

# If Someone You Love Has Been Raped

## Rape in the United States

- Drug-facilitated, Incapacitated, and Forcible Rape: A National Study in 2006 found 18% of women reported any *lifetime* experience of rape, which included forcible sexual penetration (16.1%) as well as penetrations involving drugs, alcohol, or other incapacities (5%) (Kilpatrick, Resnick, Ruggiero, Conoscenti, & McCauley, 2007). Note: These statistics do not include attempted rape.
- The majority of women who were raped knew their attacker (75%-89%) with about one quarter reporting they were raped by an intimate or ex-intimate partner (19%-30.4%) (Basile et al., 2007; Kilpatrick et al., 1992; 2007; Tjaden & Thonnes, 2000a; 2006).
- An estimated 84 % of rapes are not reported to police. (Kilpatrick et al, 2007)
- An estimated 91% of victims of rape are female, 9% are male and 99% of offenders are male. (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1999)
- Native American women are raped at a rate more than double that of rapes reported by all races on an annual average. (US Dept. of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics: American Indians and Crime: 1992-96 Report)
- The federal government has responsibility for prosecution of rapes in Indian Country. Between 2000 and 2003 of the 597 adult rape cases in Indian Country that were initiated, 128 arrests were made resulting in 109 convictions... an average of 27.5 convictions a year. (Federal Prosecution of Misdemeanor & Felony Violent Crimes in Indian Country; 2005; Leslie Hagen and Jeff Davis; US DOJ)

## Words For Family and Friends

If someone you care about is raped you may have a range of reactions: shock, anger, rage, sadness, fear and/or anxiety. It is not unusual for women who have been raped to go from shock to denial - the reality is too harsh. You may go through those changes, too.

It is extremely important to know that your first response to your loved one that has been raped will impact how fast she is able to heal. Sometimes it is difficult to find words, to know what to say. Sometimes people walk away because they feel awkward - leaving their loved one often feeling shunned and shamed. First, know that just your being there counts. Second, saying you are sorry this happened to them and that you know it's not their fault are helpful. It's not unusual for women who have been raped to need to be told repeatedly that no matter what, it's not their fault. Always ask first if they want a hug or any other physical contact. Some will find safety and comfort in hugs; others are not ready yet to be even a little vulnerable for a while. Asking for permission to touch shows respect and honors the woman's right to decide about her body and life.

Listening without judgment is very important and it can be emotionally difficult. You may be feeling disbelief, rage, shock. Just listen. Find someone you can talk to yourself. Taking care of yourself is vital. The path of healing from sexual violence is long. For you to be there for your loved one means you need to be as balanced as possible emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually.

The most immediate need for women who have been raped is to feel safe. For some women that may take hours, others it may take years. Ask what she needs to feel safe. It may mean leaving lights on 24/7, sleeping in small, enclosed places, bells on all doors and windows, not going outside or only with certain people. Whatever it takes is ok until some healing has taken place.

Medical care, whether she wants to go through a rape exam or not, is essential. Sexually transmitted diseases, physical injuries and possible pregnancy should be taken care of as soon as possible.

Assisting your loved one in connecting with an advocate, possibly a counselor or therapist, and/or a support group of other women who have been raped are significant ways you can help.

The spiritual impact of a rape can be devastating, too. The woman may or may not want to go to church or ceremony. You can encourage, but that must be her choice. Spiritual advisors, as well as counselors, therapists etc. should be checked out a head of time - none of them are guaranteed to understand the dynamics of rape, or even to not be offenders themselves. Working with people you already know and trust to find those that are trustworthy and have the expertise in this area takes a large burden off of the person who has been raped. Be sure to get permission from the woman first.

Everyone involved needs to pay attention to their basic needs as they go through this journey. Eating healthy foods, sleeping on schedule, getting some sort of exercise and avoiding the common wish to escape it all, provide the foundation for moving forward on the healing path.

You may need to remind your loved one who has experienced the horror of rape, that they are strong even though they may feel pain, scared and weak. Let them know that being strong when you feel pain, scared and weak is the definition of courage. Healing will happen over time, given the support she deserves.

## **Lies and Truths About Sexual Violence**

**The dominant society's understanding of sexual assault is complicated by lies and distortions. These lies are dangerous because they lead women to feel safe when they aren't and blame women for sexual violence. These lies re-victimize and let rapists and community members off the hook. Knowing the truth is the first step in ending violence.**

**Lie:** Women often provoke sexual assault by how they act or dress; they ask for it.

**Truth:** This is a poor excuse used by offenders to rationalize their behavior. Offenders are solely responsible for their own behavior. Rape is not a crime of passion or "lust." It is about misogyny (women-hating) and power and control. If a woman got drunk, naked and actually asked for "it," in a compassionate society, people would wrap her in a blanket and take her to her family to get help. They would not take advantage of her vulnerability.

**Lie:** Rape is not a big deal; it is only sex.

**Truth:** Rape is a life-changing, violent crime. It is a crime of dominance and control using sex as the weapon. To be raped is to be violated, humiliated and stripped of control. It violates a person physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Forcing someone to engage in sexual intercourse against her or his will is an act of violence and aggression. Fear of dying is a common response to being raped.

**Lie:** Women falsely accuse men of rape all the time.

**Truth:** Nobody volunteers for a rape exam! The FBI has stated that false reports of rape are only 2%, no higher than false reports for any other crimes. Rape is the most underreported of all crimes. Studies suggest that 70%-90% of rapes are never reported to the police.

**Lie:** When a woman says "no" she really means "yes."

**Truth:** If a woman says no, it is the responsibility of the man to accept and respect her "no." There are many ways of saying "no": "I have to go"/ "I'm going to be late"; "My friend is waiting"; "I'm not into this"; silence; crying; body language (squirming, stiffness etc.) and **not saying "yes."** Many offenders will not quit until they get what they want. Women may eventually submit because they are afraid of more physical violence if they refuse – that is rape.

**Lie:** It's only rape if she fights back and has physical injury.

**Truth:** Many women are too afraid to struggle. They may freeze in terror or realize that fighting back will get them hurt much worse or killed. 85% of sexual assaults are committed by someone the woman knows and trusts. That betrayal and disbelief are weapons of rape. Assaults may also be drug assisted. The goal is to do whatever it takes to survive.

**Lie:** If it really happened victims would be able to tell what happened in a complete and logical way.

**Truth:** Shock, fear and trauma impair memory, temporarily and/or long term. Rape is a near-death experience. It's a harsh reality that can take weeks, years or decades to accept, much less talk about. Many women know if they tell, they'll not be believed, may be subject to more physical danger or humiliation and that reporting to law enforcement may complicate their lives for a long time and rarely result in a conviction.

**Lie:** A woman who has had sex before with the offender cannot be raped.

**Truth:** A woman does not give her right to say no away of an existing relationship, marriage and/or previously having sex. A woman has a right to change her mind *at any time*, without explanation.

**Lie:** If a man buys a woman dinner or drinks, gives a present or does a favor, she owes him sex.

**Truth:** No one owes anyone sex - ever. Sex is not something to barter for. Sex has emotional and spiritual effects. Friendliness and openness are not invitations to sex.

**Lie:** Rape only happens to children or women, not men because men can fight back.

**Truth:** Rape does not discriminate. Individual rapists may target a certain type of person, but infants, senior citizens, boys and girls, women and men are all raped. Men rape men. Women, though rare, rape. The vast majority of rapes happen to women who are 16 - 25 years old and the rapists are men.

**Lie:** Once a sexual assault report has been made the offender will be prosecuted and found guilty.

**Truth:** Prosecution requires reports. Yet, fewer than one in ten women ever report their rapes. An extremely small percentage of rapists, especially in Indian Country (less than 1%) are ever convicted. Prosecution rates are low. "Proof" is difficult, and there are too many prosecutors out there that won't take a case unless they know for sure they will get a conviction. Participation in the criminal justice process may take years, and often causes re-victimization by the very systems that they are supposed to be helping.

**Lie:** Rapists are mostly psychotic men. You can identify a rapist by the way he looks.

**Truth:** In study after study, researchers are unable to find any significant psychological difference between men who rape and men who do not rape. Many rapists have wives or girlfriends. Violence against women is a result of socialization, not psychological problems.

**Lie:** Men rape as a result of uncontrollable sexual urges or because they have been sexually abused as children.

**Truth:** 75% of men who rape are either married or have regular sexual partners. Many male rapists claim to have been sexually abused as children, though studies show many lie about this to excuse their behavior. If childhood sex abuse caused the victim to grow up into a rapist, then most rapists would be women. Motives for rape are misogyny (women-hating) and to feel powerful and in control.

**Lie:** Men who rape other men are gay.

**Truth:** Rape is not about sexuality and does not relate to sexual orientation. It's about humiliation and submission by violent acts to prove power and control. Most men who rape men and children are straight. Rape happens in the LGBTQ communities. Lesbians and gays are often raped by straight men as a hate crime.

**Lie:** Most rapes are spontaneous. Rapists just can't control themselves!

**Truth:** Rapists usually plan when, where and how to commit the rape. Rapists are in complete control of their actions and often know the routine of their victim in order to commit the rape, whether it's someone they know or a stranger.

**Lie:** Most rapes only happen in the street late at night, outside the home.

**Truth:** Rapes occurs at all times of the day, often in the morning. Six out of ten rape/sexual assaults occur in the home or the house of a friend, relative or neighbor. Marital rape is part of battering.

**Lie:** A woman should be discouraged from talking or thinking about the rape. She should forget it and go on with her life.

**Truth:** For those women who tell and are not believed or silenced, the life-threatening trauma is multiplied many times over. They may never speak of it again or at least not for a very long time. Healing may not happen. Too often, self-destructive behavior compounds the damage. Healing happens over time, in the individual's own ways, if they have informed, compassionate, non-judgmental support and safety. It is not possible to either "just move on" or to forget. Talking is a necessary part of healing.

## Things To Say and Things Not to Say to a Survivor of Rape

Sometimes knowing what to say to someone who has been raped is difficult. Sometimes we say things that are hurtful because we don't understand this violent crime and the impact it has on the victim. Here are some suggestions.

### Please don't...

1. ... tell us "It's just sex."  
Rape is a crime of power, control and extreme violence; sex is the weapon. Rape is a near death experience that tears at the body, mind and spirit. *Better to say you're sorry it happened and ask what I need to feel safe.*
2. ... tell us how we could have avoided it.  
It's too late and is victim-blaming. Everyone has a right to go anywhere, in any condition without being raped or assaulted. *I'd rather hear that it's not my fault no matter what and it's wrong that it happened; I should have been protected.*
3. ... avoid me.  
Please don't let your discomfort make you shun me. I already feel like people can tell what happened to me just by looking and that it disgusts them. *Tell me you care, ask what I need, buy me lunch! Near and quiet is ok.*
4. ... say I'm lying or exaggerating.  
Being disbelieved is a survivor's greatest fear. If you don't believe me, I might not be able to tell anyone else for a long time... (false rape reports only happen 2% of the time) *Believe me and say so.*
5. ... tell me not to talk about it or to "get over it" or "to put what happened out of my mind."  
I need to talk to heal. *You can't fix this for me, but you can help by just listening.*
6. ... say, "it happens all the time," or "other people have it worse off than you".  
That belittles my feelings and me. Comparing my pain and fear to others doesn't help. *Let me know that you're concerned about me, and that talking to other women that share this experience can help - and you'll help me connect with them, when I'm ready.*

7. ... say, if it really happened, I'd report it to law enforcement and press charges.  
This decision is personal, and every woman's decision is legitimate. Telling my story over and over again to strangers is like reliving it over and over. What about confidentiality? Privacy? What about paybacks from his family, friends or gang? Why should I press charges if rape investigations especially in Indian Country hardly ever go to trial...and less than .1 % get convicted anyway? If I do, it'll mostly be to let him know he can't scare me anymore and to let other women know what he is. **Believe me. Trust that I know what I can do and need to do for myself.**
8. ... feel you need to retaliate against my attacker.  
He's proven he's extremely violent. Please don't make me worry about you being hurt. I can't handle your anger; his rage is enough for many lifetimes. *I know you would have stopped it if you could; find help for your reactions.*
9. ... question my choices to feel safe right now (unless I'm hurting others or myself.)  
What may seem strange to you may help me feel safe. And I can't begin to heal until I feel safe. *Ask me what you can do to help me feel safe.*
- 10.... ask me if I fought back.  
I made the best choices I could to survive. I got away without being killed, so whatever I did was right. *Help me remember that when I forget.*
11. ... think if you give me a hug and I pull away that I'm rejecting you.  
*Just ask if me if I want a hug.* It takes time to feel in control of my body and to want to be touched again. Asking me, shows respect for me.
12. ... tell me that it's not rape because I knew the attacker, he bought dinner, I went out with him, slept with him before. Most rapists are people we know and trust. I always have the right to say "No" - no exceptions. That right cannot be bought or forfeited. *Tell me, no matter what it's not my fault and only he is responsible for his actions.*

© 1996-2000 <http://raperecovery.terrashare.com> Revised by Sacred Circle 2008; revised by SDCADVSA 2010

## What Your Loved One Is Going Through

Being raped is a near death experience. Most rapes are done by someone the woman knows. This creates a sense of betrayal that is extremely painful. Many women wrongly blame themselves for the rape. Some women don't blame themselves but won't tell because going through the criminal justice system means being vulnerable again and re-living the rape repeatedly, often with no consequences for the rapist. They know they may be shunned or re-assaulted. Some women report to take a stand and regain control over their lives. They believe whether there is prosecution or a conviction or not, they can identify a rapist and protect other women from him.

Telling is a woman's choice. Many women do not tell for weeks, months or many years - even decades. It can take that long to get strong enough and find enough safety and support to talk about the rape. The more people talk about rape openly as a violent crime, state that rape is never the victim's fault, accept no excuses for it, provide support for those who have been raped and hold the offender accountable with severe consequences, the more sense it makes for women to come forward and heal.

Women may need reassurance about what she did during the rape. Whatever a woman did or did not do to survive was the right thing. No matter what the circumstances were, she is not to blame, did not cause or deserve the violence. Whatever she needs to do to feel safe is ok, if it's not hurting her or somebody else. Some women leave all the lights on day and night, close curtains, sleep with clothes on, stay at a shelter or with friends. In the beginning some do things that even they think are may be a little strange in order to feel safe.

Another difficult decision for women may be whether they want a “rape kit” done at the hospital. This exam includes looking for evidence of the rape in addition to health concerns. It’s up to the woman if she wants to get this exam, but if at some time she wants to prosecute the rapist, this exam can be very important. The rape kit should be kept, so if she is unsure now about reporting to law enforcement, it can be used later. If the woman wants help from the state’s Victim Compensation program that can reimburse for certain expenses, either a police report or the rape kit will be necessary. It is important to know that neither the rape kit nor police report guarantees prosecution or conviction.

The path to healing can be a roller coaster. Friends, family, an advocate, spiritual leader, or therapist can provide support and help. Other women who have survived a rape can be very powerful in helping the woman and her family and friends through this experience. Many communities have support groups made up of women who experienced the same trauma. These groups are often the strongest ongoing supports available.

Be aware not all helpers or mental health professionals are knowledgeable about sexual violence. Know the spiritual advisors or helpers you might want to talk to or have ceremony with. No title or position guarantees understanding or trustworthiness. If there is no local program or you have difficulty finding one, please contact the South Dakota Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault for information about a program closest to you.

For most, there are three stages on the healing journey. The amount of time each stage takes varies greatly, but all women who have been raped/sexually assaulted seem to experience each of these stages in some way.

The **first stage** is the time right after the assault and can last days or many weeks. Women may be very emotional: very agitated, hostile, have crying spells and/or anxiety attacks. Some women are extremely controlled, acting as though nothing happened, or that they can handle it. It may be that the woman is in shock. Other women react with shocked disbelief, appearing or feeling disoriented. They may have trouble making decisions, concentrating or doing everyday tasks. They may have trouble remembering what happened to them.

During the **second stage** often called the "outward adjustment phase," women get back to their normal routine, but still suffer the effects of the assault inside. Most times women cope in one of five ways:

1. Minimization: Pretend "everything's fine," or "it could have been worse."
2. Hyper-focus: Always talking and thinking about the assault; the assault becomes their life and identity.
3. Suppression: Acts as if nothing happened; will not talk about it.
4. Explanation: Speaks from the head about the assault with no emotion; intellectualizes.
5. Flight: Tries to escape the pain and fear by moving, changing how they look, different friends or self-medicating with drugs or alcohol.

Any of these reactions are normal reactions to the horror the woman has survived. Some women may feel they are going crazy, but usually they are reacting logically to a violently chaotic experience.

The behaviors and feelings may include some or all of the following:

- ◆ Feeling out of control
- ◆ Nightmares, not being able to sleep, sleeping too much
- ◆ Flashbacks
- ◆ Anger/ rage with yourself and/or others, or numbness - feeling nothing
- ◆ Fear of public places, being alone, new relationships, the dark
- ◆ Extreme dependency on family and friends, or isolates themselves from others
- ◆ Depression, mood swings

- ◆ Crying spells, anxiety attacks, feeling jumpy
- ◆ Disorganization, difficulty concentrating
- ◆ Wondering what you did to deserve the attack; worried you will never be normal again
- ◆ Eating problems—too much, too little, nausea, vomiting
- ◆ Abuse of alcohol or other drugs
- ◆ Lack of trust
- ◆ Not wanting to be touched or intimate
- ◆ Body pain

After experiencing some of these feelings and/or behaviors, the woman may begin to feel that she is beginning to regain control and are actually handling everything extremely well. It is possible any time during this controlled period that something triggers her memory of the assault and is thrown back into crisis again. "I must be crazy" or "I am losing it", are common thoughts during this time; however, feeling the effects of a sexual assault long after it has happened is not crazy and fairly common. These feelings may surface when least expected.

The **last stage** is called the "resolution" or "re-integration stage." Now the assault is not the central focus of her life. The memories are there forever, and she will mostly likely need to deal with some reaction from time to time. But the pain has lessened, and healing has taken place. This point is marked by acceptance of the experience of rape and the changes it brought. However, she has regained control of her life and is able to move on with life.

There are many approaches that can provide the help and support needed to over-come the trauma of sexual assault. Mainstream society offers a number of methods of healing: counseling or therapy, support groups, meditation, art therapy, journaling, exercising and various forms of self-care (wrap-up in a blanket and rock, eating and sleeping well, massage, bubble baths etc.). For native women, there is tremendous healing power in traditional ceremonies. These natural ways can help through all aspects of recovery. They help reconnect body, spirit, mind and heart. For those of other faiths, there are many existing and developing faith-based programs for survivors that provide significant support and information. Using any of these ways will not erase the memory, but can help to drastically decrease the fear, anger, doubts and pain it caused.