

Male Survivors

SUSAN WACHOB AND RICK NIZZARDINI



JUST AS WOMEN HAVE HISTORICALLY BEEN DENIED PERMISSION to be powerful, assertive, and in control of their bodies, men are expected to embody these attributes at all times. Thus, the very rules that oppress women set up a dynamic where it is assumed men can't be sexually victimized.

In the United States and in many other cultures, gender role socialization, a process that begins at the moment of birth, teaches the young male child how he is expected to feel, think, and behave and, most importantly, how he is to experience himself. "Big boys don't cry." "Be a man!" "If he hits you, hit him back." None of what he's taught allows him a full range of emotional response—crying if he's sad, freezing in fear or feeling helpless if overpowered—to one of the most devastating of human experiences: sexual assault.

The average man is not prepared for the role of sexual assault victim. Thus, he is taken totally off guard, further adding to the trauma. This lack of anticipating the possibility that he can be a rape victim not only prevents him from having considered options (something as basic as being aware of a rape crisis center as a place to call for help or support), but also minimizes the actual options available to him. The same gender role socialization that has molded his own beliefs has occurred in the very environment that has molded other individuals as well. Thus, while the male survivor struggles to integrate the experience of a sexual assault with his gender stereotyped notions that such things do not happen to men, those who wish to offer him help struggle with the same issues. It is important for sexual assault counselors, then, to analyze their own assumptions about gender stereotypes so that when a male victim calls, these beliefs do not impede the counselor's genuine offer of help.

A number of issues are similar for most survivors: fear, shame, guilt, helplessness, anger, among others. How these particular concerns are experienced by the male survivor and how he communicates them to others, however, may be significantly different. Additionally, there are many issues unique to male survivors and some that are of particular relevance to gay survivors.

Because statistics vary from study to study, it is difficult to estimate the number of male victims of adult rape or childhood molestation or incest. As a general rule, however, it is estimated that as many as one in six men are sexually abused as children. The following section highlights some of the most frequently encountered issues unique to the male survivor, and it is followed by a section focusing on the specific needs of the gay male survivor.

Issues for Male Survivors of Any Sexual Orientation

It is often difficult for the male survivor to identify sexual victimization as abuse because he has been taught that it happens only to women. He might redefine the abuse as something other than sexual victimization: "It wasn't rape. It was just an early opportunity for sex," or "Women can't rape men, so it wasn't rape," or "Because I had an erection, I must have enjoyed it so it wasn't really rape and what am I complaining about?" The first task, then, is to help the male victim understand that his experience was abuse or a rape.

Although the sexual assault counselor should assess where the male survivor is regarding his acceptance of what has occurred, it is also helpful for the worker to assess whether those survivors who seem fearful of naming the assault as rape may benefit in the moment by naming it as such. In effect, the sexual assault counselor might need to serve as the external, objective voice of reason that helps the male survivor see the abuse for what it really is—abuse—because gender socialization prevents the survivor from doing so on his own. The male victim who is able to define his experience as sexual abuse may still fear the response of the rape crisis center or others he reaches out to, anticipating that their responses may be as judgmental or uninformed as his own. Many of those the male survivor turns to for help (rape crisis centers, therapists, his own family or friends) will, in fact, similarly distort the realities of the rape of men.

It is important for the sexual assault counselor to keep several things in mind when a call comes in from a male survivor. First, it should be recognized that there are few culturally sanctioned emotions for men, with anger being the primary one. Sadness and fear are the least acceptable. It is therefore easy to miss the broad array of underlying reactions and needs that any survivor experiences. Because for women anger is often seen as empowering, it is easy to misinterpret the early anger expressed by the male survivor as a sign that he is less traumatized. Additionally, male survivors often feel the need to take action regarding the abuse. “Sitting with the feelings” is often unknown and intolerable. More active options sometimes work better at first, but ultimately he needs to learn how to deal with those feelings. Some things that might prove useful are helping him identify and name the feelings he is experiencing, normalizing them and his discomfort with them, and helping him to understand the importance of the feelings as internal messages and healing tools. It is also important to understand his statements like “I’m going to get him” as expressions of his hurt and fear in a framework of taking action. At the same time, however, it is still imperative to not dismiss expressions of potential violent behavior without fully exploring them.

Furthermore, it should be recognized that many men talk about sex in graphic ways. When they call a rape crisis center, this presentation fits well with the stereotype of men as the perpetrators and women as the victims and can be mistaken for someone making crank calls for his own sexual gratification or to harass the person taking the call. Although it is important to acknowledge that crank calls can occur and that they make it difficult for legitimate male victims to access services, sexual assault counselors should also recognize the importance of differentiating the two callers. To do this, it is helpful if the sexual assault counselor does not initially comment on the graphic nature of the caller’s story, acknowledging the possible underlying meanings to the graphic content (for example, “That must have been really frightening,” or “What an awful thing to go through”) and attempting to determine if the caller may be a legitimate victim who is calling for help but unable to find words other than a detailed description of the rape. Doing this both avoids the judgment that is the very thing the survivor fears and also models a way to talk about what’s underneath the initial presentation.

Sexual assault counselors should also be aware that sexual issues are of major concern to many male survivors. Because an erection is so visible, it is obvious to the perpetrator, who may use it to confuse the victim. The survivor may also mistake this physiological response for consent or desire, and he may need educating that he may well have been physically stimulated without having wanted the sexual activity and that erections can be caused by such things as fear as well. Additionally, men are often expected, both internally and by the culture at large, to be sex seekers—ready, willing, and able to perform. Yet post-assault, it is common for men to experience diminished interest in sex through difficulty getting or maintaining an erection and reaching an orgasm. It is vital to normalize

these experiences. Exploring the “message” that his body is expressing often helps minimize the need for acting it out through sexual dysfunction.

Men who are sexually victimized often assume that they are the only ones—an idea that is reinforced by the secrecy that other male survivors maintain, and that is in turn fostered by the massive denial about male sexual victimization in general. For the man assaulted by another man, this leads to such questions as, “Is there something wrong with me, that I’m the only man it happened to?” This in turn leads to questions about whether the assault will have an effect on the survivor’s sexual orientation and whether he was singled out because the assailant thought he was gay. For the heterosexual survivor, fears of “becoming gay” could emerge. The sexual assault counselor should normalize such fears but reassure the survivor that the assault was an act of power and the sex was just used as the weapon. Finally, for the male survivor of sexual abuse by either gender, concern arises about his inability to be a “man”—that is, one who is never vulnerable—obviously an impossible standard to uphold.

Issues Specific to Gay Male Survivors

The gay male survivor of sexual abuse has all the concerns that any man might have, plus a number unique to being a gay survivor. There are differences in the gay survivor’s internal experience of himself as a gay man, of the greater culture’s view of him, and of his relationship with both the gay and nongay cultures in which he must function daily.

Similar to the question that a heterosexual man might have about sexual orientation as a factor in the abuse is the gay man’s question about whether he was raped because he is gay. In gay bashings, this may well be true.

Most sexual abuse of gay men outside institutional settings occurs in the same way that it does for women—by partners and acquaintances. Thus, the very people who are likely to make up his community and social support system are similar to the person who assaulted him, possibly heightening the lack of safety he already feels.

In addition, the gay man who is raped is taking an often enormous risk approaching some service providers, fearing that his homosexuality, rather than his assault, will become the focus of sexual assault services. He legitimately fears judgment about his sexual orientation and sexual practices. His partner may not be offered the same emotional support that a heterosexual survivor’s partner might receive or be welcomed as a valid part of the gay survivor’s support system.

There is some debate in the gay community as well about whether forced sexual activity among gay men is rape or a form of sexual expression. The issue remains the same, no matter who the survivor or the circumstances: was it consensual? Helping the gay male survivor explore the event in this context, helping him use his feelings as a tool to guide him, will be more fruitful than defining it for him. This is an extremely sensitive issue in the gay community, and the survivor may not mention it at all, not wanting to expose his community to the scrutiny of a possibly hostile public.

The sexual assault counselor should also be aware that gay men, like their heterosexual counterparts, often experience a lack of libido and erectile and orgasmic difficulties after being raped. Both within the gay culture and in the wider community, a gay man is expected to be universally interested in sex and may question his identity or competence as a gay man as he experiences a decrease in sexual desire and/or functioning.

In summary, men who are sexually victimized face many of the issues that female survivors encounter. But they have numerous additional hurdles to surmount in their healing as well. As a healer in these men’s recovery, it is vital to be aware of the issues with

which the male survivor may be struggling. Perhaps even more important, however, is examining your own biases about men and their varying roles in sexual victimization. To fully accept that men can be and are sexually victimized in no way minimizes the impact of sexual violence in the lives of women. Each sexual assault survivor, female or male, deserves a fully compassionate and informed response to that person's unique needs.