



ACTIVITY 5

Sexual Violence Response and Empowerment

ACTIVITY:

Analyzing the skepticism and victim blaming that often follow a disclosure of sexual violence and developing more helpful responses.

BACKGROUND:

Many sexual violence victims who disclose are met with skepticism, doubt, blame, and shame. As a result, victims often stop talking, don't reach out for help, and never receive the services and support they need. This compounds the trauma and long-term emotional, physical, and spiritual effects of the trauma. Faith communities have an opportunity to be places where victims are believed and supported. They could help survivors reach services and accompany them on the journey toward healing. They could empower survivors to recover control of their lives and to heal spiritually. To do this, faith community members and leaders must listen to and believe survivors.

GOALS:

1. To examine cultural misunderstandings about sexual violence.
2. To practice developing appropriate responses.

OBJECTIVES:

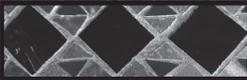
At the end of this activity, participants should be able to:

1. Understand reasons why a victim may not disclose a sexual assault.
2. Demonstrate responses that believe and support victims of sexual violence.

ESTIMATED TIME: 30 minutes

MATERIALS:

Flip chart, markers, tape
Handout (one copy for each participant)
Talking points (below)



Facilitator Talking Points

- ❖ Victims of sexual assault desperately need support, justice, and healing. They are here (refer to physical, emotional, and spiritual effects of trauma developed in Activity 2), and they are in our congregations and communities.
- ❖ “Where?” you might be asking. “Where are these victims? I’ve never heard this talked about.” That’s because most of the survivors in our communities are suffering in silence.
- ❖ This is a big problem.
 - ❖ It’s a problem for survivors because if they can’t talk about what they have experienced, it will be very hard to find safety or healing or justice.
 - ❖ And it’s a problem for our communities because if a crime is never reported, never investigated, never prosecuted, it’s hard to imagine how that crime would ever stop.
- ❖ So an expert named Sarah Ullman asked: why is SV so underreported?? Why is it so hard for victims to talk about this? Why don’t victims “speak up”? She decided to do some research. She talked to victims.
- ❖ It turned out, victims often DO disclose, usually to someone close to them. So the problem is not that victims don’t disclose. The problem is the response they get when they disclose.
- ❖ Here are some of the responses that victims reported hearing when they talked about the sexual assault.¹
 - ❖ My mom’s boyfriend said, “you have no business going out looking like that.”
 - ❖ My younger sisters just blurted it out to the kids. I’ll never forgive them.
 - ❖ My friend that I first told went and told her boyfriend. I wanted it to be personal and now more people know. It is like the grapevine effect.
 - ❖ An acquaintance told me that I didn’t have it as bad as some other victims.
 - ❖ A guy I was friends with who I talked to about it tried to rape me.
 - ❖ The first person I told [a nurse at the hospital] said it wasn’t rape.
 - ❖ A friend who was with me at the time stated that it didn’t really happen – that I must be mistaken.

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Lead a brief group discussion about these responses. You could discuss the responses one by one. Or just have a discussion about the responses in general.



- ◇ *What are some of the assumptions behind these responses?*
 - ◇ *How do you think these responses make the victim feel?*
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- ❖ One of the things we often hear from victims of sexual violence is that when they talk about it, they are met with a “knee jerk reaction of skepticism.” Everyone seems to doubt what they are saying, because maybe they led the perpetrator on, or they are making this up, or they are trying to get the perpetrator in trouble. But that’s not usually the case. In fact, only 2% to 8% of sexual violence cases are false reports.

This “knee jerk reaction of skepticism” even drives research. The only crimes that have a body of research on false reporting are sexual assault and stalking.

This skepticism extends to law enforcement, court professionals, medical personnel, and members of the general public. Unfortunately, it also extends to faith leaders and members of faith communities.²

- ❖ Ironically, a significant challenge in responding to sexual violence is not false reporting, it’s under reporting. There are significant barriers to disclosing, such as shame, fear, guilt, embarrassment, concerns about confidentiality, and, of course, fear of not being believed. As a result, only 20% of sexual assaults are ever reported, and only 3% of the cases that are reported result in a conviction.

In fact, there are currently hundreds of thousands of untested “rape kits,” which contain physical evidence connecting the crime to the perpetrator, sitting on shelves in law enforcement offices and crime labs around the U.S.

Each rapist assaults, on average, 6 people. Every failed response is a victim who doesn’t get the support and help they need. And every failed response could also mean an additional five victims in our families, in our congregations, and in our communities.

- ❖ We can’t change it all. But we can do one important thing: we can support victims by listening to them and believing them when they speak up.

Research shows that the first person the victim confides in is usually not police, but family and friends, and, if they are faith-affiliated, someone in their faith community.

The first response is a critical first step in healing and justice or this first response can worsen the trauma and decrease the likelihood that the victim will get needed services and support.

Pieces of a Bigger Picture Training Model

In fact, research shows a direct relationship: the more negative the response, the worse the long-term physical and emotional health effects of the trauma, and the better the initial response, the better the long-term physical and emotional health effects.

- ✦ The two things that victims name as critical are someone to talk to and being believed.
- ✦ For those of us in the community, and especially for those in faith communities, this is something we can do. We can listen. We can believe.

Re-Writing Responses

- ✦ The survivors Sarah Ullman interviewed were met with silencing, blame, and disbelief, but we think we can do better. So, we'd like to invite you to work with a team to re-write these responses and a few others. The goal is for the victim to feel believed and supported rather than trivialized, disbelieved, or burdened with shame or blame.

Break the room into small groups to discuss the following responses and to re-write them so that the victim feels believed and supported. Give each group a handout (see below) to work with. Ask each group to assign a "reporter" who can bring their work to the wider group.

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1. "You have no business going out looking like that."
2. "You told me not to tell, but I was concerned, so I talked to some people about it."
3. "You didn't have it as bad as some other victims."
4. "This didn't really happen. You must be mistaken. I don't ever want to hear you talk about this nonsense again."
5. "Next time this happens, you should defend yourself."
6. "Shame on you. Didn't you know this would happen if you drink?"
7. "You guys have been married for years. This can't possibly be rape."

After 10 minutes of small group discussions, bring the participants back and have them share their re-written responses. Ask the first group to explain how they re-wrote Response 1. Ask the other groups to report any re-writes of Response 1 they had that were different. Then ask the second group to explain how they re-wrote Response 2, and again ask other groups to report, but only if they did something different. Continue for all the responses.

Re-written responses might include phrases such as the following.

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- ◇ "How can I help?"
- ◇ "I won't tell anyone else what happened unless you want me to."

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- ◇ *"It was brave of you to tell me."*
- ◇ *"No one has the right to hurt you."*
- ◇ *"The responsibility is on the person who hurt you."*
- ◇ *"This is not your fault."*
- ◇ *"I believe you."*
- ◇ *"I'm sorry this happened to you. No one deserves this."*

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- ✦ Indian author and activist Arundhati Roy commented: "There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless.' There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard." Victims of sexual violence have been "deliberately silenced and preferably unheard" for far too long. We can change this, and we will, because it is the right thing to do for victims, and also because it is the right thing to do for our children, families, congregations, and communities.
 - ✦ Here's an example of how one faith leader broke the silence by making a statement in her congregation to welcome those who have been silent for far too long.

Wherever you are in the silence you are welcome here.

Whether you have been waiting
To be asked for your story
Knowing someone will listen
And not express an opinion . . .
Or you cannot imagine
Telling your story
Until fill-in-the-blank has died

You finish therapy, start therapy, or until hell freezes over.

Wherever you are in the silence you are welcome here.

Whether it's someone else's story,
But as parent or sibling or child
You are grateful to be quiet
In a place where this kind of truth
Is being told . . .
Or you are really, really quiet

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Because suddenly you remember
Something you were a part of long ago
That everyone then called
Funny or stupid or insignificant,
But you know now –
It was sexual assault

Wherever you are in the silence you are welcome here.

Whether you are stunned by statistics,
Or uncomfortable because
This isn't churchly stuff
Or scared because you suspect
You are starting to remember
What happened to you,
Or sorry you told the pastor
You would share your story . . .
Or are so glad, so glad,
So wishing you could text three people
And tell them to be here.

Wherever you are in the silence you are welcome here.

(Rev. Maren Tirabassi © 2017)

¹ Adapted from Sarah Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault: Society's Response to Survivors*, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 2010, p. 71.

² Ullman comments, "Support providers consistently rated by survivors as most unhelpful or unsupportive in their responses to sexual assault survivors' disclosures include police/legal personnel, physicians, and clergy (Ullman, 1999). . . . A study of clergy's attitudes toward victims of rape showed that most clergy blame the victim and adhere to rape myths. . . ." Sarah E. Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault: Society's Response to Survivors*, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 2010, p. 77.

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Sexual Violence Response and Empowerment Activity

Sample response: "You've got to go to the hospital, get a forensic examination, call the police, and get a lawyer right away!"

Sample re-written response: "I'm here for you. What do you need from me?"

1. "You have no business going out looking like that."

2. "You told me not to tell, but I was concerned, so I talked to some people about it."

3. "You didn't have it as bad as some other victims."

4. "This didn't really happen. You must be mistaken. I don't ever want to hear you talk about this nonsense again."

5. "Next time this happens, you should defend yourself."

6. "Shame on you. Didn't you know this would happen if you drink?"

7. "You guys have been married for years. This can't possibly be rape."

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