

Sexual Assault: The Importance of First Responders

- By Michigan Resource Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence

Sexual assault can have a profound and long-lasting impact on victims' lives. Research shows that the response from those whom a victim first encounters – police, health care providers, friends, family, or advocates – has a significant impact on the victim's process of healing and recovery. Subsequently, it is imperative that those in "first responder" positions have a concrete understanding of what constitutes a supportive and helpful response, based on high quality knowledge of the nature and dynamics of sexual assault and common reactions of victims.

What is Sexual Assault?

Sexual assault is generally any sexual act that one person forces on another without her/his consent. Michigan law divides sexual assault crimes into four degrees of Criminal Sexual Conduct (CSC). First and 3rd degrees involve penetration of any body orifice while 2nd and 4th degrees involve contact with intimate body parts. Also available to prosecutors is Assault with Intent to Commit CSC in the 1st through 3rd degrees. The degree of assault charged depends on a number of factors including the victim's age, mental capacity, use of weapons or family relation. Victims who are drugged, incapacitated, or under the age of 16 are deemed by the law as unable to give consent to any sexual act. To learn more about Michigan's CSC laws visit www.michiganlegislature.org (MCL 750.520a-750.520l).

Common Reactions of Victims

Although healing from a sexual assault is different for every victim, there are some

common reactions that many experience. It may be helpful to separate these common reactions into the four categories of: cognitive, emotional, social, and physical.

Some common cognitive reactions include confusion, lack of concentration, nightmares and flashbacks. Cognitive reactions may also include thoughts such as "Am I damaged goods so that nobody would ever want to be in an intimate relationship with me ever again?," "Bad things happen to bad people...I must be bad," and/or "I deserved it because..." - *insert any myth about sexual assault victims such as: "My dress was too short," "I was drinking," "We had had consensual sex before."*

Emotional reactions may include anxiety, fear, shame, depression, anger, helplessness, a sense of disbelief, shock, or numbness.

Social reactions after the assault may include difficulty getting along with other people, difficulty in social situations that may mirror what happened prior to the sexual assault, disruption of an already existing relationship in which sexual relations were consensual, reluctance to trust others, withdrawal from family and friends, and fear of people who look like the perpetrator.

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Physical injuries can include injuries to any part of the body, STIs, pregnancy, changes in eating or sleeping patterns, fatigue, headaches, muscular tension, and immune system responses.

Healing Process

Healing from a sexual assault is rarely a linear process. Most victims go through times where they feel “back to normal” and then a trigger occurs. The victim may then be back in a crisis phase. This ebb and flow of healing can occur over the course of years. Some victims may choose to seek out supportive services such as a counselor, health care provider or spiritual leader. Some may rely on friends and family. Others may choose not to speak about the assault to anyone. Each victim’s path should be supported and respected by involved family, friends and systems.

If you are interested in learning more about sexual assault, please visit the Michigan Resource Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence at <http://www.resourcecenter.info/>.