

# **SIGNIFICANT OTHERS**

## **FAMILY MEMBERS & FRIENDS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVIVORS**

The divorce rate among sexual assault survivors is extremely high. Often the significant other has grown up with preconceived notions (myths) about rape and cannot deal with the fact that someone else has “had” their spouse, even against the survivor’s will. When the survivor has post-rape sexual problems, the significant other may interpret unwillingness or inability to have a normal sexual relationship as rejection. Also, a sexual assault might bring other family problems to the surface. Advocates must address the problem of working with significant others of survivors. Significant others might make the situation more painful if not informed about what has happened.

How does sexual assault affect people - either the primary or secondary victims of this crime? How can those closest to a survivor do “the right thing?” It is those closest to a survivor who will influence how well the recovery process proceeds.

People who have been sexually assaulted may not react to the sexual aspects of the crime, but instead react to the terror and fear experienced. One reaction of the survivor could be, “I could have been killed.” One way to explain this feeling is to ask the significant other to remember or imagine a situation in which he/she felt powerless and afraid. Ask him/her if he/she felt alone, fearful and/or needed comfort.

### **The goal of crisis intervention with relatives and close friends is twofold;**

First, to assist with their own feelings about sexual assault and the effect it might have in their relationship with the survivor; and to assist the family and friends in giving support to the survivor.

Sexual assault is an emotionally charged situation surrounding family and friends immediately after the rape. Some of the reactions you might expect from family and friends could include

- ### **distress** that the survivor has been injured
- ### **anger at the offender** that might be taken out on the survivor
- ### **anger that the survivor** did not “fight harder”
- ### **anger that the person** had not been “careful” enough
- ### **feelings of revenge** on the offender
- ### **feelings of guilt** that they were not there to protect the survivor
- ### **sense of loss** for themselves, for the survivor, for the family

Listen to what the partner, father or other family members are saying. As they express their feelings they will be better able to help the survivor express theirs. Provide accurate

information and encouragement - give them permission to react to this crisis, also. Friends and family may have a difficult time talking about sexual assault. The advocate can be a safe place to discuss their concerns and vent their feelings.

When you have had a chance to listen to what has been said, you can give the family some concrete information about what the sexual assault represents to the survivor. First, the significant other and family should know that the threat of death or injury was uppermost in her/his mind – not the sexual assault episode. Second, you should try to dispel myths about rape – which the family may have grown up with (e.g., “If she didn’t fight back, she must have wanted it.” (See myths.) The third thing you want to stress is that, since this is a mutual crisis, they should support one another. The family can support its loved one by providing a place to share feelings without condemnation and by assisting in mobilizing the survivor’s coping skills. The survivor should be allowed, not forced to express her/his emotions.

Questions about how the survivor feels now and what bothers her/him the most are useful. They are not threatening and should allow her/him to talk about the most immediate concerns. Remember, too, the survivor wants to talk about other things. Often the sexual assault may leave them concentrating on other things and it is important to talk about these. Probably the most practical suggestion is that you communicate your own willingness to let the survivor talk. Because of your closeness to him/her, the survivor may be more sensitive to your feelings. If you are distressed, it may be impossible to talk to you. She/he may also try to protect you. In these and other cases, where he/she really will not be able to talk to you, encourage speaking with someone trusted. Remember that the sexual assault has brought up feelings of powerlessness. Encouraging him/her to talk to whom he/she wants, when he/she wants, is more helpful than feeling it is necessary to talk to you.

In the case of a virgin, female support may seem most important. It is a good time to discuss the pleasure involved in sex, as well as to reassert the person’s right to decide when and with whom to have sex.

If the family has strong religious convictions, they may have trouble dealing with the unfounded concern about “sin” having any part of the sexual assault. The survivor may wrongly feel as though she/he committed a sin. If the family agrees with or promotes this idea, the psychological ramifications could be tremendous.

The crisis is very much akin to the grieving process associated with the loss of a loved one. The survivor must be allowed to grieve – it will lead to eventual healing, and the healing of the family. If the family tries to get the survivor to forget it or deny it by shrouding the incident and feelings in silence, they only force her/him to bury it more deeply. This can cause problems for years afterward.

Overprotecting the wounded loved one can be just as harmful as denying the crime. If family/friends constantly try to insulate the survivor from hurt, they keep him/her from confronting feelings. Keeping the survivor in a cage and taking away car keys is not the answer, either. Survivors must live in this world when their “protectors” are no longer there. They must be allowed to regain control of all of their life.

Sometimes family members turn their feelings of inadequacy into self-recrimination – “If I had taken her, she wouldn’t have been attacked.” Significant others must be made to realize that blaming themselves only increases their own anxiety. They could not know this would

happen. When they blame themselves, it might cause further anxiety to the survivor because she/he does not want to be the cause of their hurt.

## **REACTIONS EXPRESSED BY LOVED ONES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR HELP**

### **ANGER**

Anger is a normal reaction, but too often is misdirected toward the survivor him/herself. An advocate can help here by explaining that the sexual assault was an act of violence and hostility with sex used as a weapon. Anger should be directed toward the assailant who committed the crime.

### **DESIRE FOR REVENGE**

This is also a normal reaction, but sometimes there is an urge to take vigilante action against the assailant. This might be particularly true if court action failed to result in conviction. If possible, the desire for revenge should be channeled into legal action. Conviction of the assailant is a desirable goal, because it is one way to prevent the assailant from committing sexual assault again. However, an important factor to consider in the decision to prosecute is the survivor's ability to withstand the ordeal of a trial. "Taking the law into one's own hands," should be discouraged. The survivor needs support, not revenge. *Research has shown that anger toward the assailant, when communicated to the survivor, has a healing capacity. In the same line, communication to the survivor about a loved one's feelings or desire to see the assailant punished can also be healing, however, threats to act out on such feelings can overwhelm or frighten a survivor who desperately needs some control and stability in the aftermath of the assault.*

### **GUILT AND INADEQUACY**

Loved ones may feel that they could have prevented the sexual assault. Men often feel that they have failed to perform their role in a society, which decrees that the male is the protector of the female. Feelings of impotence may also arise from the fact that they were unable to bring the criminal to justice. Sometimes simple and honest reassurances such as, "You could not possibly have known," or, "You were not even there," might help. An advocate should try to channel their thoughts toward what they can do for the survivor right now. They must be encouraged to meet the survivor's need for comfort and reassurance of their continuing love and acceptance. They need to provide the survivor with assurance that he/she has not become less attractive and that they do not think of him/her as being guilty.

### **DOUBTS**

Husbands or lovers may be so horrified by the fact that another man has "performed sexual acts" on their loved ones, that they rationalize that he/she may have provoked the sexual assault by his/her behavior or immodest dress. This rationalization helps them to avoid the idea that if it happened once, it can happen again. Hopefully, if they can gain some understanding of the nature of the assault, they can come to understand that no one asks to be raped and no one enjoys a crime which robs an individual of control in his/her life. This is the time to remind them that sexual assault is not a normal sex act and can in no way be interpreted as making love.

## **INABILITY TO RESUME NORMAL SEXUAL RELATIONS**

This may be a problem of the survivor and/or the spouse or intimate partner. The spouse's or lover's willingness to be supportive of the survivor is important here. The survivor has been forced to participate in an act that makes sex a mockery of society. This is destructive to both people. They should be encouraged to understand the survivor's problems and to find a balance between over-aggression and the appearance of no longer desiring the survivor.

Unfortunately, society reinforces many of the false assumptions about sexual assault. The idea that "it is impossible to rape a woman or a man" is widely accepted, particularly among men. If an individual consents to a sex act because he/she fears for his/her life or fears bodily harm, it is rape. This should be made clear.

Whenever loved ones take a healthy approach to this crisis or mention doing something constructive, offer support and praise. Positive reinforcement is essential. Feelings of effectiveness and self-worth can come from supporting the sexual assault survivor. The survivor can be helped by helping those close to her. Perhaps at the same time, we can change some attitudes about sexual assault.

The advocate's key roles in intervention with the families and partners of survivors should be educational in nature.

- ☞ Explain the inherently violent nature of sexual assault as a crime, helping family members to understand that the survivor's experience has been more of a life threatening one than a sexual episode.
- ☞ Prepare the family for the predictable psychological and physiological consequences of the sexual assault.
- ☞ Explain to the family how to provide an accepting and safe environment into which the survivor can release troubling thoughts and feelings without fear of condemnation or critical response.
- ☞ Discuss any sexual indifference by a partner toward the survivor. Help the partner to identify the components of change in feelings and see the congruity of the feelings.
- ☞ Discuss sexual incompatibility or indifference before the assault. Encourage both partners to discuss this fact and not to blame the sexual assault for pre-existing problems.

## **HELPFUL INFORMATION FOR THE ADVOCATE**

- ✗ **Don't** be openly critical ("You shouldn't..." "You are angry and that's bad.") This can cause defensiveness and anger as well as cause the family to stop talking with you and thereby decrease useful venting and render you powerless to help.
- ✓ **Do** focus supportively on the partner's injury – be aware and let her/him know you are aware that she/he has suffered a loss also.

- ✓ **Do** let them know that although it is like grief, it need not be permanently debilitating. He/She will never forget it, but they can go on.
- ✓ **Do** encourage significant others to support one another.
- ✓ **Do** give any information and support you can.
- ✓ **Do** let them know you care.
- ✓ **Do** offer a male counselor for male survivors or male family members if available and requested.

## **FOR SIGNIFICANT OTHERS: ASSISTING THE SURVIVOR**

- ### Let the survivor know you are willing to listen. Because of the nature of the crime, it is sometimes difficult to talk about it. Be a good listener. Allow him/her to “talk it out” if he/she wants to – to you or to someone else.
- ### Let him/her know you care and that it is important to you that he/she feel safe again.
- ### Allow him/her to make decisions and take control of his/her life at his/her own pace. The rapist just took that control away. You may help make decisions but do not overprotect.
- ### Be stable and secure for them. He/She will need reassurances that he/she is still the same person, not dirty or ruined.
- ### In general, a male survivor may be more controlled in his response to the crisis and less inclined to talk about it. Encourage him to talk, but do not force him. Be supportive. Be open when he wants to talk.
- ### Everyone reacts differently in a crisis situation. Try not to judge.