

Men Responding to Sexual Violence

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Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault

Introduction

Someone important to you has survived a traumatic experience. You have been affected as well. Healing is possible, but it will take time, and the path is not an easy one. Life, as you once knew it, will never be quite the same again.

This booklet has some ideas to help you support your loved one during one of the toughest times of their life. You can help with her recovery from the assault.

The Facts

Rape is never the victim's fault. The rape is not about how she was dressed, where she was or decisions she made prior to the rape. Remember, children can never consent to sexual activity. Beliefs such as the victim "asked for it" or enjoyed the experience are dangerous and destructive myths. These myths blame the victim for rape instead of holding the offender accountable. Rape can happen to anyone, anytime, anywhere. And unfortunately it happens at an alarming rate. Studies have revealed that:

- 1 in 3 girls will be sexually abused by the age of 18;
- 1 in 6 boys will be sexually abused by the age of 18;
- 1 in 4 women in college have been the victim of a rape or attempted rape;
- In the U.S., a woman is raped every six minutes;
- Women aged 16-24 are three times more likely to be raped than other women;
- 61% of female rape victims are under the age of 18;
- 75% of rapes are committed by acquaintances. This may be a family member, friend, date or other person she knows.

If the rapist was someone she knew, the victim may doubt question her judgment and have difficulty trusting others in the future. She may be unsure who to confide in.

What to Expect

Rape is a traumatic life crisis that can overwhelm a person's normal ability to cope. The rapist overpowered the victim with intimidation, threats, physical force or weapons. He controlled, humiliated, terrified and violated the victim physically and emotionally.

The months after a sexual assault may be difficult, with many ups and downs. Recovery may be a slow process, and it is different for each person.

After a rape, there are several immediate decisions for the victim to make. As strongly as you may feel, you should not make decisions for the victim or pressure the victim to make a decision. However, if the victim is a child you will need to help with the decision-making process.

Choices

Some of the victim's possible choices are listed below.

Call a rape crisis center for support. The crisis center will provide free and confidential crisis counseling, assistance with medical care, guidance through the legal system and other services. A list of the ICASA rape crisis centers can be found at the back of this booklet or on the Internet at www.icasa.org.

Seek medical attention at the hospital. The victim may have physical injuries, sexually transmitted infections or be at risk for pregnancy.

Report the rape to police. The police are responsible for taking a report. They will interview the victim in detail about the assault and the rapist.

Take no action. Some victims choose not to report the assault or seek other assistance. While you may not agree with the victim's choice, she needs to be in charge of her decisions at this time.

Reactions

After rape, many victims experience shock, disbelief, fear, helplessness, shame, anxiety and anger. One of the most harmful results of rape can be damage to self-esteem. Victims also may lose confidence in their ability to make decisions about their lives. Physical symptoms can include stomach

pain, nausea and headaches, as well as changes in eating and sleeping habits. Flashbacks, nightmares and recurring dreams also are common.

The victim may not want to talk with you about the assault. Do not take this personally. It is painful for victims to talk about the assault, and it is difficult to share these feelings. Even if the victim chooses not to, it is important for her to know she can talk to you about her feelings and emotions.

Be respectful of the victim's feelings. Follow her lead regarding any physical contact. The victim needs to be in charge and move at her own speed. For partners, remember the victim was violated by someone who used sexual contact as a weapon. The victim needs to make her own decisions about engaging in sexual activity.

Recovery

Rape affects everyone differently. On the surface, a victim may appear to be coping with the experience and trying to relate to family and friends. She may return to everyday activities. Yet she may not have resolved fears, self-doubts and other feelings about the assault.

Healing takes time, so don't expect too much, too soon. Healing varies a lot depending on the survivor's age, personality, support systems and how she is treated by others. The sexual assault will always be a part of her life, but the survivor can heal.

How to Be Supportive

Your loved one needs your support. You can play a vital role in the victim's recovery. To be helpful to her, your words and actions must clearly send the following messages.

- You believe her.
- You support her.
- You know the assault was not her fault.
- You respect her choices regarding medical care, legal issues and services.
- You are sensitive to her concerns about safety.
- You will listen without pushing her to talk.

- You will follow her lead about hugging, touching and sexual intimacy.

Other Things you can do to Help

- Protect her privacy; she gets to decide who to tell about the assault.
- Help others who know about the rape understand that your loved one was not at fault. Teach them about sexual violence.
- Don't be too protective. If you are too protective, she may feel more powerless.
- Don't act like the rape never happened, even if she does. Attempts to deny or repress the rape only delay recovery.

Dealing With Anger

You may be angry at the victim. It is normal to wonder whether your loved one could have done something to prevent the rape. You may wonder if she could have fought off the attacker. You must remember – the rape was not her fault. The important thing is that your loved one survived the assault.

Since someone you love has been harmed, it is natural that you will be angry at the rapist. If no arrest or prosecution occurs, you also may be angry at the police or prosecutor. It is important to channel that anger in useful ways and to focus on what your loved one needs at this time. Your anger and your own beliefs about rape can be your enemy at this crucial time. If you act without thinking, you can quickly become part of the problem.

It is natural for you to want to find and confront the rapist. Even if you know him, this is a bad idea. Once a confrontation begins, you risk being hurt or being arrested. Your loved one needs you, and you will not be able to help her if you are arrested or injured.

Don't Ignore Your Need for Healing

Because your loved one is injured, you also hurt. Many people, especially men, blame themselves when they cannot protect their loved ones from harm.

Dealing with your own feelings can be a real problem. Showing your anger or frustration in front of the victim can be confusing or only further upset her. Many victims, especially children, will “shut down.” They may quit talking and hide their feelings. Often they will blame themselves or withdraw from others to avoid upsetting the family.

You will need to find a way to deal with your own feelings. Here are some ways to find help.

- Contact your nearest sexual assault crisis center. Their services are free and confidential for friends and family.
- Join a sexual assault counseling or support group. This can help you understand the feelings of the victim, family members, friends and others. A group can be a safe place to talk about how you feel and to deal with your anger.
- Write your feelings in a journal. This is better than keeping them bottled up.
- Talk with a trusted friend who will listen to you and support you.

Become Part of the Solution

After someone you know has been raped, you, and others in your family, may begin to examine your own attitudes about women, sexual violence and your basic beliefs about our culture and society. You will become more aware of the risks women and children face and the damage that rape causes. You will probably become angry when others ignore the pain of sexual violence.

Once the situation with the victim has stabilized, you can help in the work to stop rape and assist victims. There are many ways to help, and some ideas follow.

- Offer support to other victims and their families.
- Educate others about rape.
- Interrupt sexist jokes and jokes about rape.
- Donate your time and money to your local rape crisis center.
- Talk to your children about sexual violence. Teach them the facts, and teach them not to hurt others. Teach them how to get help if they are afraid or if someone hurts them.
- Tell your local schools that you want them to sponsor prevention programs on date rape, sexual harassment and other sexual violence.
- Challenge the media. Music, television, movies, print media and the Internet often shows women as sex objects. This promotes myths about rape. Contact producers and sponsors, and ask them not to exploit women.

■ Say thank you to police and prosecutors who take rape seriously. If they don't take it seriously, ask them to do so.
Encourage your legislators to support laws that help sexual assault victims.

Educate Yourself

You may need to learn more about rape and recovery to deal with your feelings and to be able to support the victim. ICASA's website at **www.icasa.org** can provide book referrals, statistics and other information. Public libraries also can provide information on sexual assault.