Disclosing Sexual Assault—Unique Barriers to Men

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While everyone will react differently, some common reactions to sexual assault include feelings of fear, shame, guilt, embarrassment, anger, helplessness, and hopelessness. Other common reactions are loss of appetite, trouble sleeping, nausea, headaches, pain related to the injury, and psychological reactions (such as trying to block out the memory of the assault, reliving the assault, thinking about it constantly, trouble focusing, flashbacks, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem). This is only a short list of possible reactions that are common in the aftermath of a sexual assault, and may prevent someone from reporting the assault or receiving the treatment they need.

Male survivors face a unique set of challenges when reporting sexual assault, and encounter specific barriers to seeking counseling or therapy. Societal norms and standards tell men they must be masculine, tough, and strong, and a sexual assault can make a man feel emasculated, vulnerable, and weak. A male survivor may feel too embarrassed or ashamed to report a sexual assault or rape. Not only does society expect men to be strong enough to protect themselves from an assault, they are also encouraged not to talk about their feelings or express their emotions. They may downplay the assault, or engage in unhealthy behaviors to cope with the trauma, rather than report or seek treatment.

Even if a male survivor does not feel emasculated, vulnerable or weak, he may fear being perceived that way by his partner, children, parents, siblings, friends, boss, or coworkers, and worry that they might find out if he reports the assault or seeks treatment. Men may also struggle with the fear of not being believed, understood, or supported. Sexual assault and rape of men is rarely discussed in society or the media, which perpetuates the myth that men are never sexually assaulted or raped.

Another commonly believed myth that prevents men from reporting is the perceived myth that being sexually assaulted or raped implies that a man is homosexual or gay. This is NOT true. While gay men can be raped, a man getting raped by another man says nothing about his sexual orientation before or after the assault. Heterosexual men who are assaulted may avoid reporting or seeking treatment out of worry and fear that others will perceive them as gay. Gay men might avoid reporting or seeking treatment out of shame or self-blame that they did something to provoke the assault, or deserved to be assaulted because of their sexuality.

Many of the male clients served by Victim Services Inc. in the Cambria and Somerset counties can attest to struggling with issues like these. One male survivor stated that his reluctance to report and seek counseling came from extreme feelings of shame and embarrassment. He did not have a good support system and was not initially believed when he first admitted what happened to him. This kept him from seeking treatment for many years. He was also worried about being labeled as a ‘victim,’ which implies powerlessness and pity. “Once you’re a victim, you’re always a victim,” he stated. The label ‘victim’ may deter some men from seeking services at a place called Victim Services, Inc. Instead, it is important we try to refer to these men as survivors. Surviving refers to the strength, stamina, and resiliency that all men who have seen sexually assaulted or raped possess.

If you or someone you know has been sexually assaulted or raped, you can call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673 or find your local rape crisis center at 1-888-772-7227.