

Feelings Frequently Reported By Rape Victims*

Rape is sexual contact without consent gained by force or the threat of force. Rape is a humiliating physical and psychological attack; its effects can be shattering. The first call for help from a rape victim may be the most important. It can be hard for the victim to make that call. Given the fabric of myths unfavorable to the victim that society had created around rape, we can understand that the victim will be frightened to hear him or herself say to another person that they have been raped. At a workshop on rape, a rape victim told us that the rape victims place a lot of responsibility on the person they call for help. Therefore, when a rape victim calls you or comes in to see you, it is important to help immediately as much as you can in practical, concrete ways, and to create a feeling of mutual trust, security and competence so they will feel comfortable about calling you or your group again if they need you.

To help you assume this responsibility we have listed below common feelings and potential problems that rape victims and anyone to whom a rape victim turns for help, friend or stranger, should be aware of.

This section was originally written for people who would be staffing a rape crisis line. However, the information contained here will be useful for anyone, professional or friend, to whom a rape victim turns for help.

Fear of People, Sense of Vulnerability

The rape victim frequently finds that he or she fears people and that they feel vulnerable going about the regular activities of life. They may keep curtains drawn at night and during the day; jump at certain sounds or sights; glance behind them; not go outside at all. They may be particularly attuned to sexual innuendoes, stray looks, pats, pinches, feels, etc. which they realize, due to their heightened awareness, are all around, but which they used to take in stride. Now those things cause terror. It may reassure them to know that many rape victims experience these feelings and that they often remain long after the rape. They should try to be with friends and build up their self-confidence again. This process is especially difficult for the victim when the attacker was someone they had trusted. In this case, not only their faith in others but their faith and trust in their own judgement has been undermined by the rape. They will need time and support to regain a realistic trust in themselves in relation to others.

Loss of Control over Their Own Life

The rapist has forced him or her to submit to something they did not want to do. Possibly, they harbored some ideas before the rape that rape couldn't happen to him or her, that they would be able to resist or could take care of themselves. Since the rapist overcame their resistance by force or fear, they no longer feel sure of anything about themselves and their self-determination. Sometimes even little decisions like whether to have a cigarette or whether to eat become momentous things. The victim practically has to repossess his or her self after the rapist took possession by force. They have to reassert the value of doing things for themselves, have to insist to themselves that they are worthwhile and still have willpower and control over themselves.

A related aspect of fear of people and loss of control enter when the victim has followed a life style of trusting people, leaving doors open, talking to strangers, making friends in odd places, hitchhiking across country, and so on. They may feel that in addition to their body, the rapist has stolen their whole way of life. How can they return to their former freedom and trust when rape has happened to them? Hopefully this frustration can develop into a combination of realistic alertness, constructive anger and action to combat rape and its consequences.

Fear of the Rapist

However he or she did it, the rapist overcame the victim's resistance and forced her or him to submit to sexual demands. They have been robbed of self-volition and made helpless. They have faced

the possibility of violent injury or death. If the rapist was successful once, might they not try again? The need we all have to preserve ourselves from bodily harm or death cannot be taken lightly. If the victim resisted harder next time or even tried to kill the rapist, as some victims have said they would do, they may be killed.

Fear of attack under these circumstances is a normal human fear. The victim is not crazy or paranoid to fear the attacker. They may also fear people who remind them of the attacker. This is not crazy either. The pain of the experience, mental and physical, is still fresh in their mind. They need positive assurances from those around that life is worth living and they need to explore alternative ways of coping with the fear of attack. They should be given calm, step-by-step instructions on what to do if the attacker does show up. Talk about the attacker. If they knew the rapist, do they think he or she will come back? If so, encourage them to plan accordingly. If it was a stranger, does the attacker possibly know the victim's name, address, or phone number? Suggest alerting their employer not to give any information about them to anyone. They could seek police protection by reporting the rape. The more they calmly talk about the rapist, the clearer they will be about their plan for action if the rapist should return. They may decide to get a protective dog, to take training in self-defense, to develop a warning or "help" signal with a friend or neighbor; they may memorize the police emergency phone number or have it written on the phone, etc. Whatever they decide, their plan should be clear in their own mind and simple to put into operation even when they are emotionally upset.

Talking About the Rape vs. Risks of Telling

Talk to the victim about telling friends or other people. They may feel compelled to tell everyone they see, or they may feel they have to hide the rape from everyone. They may find it difficult to articulate out loud, even to ones self, the fact that they have been raped, let alone to share this fact with another individual. They are taking a risk by telling people about the rape since some people will not be supportive. They may not be ready to stand up to their fears, doubts, or real or implied accusations, especially if they are friends or if they know the rapist and tend to be protective. They need to see the dangers of being frank to everyone and to evaluate each situation as it arises before telling someone. Nevertheless, supportive friends and relatives are invaluable to the victim in dealing with the rape. Some rape victims never call any rape crisis line, perhaps because they have people to talk to who will support them as long and as intimately as the victim needs.

Concern for the Rapist

Many victims have expressed concern about what will happen to the rapist if the rape is reported to the police. Some victims want psychiatric help for the rapist rather than jail. Perhaps these attitudes are the result of their efforts to understand what happened and what their contributions were to the assault. If no physical beating or other violence occurred, some victims even say that it is not worth sending a man to jail. It is human to show concern for another human, especially one in trouble. But they must not let this feeling obscure the fact that they were attacked. In feeling sorry for the rapist, they should not repress their anger for the indignities they have suffered just as most robbery victims wouldn't think of forgiving and forgetting someone who robbed them.

Anxiety, Shaking, Nightmares

Victims often react after physical attack with shaking and anxiety. The relief of having made it, the shuddering at the thought of how close to death they were are expressed in this way. The victim remembers the incident. The trauma goes so deep that they may have nightmares. They think what they could have done and what the attacker could have done. Continued support from all around and reassurance that they are physically safe and can do things to protect themselves will help these symptoms of trauma dissipate. The nightmares will continue, perhaps, but will not be as vivid.

The next five symptoms or reactions--guilt, why me?, shame, embarrassment, and stupidity--are treated together because they represent a tendency of women to blame themselves for things that happen to them--a tendency with numerous social and psychological studies have documented. Women are taught that they are especially responsible for sexual contacts which go "too far", and women's feelings about that forced contact frequently reflect the feelings they have been taught to have about other sexual events. If women are caught in this line of thinking, they perceive rape as just a contact which got out of hand, rather than as an aggressive act.

Guilt

Many women tell us they feel guilty about the rape. They may fear that they "asked for it" or provoked it by their actions. They may feel they did not resist enough. Horrible as it was, they may also feel that because we often hear that women really enjoy being raped, somehow they did. They may feel guilty for looking nice, for giving the rapist an opportunity. Where do these feelings come from? These feelings are the results of society's myths and misconceptions about sexuality and rape. These myths say that men cannot control themselves. They say that women who go out alone at night or who hitchhike are "asking to be raped." If the victim spoke to the attacker once, she may feel she was at fault. These feelings are the dirt result of knowing what society thinks and worrying what society will think of her now. Positive, unwavering support and calm objective talk about the absurdity of these destructive myths can help her see that she is not the one who should feel guilty. Ask her this: Why should anyone feel guilty for being the victim of an attack?

Wondering -- Why Me?

Some women wonder why the rapist chose them. What is it about them that separated them from other women? These feelings arise from the common mistaken belief that rape happens to women who "ask for It", or who in some other way made themselves noticeable. These beliefs are wrong; anyone can be raped. To help the victim see this, try to get her to tell you how she came in contact with the rapist and what contacts she has with the rapist before the rape occurred. The rapist probably already knew where he could rape someone without interference and waited until a woman happened into that spot. It might have been a room he knew was empty or a dark corner or deserted parking lot. He may have maneuvered the situation to get someone there. In short, she should be reminded that the rapist made the decision to assault her.

Shame

The destruction of self-respect, the deliberate efforts by the attacker to make the victim do things he or she knows the victim and society detest, to make the victim feel dirty and disgusting, may cause shame. That they submitted at all, even if at knifepoint, may cause shame. Society's attitudes toward sex and different sexual acts are all reflected in that shame. The victim who feels violated needs to see the rape as an attack, not as a choice they made. One need not feel shame where no choice was involved.

Embarrassment

There can be two kinds of embarrassment. She may be embarrassed to discuss the physical details of the assault. Our bodies have always been regarded as private and her privacy has been stripped from her by another. Telling anyone at all may be painful. The other kind of embarrassment is one we have all felt at times. It can be embarrassing to admit that such a thing could happen to us at all.

A victim's conversations with you should be private and serious. She needs to feel confident talking to you and feel right about her choice of whether or not to tell anyone else. If she wants to tell anyone else, she needs to feel safe in talking to you about further revealing her story and should receive any help she feels it necessary to make further revelations. There are many reasons given for not telling parents or police, for instance, but try to help her if she decides to do so.

Stupidity

The extent of her mistake that led to the point of rape determines how really stupid she feels. If she was hitchhiking, for instance, she may blame herself for the rape because she knew it would be risky. It is good to admit an error and to try to be more cautious in the future, but an admission of error must not hide the fact that she was attacked. She was not the attacker, and no person asks or deserves to be raped not matter how thoughtless or careless they were.

Anger

Anger is an appropriate, healthy response to sexual assault. When someone burglarizes our homes or runs into our cars we are angry. The victim has been attacked and humiliated, so they should be angry. They can vent their anger in several ways. They can report the incident to the police. They can tell others about the attacker or about the situation he or she created leading up to the attack.

In Summary

Victims need calm, reassuring, unwavering support. They need to know they are not crazy. They need help to restore their dignity and self-respect. They need not feel ashamed or guilty. They need to see the total rape experience for what it was, an attack on their whole being. The rape cannot be allowed to become a dominant factor in their life. Such an assault is a terrifying experience that must be incorporated into one's life and then one can continue living as a stronger person. It would be damaging to repress the experience or to negate their own part in it, however small.

It is difficult for a victim to call a stranger and say: "I was raped!" Consequently, the beginning of a conversation with a victim is very important. Be calm, supportive. Explore with them reasons they may be feeling the feelings they describe to you. It is not important for you to know all the details of the assault. You only need to know those details that can help with sorting out their feelings and put the rape into proper perspective. A good start is often to see if they have seen a doctor. There are practical details they can talk about until they are ready to talk about their feelings. Are they reporting to the police? Are they afraid the attacker will come back? Always give them the feeling you believe them, that you understand their situation and that you are firm in your own feelings about rape. They may not want to talk deeply with you, but may want to listen to you tell how other victims have felt. Your concern for them as a person and your knowledge and confidence in your beliefs will go a long way. Remember that they may not know how they feel and what they want. It is up to you to help them explore what they are really feeling.

Be prepared to talk as long as they need you. Be sure to tell her them may call anytime or at what times they may call. Tell them your name and give your telephone number. Try to be sure they have a friend or relative who they trust since they may need them.

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