

Counseling Rape Survivors

OVERVIEW

- What Is Sexual Assault?
- What Can Be Expected After an Assault
- Beliefs Survivors Struggle With
- Helping Survivors

WHAT IS SEXUAL ASSAULT?

- Unwelcome sexual contact of any kind, that occurs without the victim's consent.
- Rape: Any penetration of the female genitalia by male genitalia, other body part, or object.
- Criminal Sodomy: Oral contact of genitalia, or anal penetration.
- Sexual Battery: Any sexual touching with the intent of arousing or satisfying the sexual desires of the offender or another.

Consent

- Remaining silent or not objecting does not constitute consent. Many victims are frozen by fear, or impaired by alcohol or drugs.
- Those who are unconscious cannot give consent.
- Those who are impaired by mental deficiency or disease cannot give consent.
- Children under a certain age cannot give consent ("statutory rape").

Violence

- Sexual Assault is an act of violence, even if it is not accomplished violently.
- It is an act of degradation, which disallows the victim's autonomy and control over her own body.
- It is about power and dominance, not about sex, affection, or love.
- It is a *crime* against the victim, whether or not it meets the legal definition of a crime or is prosecuted as such.

Some Statistics

- A survey reported two out of three college women have experienced unwanted sexual contact.
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- It is estimated that one three women will be raped at some time in her life.
- A national survey reported that 27.7% of college women reported a sexual experience since age 14 that met the definition of rape or attempted rape.

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- In 87% of reported rapes, the woman is threatened with a weapon or death if she resists.
- 70-90% of rapes are acquaintance or date rapes.
- A woman is four times more likely to be raped by an acquaintance than by a stranger.
- Being raped by an acquaintance is more common than left-handedness, heart attacks, or alcoholism.
- A study of convicted rapists revealed that:
 - 71% were planned.
 - Another 11% were partially planned, ie: the rapist took advantage of a woman in a vulnerable situation (intoxicated, hitchhiking).

WHAT CAN BE EXPECTED AFTER A SEXUAL ASSAULT?

It's important to understand that the survivor has lived through a violent experience in which she feared for her life. Her emotional reactions will be similar to those of survivors of other life-threatening events like kidnapping, home invasion, or armed robbery.

Phase One: Acute Phase

- Shock and Disbelief: "This can't be happening!"
- Constant thoughts about the assault
- "Flashbacks," nightmares and disturbed sleep
- Two basic patterns of emotional reaction:
 - Expressive: Crying, shaking
 - Controlled: Survivor appears calm and rational

Emotions

- The survivor commonly verbalizes:
 - Guilt and shame
 - Self-blame
 - Anger and hostility--toward assailant, and also sometimes toward those who are trying to help her.
 - Fear of danger

Phase Two: Outward Adjustment

- "Trying to forget."
- Fears become less prominent; survivor involves herself again in normal activities.
- She doesn't talk about the assault any more, and appears "over it."
- There are few memories or unpleasant feelings during this phase. She, too, thinks she's over it.

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Phase Three: Long-Term Reorganization

- Memories for the event may again begin to trouble her. She realizes that her life has been permanently changed by the event, and she needs to come to terms with it.
- This is the phase in which she is most likely to reach out for help.
- She may fear that there is something wrong with her, because she thought she'd dealt with the assault, but now the feelings have come back.
- Actually, this is normal, and a necessary part of coming to terms with a life-changing traumatic event.
- In time, the rape experience will become integrated with her other life experiences, and plays less of a major role in her life.
- She will stop defining herself in terms of her assault and ultimately see herself as a woman who was once raped, rather than a rape victim.

BELIEFS SURVIVORS STRUGGLE WITH

Beliefs About Herself

- "Maybe I didn't really say no."
- "It's my fault."
- "I shouldn't have gone there (worn that, drank so much)."
- "I led him on."
- "I should have known what he would do."
- "I should have fought back (fought harder)."
- "I should have fought back (fought harder)."
- "Maybe I really did ask for it."
- "I deserved what happened to me, because..."
- "I'm so stupid! If I'd been more careful, this wouldn't have happened."
- "I'm bad, because only bad women get raped."
- "I'm bad, because I had sexual feelings during the assault."
- "I'm 'damaged goods' now because of what happened to me."
- Notice the logical progression from earlier thoughts of self-blame (my fault, I shouldn't have) to later evaluation of self as flawed (I'm bad, I'm stupid).
- People do this because assigning meaning to their experiences seems to help them to deal with them. It's preferable to see yourself as wrong or bad than the alternative, which is to acknowledge that you don't have the power to keep bad things from happening to you.
- Notice also the absence of a sovereign God in this picture!

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Thoughts About God

- Christian survivors usually won't voice these thoughts, but they do struggle with them.
- "Why didn't God protect me?"
- "He's punishing me."
- "He doesn't love me."
- "He can't be trusted."
- "He's not good."

HELPING SURVIVORS

First, Listen

- Without judging--Remember Job's comforters.
- Without interpretation--at least at first (Deut. 29:29).
- Without promises about how quickly/easily she will be able to get over it.
- With caution in matters that you may not understand fully.

Next, Comfort

- Tell her how sorry you are that this awful thing happened to
- Tell her that you don't judge her.
- Tell her that you love her.
- Tell her that God loves her.
- "I don't understand why, but I know that God is good, and He is doing good in your life."

THEN Deal With Beliefs and Feelings

- Take your time and be gentle.
- Survivors have described feeling assaulted again by those who are trying to help.
- Be sure you've heard everything before you move from listening and comforting to helping (Prov 18:13).

Memories and "Flashbacks"

- Memories may occur unpredictably, when something reminds her (the "trigger").
- "You can't stop the birds from flying over your head..."
- "Flashbacks" are intrusive memories, that may feel as if she's re-experiencing the assault.
- Teach her to remind herself of what's true, and move her mind to something else (put on/put off). (Phil. 4:8)

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Fear

- She's had a life-changing experience.
- She knows that she's not in control, and she can't keep herself safe.
- Only One can keep her safe (Prov 29:25).
- Yes, He permitted her assault.
- John 6:67,68
- If she will not trust Him, she will never be safe.

Anger

- Anger is an emotional response to injustice
- Agree with her that what happened was a great injustice.
- But remind her of God's sovereignty.
- Ultimately, anger at circumstances is anger at the Lord of the circumstances.

Self-Blame

- She probably didn't do everything she could to protect herself.
- Even if she did, she couldn't have kept herself safe. Only God can do that.
- Blaming herself gives illusion of control, and therefore safety.
- But ultimately, her only safety is found in trusting God.

Self-Hatred

- Don't argue with her about whether she's bad.
- Of course she's bad. In fact, she's worse than she thinks. That's why she needs a Savior!
- But God's love is so great that He sent His Son to die for her. This is where her focus needs to be, not on herself.

Shame

- The shame for the assault belongs to her assailant, not to her.
- But we have all done things we deserve to be ashamed of.
- Christ endured the shame of the cross so we could lose our shame.
- Turn her eyes from herself to Him.

Why Didn't God Protect Me?

- Teach her to counter her doubts about God with Scripture truth.
- We don't know why (Deut. 29:29), but we know He is compassionate, gracious, loving, and faithful (Ex. 34:6).
- His Word tells us that He is working all things together for good in her life (Rom. 8:28).

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Is God Punishing Me?

- God doesn't punish His chosen children (Rom. 8:1).
- He disciplines them for their good (Heb. 12:10).
- To cause them to share in His holiness (op. cit.)

God Doesn't Love Me

- Nothing can separate her from God's love (Rom. 8:32-39).
- God has two classes of treatment for people--one for believers (grace) and one for unbelievers (wrath).
- God doesn't have two classes of treatment for His children, one for His favorites, and one for those who are a disappointment to Him. Because we can't earn His favor, we can't earn 2nd class treatment, either! He will always do for us what love demands.

God Can't Be Trusted

- He who didn't spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us *can* be trusted (Rom. 8:32).
- Faith is the evidence of things not seen (Heb. 11:1).
- Job learned that it's not for us to demand explanations for our painful circumstances. It's for us to trust God's revelation of Himself (Job 42:1-6).

Christ Endured The Shame of The Cross For Us

- Beaten with a whip studded with garbage.
- Taken outside the camp, to the unclean place where they burn garbage.
- Stripped naked.
- Hung on a tree, the sign of the curse.
- Reviled even by criminals.

Consider HIM! (Heb. 12:3)

- What wondrous love is this!
- Teach her to take her eyes off herself, her pain, and her desire for self-protection, and turn them to Jesus, instead.
- It's not about what she's done or what she deserves. It's about what He's done for her.
- Matt. 6:33