

# SEXUAL ASSAULT VICTIM ADVOCACY

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A sexual assault advocate must be capable of addressing the overall needs of a survivor, as well as searching for and recognizing other underlying issues that may present themselves after a sexual assault.

## GOALS OF CRISIS INTERVENTION

- To reduce the immediate impact of the crisis.
- To understand the precipitating circumstances.
- To help the person access healthy coping skills, capitalizing on strengths, support systems and resources in the community from which a base of reintegration may occur.
- To help the person move beyond the crisis so that she/he may get on with his/her life.

## FEELINGS THAT MAY BE EXPERIENCED BY SOMEONE IN CRISIS

- ANXIETY** - This is perhaps the most common feeling. Any substantial threat produces anxiety. Normal amounts of anxiety assist in mobilizing against the threat and may be appropriate and helpful. However, great anxiety may produce confusion, distortion, poor judgment, self-defeating behavior and/or questionable decisions. Anxiety may be the first emotion the advocate must learn to work with.
- POWERLESSNESS** - People work hard to manage successfully and develop their own set of coping skills. Then, perhaps because of an external event or a conglomeration of unfamiliar emotions, they experience a sense of loss of control that may be overwhelming, bringing with it a feeling of powerlessness. This feeling of powerlessness, in turn, may bring with it a feeling of shame.
- SHAME** - Many people are taught to be competent and self-reliant, but during a crisis, a competent, self-reliant person may have to depend on others and may feel incompetent. This may produce feelings of shame, and may be closely related to feelings of powerlessness. Thus survivors may feel that they are not able to handle their own problems and that they may have to turn to someone else.

- ANGER** - There may be very little, some or a lot of anger. However, anger may often be hidden behind other more obvious expressions. Anger may be directed at self, others, the listener or an "irrational" event.
- AMBIVALENCE** - Feelings of confusion and uncertainty may emerge. As a result the person may struggle with issues brought on by the crisis. Some of these issues may be: independence vs. dependence; self-reliance vs. relying upon others; controlling emotions vs. losing control; increasing self-confidence by managing for self vs. risking reaching out to another for help or trusting others too much vs. total distrust of others.
- HOPELESSNESS** – Survivors may feel that they will never get beyond the present incapacitating feelings. They see no hope of ever recovering or moving beyond the crisis and may talk of ending their lives. Suicidal thoughts or tendencies may sometimes accompany this feeling.
- DECREASED SELF-IMAGE** - The individual may also feel a decrease in self-esteem. All these feelings may combine and result in a decrease in self-esteem, leaving the person in crisis extremely vulnerable.

## **WHAT A SURVIVOR MAY NEED FROM AN ADVOCATE**

- Trust
- Clarification of the current situation.
- Anticipatory guidance and rehearsal for reality.
- Realistic reassurance and support.
- Discussion of plans and options, offering available information.

## **BASIC GUIDELINES FOR ADVOCATES IN DEALING WITH SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVIVORS**

- Seek to establish a non-threatening atmosphere.
- Be non-judgmental. Respect the survivor's values, do not attempt to persuade the survivor toward your own values.
- Be calm. Do not express shock, anger, or amusement when the survivor begins to open up.
- Use a shared vocabulary. Don't talk above or below the survivor's level of understanding.
- Keep all information confidential.
- Do not become emotionally involved, especially with friends or family.

- Explore problems before discussing solutions and alternatives.
- If possible, begin by addressing small “solvable” problems.
- Convey empathy, not sympathy.
- Consider the problems from the survivor’s viewpoint.
- Balance discussions of the survivor’s limitations with compliments on the survivor’s assets.
- Watch for non-verbal clues when making personal contact with the survivor.
- Be honest.
- Respect the survivor’s right to self-determination.
- Talk with the survivor, not to or for the survivor.
- Develop an explicit, realistic plan of action with the survivor.
- Focus on motivating the survivor to meet commitments.
- Role play, if necessary.
- Be aware of own limitations and refer the survivor to a counselor if necessary.

## **FEELINGS FREQUENTLY REPORTED BY SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVIVORS**

### 1. FEAR OF THE ATTACKER

- If he did it once, he may do it again.
- Fear of people who remind the survivor of the attacker.
- Fear of being killed during an attack.
- Feeling crazy or paranoid because of the fear.

## **AN ADVOCATE’S RESPONSE**

The survivor needs to be reminded that fear is normal; he or she is not crazy or paranoid. Many survivors experience fear as a result of a sexual assault. It is a normal part of the recovery process. An advocate needs to discuss alternative coping methods, concerning the attack, with the survivor. The survivor should be encouraged to talk about the attacker; if he was someone known, if suspected that he will return. If the attacker was a stranger, does the survivor suspect that he knows her name, address, or phone number? If so, a plan should be made. Emergency phone numbers should be memorized. Self defense programs can be suggested. A protective dog may help the survivor feel better.

The survivor has been made to feel helpless by the attack. He or she may have been faced with the possibility of violent injury or death. Those are reason enough for the survivor to be in fear. Remember that sexual assault is a crime of violence and aggression. Fear is one of the most effective weapons utilized by the attacker.

## 2. SHOCK

- The survivor feels numb
- The survivor feels that he/she is not really a part of what's going on around him/her.

### **AN ADVOCATE'S RESPONSE**

An advocate should explain to the survivor that this feeling is not unusual. There isn't much advice an advocate can provide to the survivor during this stage. He/She will most likely not remember anything said. Be sure to assure the survivor that an advocate is available to talk 24 hours a day.

## 3. DENIAL

- This isn't happening.
- This couldn't have happened to me.
- It's all a mistake.

### **AN ADVOCATE'S RESPONSE**

Most survivors assaulted or raped by an acquaintance recall denying to themselves that a rape was happening, even as the situation was worsening. Disbelief and denial by the survivor often occurs even in the face of the most excruciating evidence: violence, forceful isolation, restraint, verbal abuse, and, of course, the attacker's disregard of any negative reaction by the survivor.

Many times a survivor may call an advocate and explain that a friend had sex with him/her, even though this friend was told "no." The survivor may try to rationalize why this shouldn't be labeled as rape. The advocate should explain to the survivor that sex without consent is rape. It does not matter if the attacker was a friend, husband, wife, stranger, etc. The advocate should talk to the survivor in a calming, but firm voice when explaining this to the survivor.

## 4. DEPRESSION

- The survivor spends a large amount of time sleeping.
- Isolation from family/friends.
- A lack of concern for personal appearance.
- A lack of concern for keeping up with day to day issues.

### **AN ADVOCATE'S RESPONSE**

Depression is a common effect of sexual assault. An advocate can help the survivor discuss her anger, sadness, shame and guilt, as these emotions are all associated with the depression. The advocate needs to suggest that the survivor talk with someone when she is ready. This

may need to be done with a professional counselor, who may also be able to prescribe medications to aid the survivor during this time period. It might also help the survivor to do something different, outside of the routine, in order to help him/her break out of this negative pattern.

#### 5. FEAR OF PEOPLE AND VULNERABILITY

- The survivor frequently finds that he or she fears people and feels vulnerable while going about regular life activities.
- The survivor may keep his or her curtains drawn at day or night.
- The survivor may jump at certain sounds or sights.
- The survivor may frequently glance behind.
- The survivor may not venture outside at all.
- The survivor may be particularly attuned to sexual innuendoes, stray looks, pats, pinches, touches, etc. The survivor realizes, due to heightened senses that these innuendos are all around, but were once taken in stride. Now, these innuendos are a source of terror.

#### **AN ADVOCATE'S RESPONSE**

It may reassure the survivor to know that these feelings are common to many sexual assault survivors and that such feelings may remain long after the attack. An advocate can help the survivor find ways of making her surroundings safer (e.g., locks changed, phone by the bed, propping something up against the door/windows to make a sound if opened). An advocate may also encourage the survivor to be with friends and to work on regaining her self-confidence.

This process is particularly difficult for the survivor when the attacker was someone the survivor trusted. In this case, the sexual assault not only has undermined faith in others, but has also undermined faith and trust in the survivor's own judgment.

#### 6. CONCERN FOR LOVED ONES

- Fear for the safety of children, parents, husband, friends, etc.
- Shows extreme overprotection for loved ones.

#### **AN ADVOCATE'S RESPONSE**

It is possible that during the assault, the survivor's family/friends were threatened. Even if family and friends were not directly threatened, after the assault, the survivor knows that anyone could be assaulted and will genuinely fear that such a thing may happen to those he/she loves.

An advocate may communicate to the survivor that it is normal to fear for himself/herself and others after such a traumatic event, but that the fear needs to be put in the proper perspective. The advocate may help the survivor figure out ways to regain self-confidence

and a sense of safety and security. It may help the survivor to discuss her fears, and why they are present, with loved ones, especially children. An advocate should remember, however, that ultimately, the survivor should be able to choose if this discussion should take place, even if the advocate feels it is in the best interest of the survivor.

#### 7. LOSS OF CONTROL OVER THE SURVIVOR'S OWN LIFE

- The survivor no longer feels sure of anything about his or herself, as well as ability toward self-determination.
- The survivor now questions the actions perceived as “causing” the sexual assault, i.e., drinking, walking at night, being in attacker’s room, etc.
- Decision-making very difficult, survivor doubts own judgment
- Family or friends are doing everything for the survivor
- Family or friends are telling the survivor how to respond, i.e. pressing charges, going out with friends, etc.

### **AN ADVOCATE'S RESPONSE**

Go slowly. Have the survivor focus on feelings rather than facts. Let the survivor know that he/she is in control and can decide what to do. Let the survivor make decisions. Ask the survivor if the company of a friend would help. Reassure the survivor that she has people who can help, and not to hesitate to ask for such help when needed.

Remind the survivor that the attacker caused the episode, and the survivor had nothing to do with the cause of the attack. It does not matter what someone is wearing or doing, no one has the right to rape. The survivor needs to be reassured that whatever actions that were taken during the assault were the correct ones, since he or she survived the ordeal. The survivor should be encouraged to do things for him/herself and reminded that he/she is worthwhile.

A survivor may have thought before the rape that such a thing could not happen to her, that he or she would be able to resist, or could take care of him/herself. Since the attacker overcame the survivor’s resistance by force or fear, the survivor no longer believes in him/herself. The rapist has taken away the survivor’s sense of control. The survivor must regain that by understanding that he or she had nothing to do with the assault.

#### 8. TALKING ABOUT THE ASSAULT VS RISK OF TELLING

- The survivor may feel compelled to tell everyone about the event.
- The survivor may feel the need to hide the event from everyone.
- The survivor may find it difficult to articulate, out loud, that he or she has been sexually assaulted/raped.
- Feelings of shame, guilt, self-blame and fears of rejection are factors in considering whether or not to talk about it.
- Family members, lovers, or spouses may not understand or be supportive.

## **AN ADVOCATE'S RESPONSE**

An advocate should not encourage the survivor to tell individuals about the event if he/she does not want to. The survivor knows better than anyone how someone will react. The survivor should be informed that everyone told about the assault/rape will go through the same process of recovery that the survivor will. The survivor should be reassured that information is available for secondary survivors that will help their understanding. If concerned about reporting to the police, the survivor should be informed of the system's process to help educate in terms of his or her expectations of what will be experienced.

The survivor may be encouraged to talk about or journal his/her thoughts concerning sharing with others about the assault. The advocate may discuss, with the survivor, society's reactions vs. the survivor's reactions to the assault or rape. Help the survivor determine which of society's reactions are not truthful (e.g., everyone thinks she asked for it, no woman can be raped, she is damaged, most women secretly want to be raped, etc.). Discuss the myths associated with sexual assault and rape and utilize actual facts to dispel such myths. The survivor should be helped to identify his/her own beliefs and myths concerning rape.

The survivor is taking a risk every time someone is told. The survivor may not be prepared for another's fears, doubts, real or implied accusations, questions, or scrutiny. The survivor needs to know the dangers of telling everyone and be able to evaluate each situation as it arises. The advocate's job is to be the supportive, undoubting, non-accusatory person that the survivor needs.

### **9. CONCERN FOR THE ATTACKER/RAPIST**

- What will happen to him if he is reported to the police?
- How much jail time will he have to serve? Maybe the attack/rape isn't worth him going to jail.
- He should receive psychiatric help rather than jail time.
- Feeling sorry for the attacker/rapist.

## **AN ADVOCATE'S RESPONSE**

An advocate should recognize that the survivor is showing concern for the attacker/rapist, even though he was the cause of pain. The survivor should be reminded that it is only human to show concern for another human, especially one in trouble, but that the survivor must not let this feeling obscure the fact that he/she was attacked by this individual and in doing so this individual committed a crime, not only against the survivor, but also against societal laws. The survivor should be encouraged to avoid repressing the anger felt toward the attacker/rapist.

It is possible that these common attitudes are the result of the survivor's effort to understand what happened and what his/her contributions were to the assault. If not physical beating or other violence occurred, some survivors feel that it isn't worth sending a man to jail. In feeling sorry for the attacker, the survivor should not downplay the

indignities suffered, just as most robbery victims would not think of forgiving and forgetting someone who robbed them.

#### 10. ANXIETY, SHAKING, NIGHTMARES

- Experiencing nightmares and disturbances in sleeping patterns.
- Thinking about what he/she could have or should have done.
- Reliving the assault/rape in his/her mind.
- Experiencing involuntary shaking or shuddering.
- Changes in appetite and moods.

#### **AN ADVOCATE'S RESPONSE**

Nightmares are much more prevalent during the initial stages of healing or during a part of the process when the survivor is dealing with a lot of trauma. During the healing process, the survivor spends so many waking hours thinking about the abuse, that it overwhelms him or her- even during sleeping hours. As a survivor sleeps, the thoughts continue. Those thoughts form into dreams. Before you know it, the survivor is dreaming of the abuse. Such nightmares can overwhelm the survivor to the point that he or she is convinced the abuse is taking place as he/she wakes.

The survivor should be reassured that his/her experiences are common with sexual assault survivors. There is not a time limit to when the nightmares will stop. The advocate should ask if the survivor would like to talk about the nightmare. The advocate could also help the survivor determine ways to calm down after the nightmares are over (i.e., read a book, watch television, sew, drink tea, etc.).

The advocate should be aware of changes in behavior that might indicate suicidal thoughts. If these changes are present, the survivor should be referred to a counselor for treatment. Reassure the survivor that the nightmares are a normal part of the process and will not occur forever, but over time, will lessen in severity. Continue to support and reassure the survivor of his/her physical safety and his/her ability to do things to protect him/herself. This support and these reassurances will help some of the negative symptoms of trauma to dissipate.

#### 11. GUILT, SHAME, EMBARRASSMENT, ANGER, STUPIDITY

- Feeling as though he/she asked for the assault or provoked it by certain actions.
- Feeling as though he/she didn't resist enough.
- Embarrassed about the physical aspect of the assault/rape.
- Self-blame for having been in a bad situation.

#### **AN ADVOCATE'S RESPONSE**

Acquaintance sexual assault survivors feel betrayed by their own judgment because men/women that they knew, men/women to whom they have often been attracted,

men/women they have sometimes chosen, have turned on them in such a terrible way. The feelings of self-blame begin as the survivor recognizes his/her inability to make the rapist acquaintance stop. Immediately after the rape, self-blame leads many women to try to shut the episode out of their minds, not reporting it to the police and not even turning to close friends for comfort, for fear that others will blame them just as they blame themselves.

Again, an advocate should restate that the attacker/rapist made the decision to rape and the survivor had nothing to do with this decision. The survivor should be reminded that no one asks or deserves to be sexually assaulted or raped and the survivor did not deserve to be assaulted, even if he/she had been drinking, kissing, flirting, etc. with the attacker/rapist. The survivor had the right to go where he/she pleased and so what he/she liked without fear of being attacked/raped. Often, the survivor will tell the advocate that he/she knows that it's not his or her fault, but a little voice in the back of his/her head keeps telling him/her, "If only you didn't do..." The advocate should tell the survivor that regardless of what he/she is saying to him/herself, he/she is not to blame for someone else's negative decisions.

It is easy to see why a survivor feels anger. His/Her power and control were taken away. Anger might be directed toward him/herself, the rapist, therapist, family, co-workers, friends, etc.

A survivor might also feel angry at themselves for not fighting back harder, even though, at the time of the assault, most survivors report feeling afraid for their lives. With the calm vision of retrospect, they think of ways they could have fought off the attack, screamed for help, or escaped. Survivors often replay their mental videotapes of the episode, trying to give it a different ending.

The survivor should be encouraged to express his/her anger. This should be done in a way that is constructive and positive. He/She should be encouraged to get the anger out, either through counseling, exercising, hitting and punch bag or teddy bear, or in whatever safe means is possible.

An advocate should explain to the survivor that they did the right thing by not fighting back. He/She made it out of the rape with his/her life. Fighting back could have provoked the attacker's/rapist's anger and he/she might have lashed out at the survivor. The survivor is stronger by surviving the assault. He/She should not regard him/herself as being weak because he/she did not fight back.

**Let us examine some feelings that the survivor may have about you -- the advocate:**

1. First of all, the person in crisis is likely to feel that you, the advocate, are going to solve his/her problem. This is an erroneous assumption, and at times, he/she may need to be reminded that you cannot solve problems for him/her. You can help him/her examine options so that he/she can make the appropriate choices.

2. Secondly, he/she may feel that you are someone who is concerned, knowledgeable and willing to help. This is an appropriate assumption and it is important that the advocate show the survivor these attributes.

It is important to keep survivors in the "here and now." This will give you a clue as to what issues are presently disrupting their lives and where to begin. Keep them focused on what they are feeling right now and begin the crisis intervention.

*Material compiled by Ben Komman, MSW, ACSW from Crisis Suicide Rescue, Inc. and Suicide and Crisis Center of Dallas.*

### **If You are Going to Help Me....**

1. Please be patient while I decide if I can trust you.
2. Let me tell you my story. The whole story. In my own way.
3. Please accept that whatever I may have done, whatever I may do, is the best I have to offer and seemed right at the time.
4. I am not "a" person. I am **THIS** person, unique and special.
5. Don't judge me right or wrong, bad or good. I am what I am and that is all I have got.
6. Don't assume that your knowledge about me is more accurate than mine. You only know what I have told you. That's only part of me.
7. Don't ever think that you know what I should do. You don't. I may be confused, but I am still the expert about me.
8. Don't place me in a position of living up to your expectations. I have enough trouble with mine.
9. Please hear my feelings, not just my words. Accept all of them. If you can't, how can I?
10. Don't save me. I can do that myself. I knew enough to ask for your help, didn't I? Help me to better myself.

- Author Unknown

### **POINTERS FOR CRISIS INTERVENTION WITH SURVIVORS (AN OVERVIEW)**

- ALWAYS refer to the sexual assault victims as **survivors**.
- Keep your personal beliefs to yourself and do not judge.
- Always be empathetic to the survivor.
- Be Yourself! Don't memorize rules or steps. Don't try to do what doesn't feel natural. If you try to force feelings that are not there, you may defeat your purpose. Remember, you communicate with your voice, tone, words, and manner, as surely as the survivor. Convey confidence that you can help, but don't feel that you always

have to have the right answer. It's fine to say, "I don't know, but I'll find out and call you back." Do not try to give medical, psychiatric, or legal opinions.

- Be supportive. Comments such as "Try to keep busy and think about something else" and "There's nothing to be afraid of now," make the survivor feel discounted and misunderstood. Your goal is not to solve his/her problems, but to allow the survivor to verbalize any feelings he/she may have about the assault.
- Do not pry and ask for details and specifics. Give the survivor the opportunity to talk about his/her feelings and reactions as he/she chooses. Let the survivor know you are willing to talk with him/her about such feelings without pushing him/her to do it.
- Do not be a rescuer by telling the survivor what to do and what not to do. It is crucial that the survivor feels in control of any decisions made about the police case, living situation, etc. Your attempts at rescue and doing things for him/her serve to reinforce feelings of loss of control and power that occurred during the assault. Any ideas you have that affect the survivor, should be posed as suggestions rather than advice that "should" be followed. If possible, have the survivor involved in as much of the process as possible (e.g. – "Do you think you might feel better having someone stay with you tonight?").
- NEVER use your cell phone or talk to friends outside the survivor's hospital room. You must remember you are there for a purpose. Be aware that this is a traumatic situation. Give the survivor the respect that you would want if you were in the same situation.