

Sexual Assault/Friends & Family

Sexual assault (rape) is a crime of violence. State and federal laws define rape as an assault where one person knowingly causes another person to engage in a sexual act (or attempts to do so) by using force, threats, coercion, or fear (without the permission of that person) whether or not there has been a previous consensual relationship. Sexual assault has much more to do with the desire to hurt, humiliate, and control another person than it has to do with sex. Sex is the means to the end.

The overall violent crime rate in the United States has steadily fallen in the last three years, with one exception – sexual assault, which continues to rise each year. Current statistics indicate that one in three women (and one in six men)¹ will be victims of rape or attempted rape in their lifetime.² Over 62% of all rape victims are under the age of 18 and 75% are under the age of 25. The perpetrators planned 75% of all sexual assaults, and in 88% of those reported, the victim was acquainted with her attacker. Rape, however, is one of the most under-reported crimes. Marital rape is seldom reported for fear of further humiliation or reprisal from the abuser, and victims of date or acquaintance rape are often reluctant to report. Children (15% of all reported rape victims are younger than 12) are the most vulnerable and least likely to tell what has happened to them.

Statistics, however, can never reveal the impact of sexual assault on the survivor. The sexual assault survivor's life will never be the same. Her sense of safety and security has been shattered. She was powerless to stop the assault, yet may blame herself for not. She is powerless to control her response to the trauma and may despise what she feels as weakness. If she knew her attacker, she will be weighed down with the sense of betrayal. If she didn't know him, endless questions can haunt her days and nights. Friends and family may ask well-meaning but hurtful questions (or make comments) that cause her to pull away and deal with her pain in isolation. Her faith may become a source of pain as she wrestles with the problem of good and evil and her attempts to frame her experience in the context of her relationship with God. Each survivor's journey toward healing will be different and its course unpredictable, but healing is possible. The time will come when the assault no longer defines the survivor and grief no longer hems her days. Compassionate, knowledgeable friends (pastors, family members, friends, counselors) can be invaluable companions.

If the assault victim calls immediately after the assault:

- Honor her trust in you. She called you because she believes you are a safe person. It takes a lot of courage to say, "I was raped and I need help."
- Remember that she has just been through a traumatic experience. She may be fighting to control her emotions, emotionally out of control, or numb with shock. Encourage her to take her time as she tells you what happened. Protect her privacy and give her your full attention.
- Let her know that whatever she did to survive is okay. Giving in to her attacker may have saved her life. She may not have had time, or the ability under stress, to resist.
- Assure her that the rape *was not* her fault. She was a victim of a violent crime.
- Make sure she is in a safe place. Is she afraid the attacker may return? Did he take her keys or purse or other identification? Are her doors and windows locked?
- Ask her if she would like someone to be with her or would she like to stay with someone until she feels ready to return home. Many rape survivors want someone to be with them but may not want to talk about the assault.
- Encourage her to go to the emergency room or call the police immediately. Offer to go with her, or offer to call someone for her. It can be very traumatizing to be examined immediately

¹ Men commit 97% of all sexual assault crimes against women and children. The FBI.

² National Institute of Justice, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1998.

following a rape, especially by a male physician. Even if she chooses not to press charges, she should be checked out for injuries, be tested for STDs and/or pregnancy, and be given preventative antibiotics for infection.

- Encourage her to report the crime to law enforcement, but don't insist that she do so. That is a decision she must make.
 - ✓ If she has not already done so, remind her not to shower, bathe, wash, douche, or brush her teeth. She should wear or take the clothes she was wearing at the time of the assault (as well as an extra pair of clothing) with her to the emergency room. Encourage her to not disturb anything in the area where the assault occurred.
 - ✓ Encourage her to write down, or dictate to someone, as much about the assault as she can remember. She will find it easier to do immediately after the incident rather than later, when she is being questioned or pressured to remember.
 - ✓ Let her answer any questions the police or emergency medical staff may ask her. They may allow you to stay with her but they will direct their questions to her.
- Encourage her to seek professional help. A rape crisis advocate or professional counselor who works with sexual assault survivors will be able to help her through the crisis and the longer-term trauma.

DON'T . . .

- Don't evaluate the victim according to a preconceived stereotype of what kinds of women get raped.
- Don't press for details of the attack.
- Don't react with visible shock, horror, or disgust.
- Don't discourage her from reporting the rape.
- Don't criticize her for not resisting enough.
- Don't urge her to just forgive her attacker and not report it.
- Don't even hint that she might have been spared if she had asked for help or done something differently.

(Diane Langberg, *On the Threshold of Hope*, page 204)

"No, my brother!" she cried. "Don't be foolish! Don't do this to me! You know what a serious crime it is to do such a thing in Israel. Where could I go in my shame? And you would be called one of the greatest fools in Israel. Please, just speak to the king about it, and he will let you marry me." But Amnon wouldn't listen to her, and since he was stronger than she was, he raped her.

II Samuel 13:12-14, NLT

If she discloses a sexual assault weeks, months, or years later . . .

- Listen. You may be the first person she has ever told. Believe her. Validate her need to talk about the incident, even if the incident occurred years before. Determine what her needs are. She may need someone to call when memories or nightmares fill her waking or sleeping hours. If she is single she might need a safe home to stay in while she's dealing with memories.
- Assure her that intrusive memories, flashbacks, nightmares, and panic attacks are all normal trauma responses (even if they begin years after the event) and that recovery is possible.
- Encourage her to seek professional help (a rape crisis counselor, a professional counselor experienced in rape recovery, information, or a support group for survivors of sexual assault).
- Let her know what you are able to do (pray, listen, babysit during counseling appointments, etc.).
- Take any suicide threat seriously. Call her counselor or take her to a hospital emergency room.

Additional Resources

The Healing Path, Dan Allender.
Will I Ever Be OK Again?, Kay Scott.
Invisible Wounds, Candace Walters.
www.safeplaceministries.com