



24 Hour Crisis/Information & Referral Line (253) 474-7273 or 1-800-756-7273

Friends & Family

Sexual Assault Impact on Others: Secondary Victims

Who besides the sexual assault victim might be impacted by the assault? How might these other people react?

The family and friends of assaulted adults will be impacted as surely as the victim is impacted.

Family members are like society at large in that they enter this experience with preconceived notions and attitudes about sexual assault. They also have some attitudes toward the victim, which are unique to that person. These two aspects of family feelings can combine to create a potentially troublesome conflict.

In the acute period, families have an immediate emotional reaction, including physical (somatic) disturbances and distress.

It is not unusual for family counseling to become necessary in order to help a family deal with trauma that is affecting the normal functioning of the family unit.

To provide a truly supportive environment for the victim, David C. Silverman notes that counseling intervention with family members needs to focus on at least four factors:

1. Encouraging open expression of their feelings by partners and family members;
2. Facilitating cognitive understanding of what the experience of rape means to the victim;
3. Educating the victim's significant others about the nature of the crisis and helping them to anticipate future psychological and physical disturbances (somatic sequela) of the trauma;
4. Recognizing that some personal responses of family members are so profound as to affect their coping ability and that counseling services might be needed.

Victims' partners in particular may react to the sexual dimensions rather than the violent characteristics of the rape. These thoughts may lead to anger and resentment towards the victim even though the individual may be unconsciously aware of it.

Male members of the family may doubt the truth of the victim's story, criticizing the victim for not being more careful.

Male mates may feel personally wronged and display a proprietary indignation. Some may feel physically disgusted when approaching the "unclean" mate sexually,

immediately following an assault. Such responses reinforce the victim's sense of humiliation and devaluation.

The reality of child sexual assault causes intense reactions on the part of family and friends.

Parents suffer combinations of grief, anger and guilt when their child is sexually assaulted. It may be necessary to help parents focus on their child's needs, since their confusion and negative feelings and reactions may be clouding the issues.

Parental feelings need to be channeled constructively. They are in a crisis state and will need positive feedback to counteract any guilt feelings they have. They also need help in channeling their anger appropriately.

Parental feelings and attitudes are particularly critical to their child's feelings about self and the rape experience. For a very young child, there is likely to be little to no understanding that anything is amiss. However, the child will reflect the parents' feelings. Since parents' feelings often surpass the child's, strong reactions can be troublesome for the child victim, who is always concerned about parents' reactions. *(Also remember: the younger the child, the greater the likelihood that the rape is family-related).*

Anxiety about the unknown situation is suffered by parents of victims. They need to be informed of legal and medical matters. Particularly, they need to understand that medical examinations are for the safety of the child and for use as legal evidence.

A common response by families to their overwhelming feelings is the need to blame someone: the assailant or the child victim.

Victims have specific needs that can be met in part by family members and friends.

The process of recovery from rape starts immediately after the incident. Fortune notes that the most important factor in shaping the recovery is the response received from the significant others in the victim's life. The sexual assault victim needs family support to deal effectively with the trauma.

The assault victim needs to feel comfortable in sharing what happened with those around her/him.

The victim needs to find a sensitive, caring response. Without supportive responses from family members and others, victims remain victims, rather than becoming survivors.

Parents need to be available to their child, but not to force the child to talk and not cut off any talk the child is having. Children need to be encouraged to continue in their usual routine and activities.

A rape victim may have a need for privacy, confidentiality, or simply not to discuss her/his crisis at all.

The best thing any family member or friend can do is to empower the victim so that she/he can free herself/himself from the crisis and become a restored, functioning person.

Support from family and friends enables a victim to capitalize on her/his own strengths and move through recovery to discover new strength. The process produces growth and changes in the victim, and may result in a new level of quality in family relationships.

Unfortunately, but understandably, it is not uncommon for families to patronize and overprotect a victim in the aftermath of a rape. Being a constant companion, chauffeuring the victim, moving her/him, etc. are all well intentioned, but perhaps not wise. They may reinforce a victim's sense of helplessness and defenselessness and prevent her/him from using her/his own adaptive strategies for coping.

Families also try to distract the victim, keeping her/him heavily involved with activities. Or the family may try to keep the incident a "secret". Either denies the victim the opportunity to mourn the personal loss inherent in the rape experience, denies needed support, and communicates that the event is too terrible to discuss – all of which tend to exacerbate the victim's fears and doubts.

In contrast, the following are three examples of empowering:

1. Ask the victim what she/he needs from you.
2. Support the victim's right and ability to make her/his wants known.
3. Support the victim's right and ability to make her/his own decision (e.g. "I think it is up to you whether or not you call the police about this" or "You know best about your emotional and financial ability to continue this pregnancy to term".)

More Questions asked by Secondary Victims

How can I be supportive and understanding of my friend/family member if I am having difficulties with my own emotions about sexual abuse/assault?

.....You are also impacted by the sexual assault of your family member/friend. Understand that it is normal to experience some impatience, guilt and fear during this difficult time. Talking with professionals in this area may offer an opportunity for you to express your thoughts and emotions regarding this incident in a safe and confidential setting while also providing non-judgmental support and healthy coping strategies.

What can I do to support my loved one who is a victim of sexual assault/abuse?

.....Whether you are a parent, a spouse, a partner or a friend it is important to remember that you too have been hurt by your loved one's assault/abuse even though you are not the person to have suffered the actual assault. Therefore, your focus should be on assisting

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and supporting your loved one but also on taking care of yourself. Many of us take comfort in believing that we will never be assaulted if we do the “right” thing; or that if we are assaulted, we will respond heroically and put the pain behind us quickly and with ease. Research into trauma reveals that this is simply not the case.

It is important to remember that individuals cannot predict if they will be assaulted, how they will respond during an assault/abuse or in the days, months or years that follow it. It is common after an assault to want to look to see how the victim could have prevented it. Hindsight is always 20/20. It is important to remember that no matter what the circumstances of the assault there was no way your loved one could have known that she or he would be assaulted.

Your loved one is also likely doing the best that they can to cope with the situation currently. They likely wish, as you may, that they could “put the assault behind them and move on”. Or you may feel that your loved one is not addressing the issues related to the assault/abuse as much as they should. For many survivors of sexual assault/abuse there are competing needs: to address the sexual assault/abuse while also fearing that they will be overwhelmed by it. Studies have shown that an individual’s reaction to trauma is largely not a matter of choice but a complicated interaction of history and body chemistry. It is important to allow your loved one as much control and choice as possible over how, when, at what pace and with whom they address the sexual assault/abuse. *(Please see Links to Resources button for more information on responses to trauma and ways to be supportive.)*

How do I support my friend/family member after a recent sexual assault or disclosure of childhood sexual abuse or past sexual assault?

.....Listen, do not judge them; believe, do not ask judgmental, blaming questions; be supportive, be there for them; be understanding, tell them the assault was not their fault and that it doesn’t change how you feel about them; be there for them, comfort them; offer a safe place to go; be patient; encourage them to seek the appropriate professional assistance such as medical, law enforcement or the Sexual Assault Center of Pierce County; empower them to make their own decisions and choices regarding next steps, even if it is different from yours.

Where can I find out more?

.....For more information you may contact us by calling the 24-Hour Crisis, Information and Referral Line at (253) 474-7273 or 1-800-756-7273 or you can email jennifer@sexualassaultcenter.com. (As safety permits, please include a phone # where we might reach you if email response presents a problem.)

On the *Links to Resources* page we have listed links to other sites you might find helpful and informative. In addition we have listed books that survivors have found particularly useful.