludes. "If you start asking judgmental questions like, 'Why did you send the picture in the first place?' then you have just forfeited your capacity to help them."

Matt Alderton is a contributing writer who specializes in health and wellness, travel and technology. His work has also appeared in USA Today, Forbes and The Washington Post.

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