

## EFFECTS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

### Statistics

- One-third of all female rape victims are affected by major depressive disorders; one-third of women contemplate suicide and 17% attempt suicide. National Center for PTSD, Sexual Assault against Females, 2004.
- Rape victims are 13.4 times more likely than non-victims to have major alcohol problems and 26 times more likely than non-victims to have serious drug abuse problems. *Ibid.*
- The estimate risk of developing posttraumatic stress disorder is 49% for rape survivors and 24% for survivors of other sexual assault. Sidran Foundation "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Fact Sheet," 2004.
- Almost 27% of women and 12% of men who have been molested develop PTSD later in life. Kilpatrick and Acierno, "Mental Health Needs of Crime Victims," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 16 (2003).
- Victims of rape are 13 times more likely to develop two or more alcohol-related problems and 26 times more likely to have two or more serious drug abuse-related problems than non-crime victims. *Ibid.*

### Overview of the Issue

- Factors influencing an individual victim's response to and recovery from sexual assault are: developmental maturity; age; available social supports; relationship to offender; frequency, duration and severity of attack; level of violence and injury; responses of police, advocates, loved ones and the community; and the meaning attributed by that victim.
- Physical symptoms experienced by survivors include: trembling, vomiting, breathing problems and nightmares. Common psychological symptoms are helplessness, shock, denial, guilt, loss of trust, loss of self-esteem, memory loss, phobic anxiety, insomnia, panic attacks, sexual dysfunction, jumpiness, depression and self-mutilation.
- Many will experience Rape-Related Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (RR-PTSD), which is characterized by: re-experiencing the trauma through flashbacks and avoidance of triggers; social withdrawal or emotional numbing; avoidance behaviors, usually of triggers; and increased physiological arousal traits like hyper-vigilance, sleep disorders, difficulty concentrating, memory impairment, hostility and rage.

### What You Can Do

- Reassure survivors that it was not their fault, regardless of where they were, what they were wearing or what they did or said. With validation, victims' sense of shame and worthlessness will be diminished.
- Listen without judgment. Let the survivor know they are not alone. Encourage them to talk to a mental health professional, advocate or someone they trust.
- Friends and family also have to deal with their own feelings about the assault. By resolving their own feelings, loved ones can be more useful and supportive to the survivor.

### Impact on Survivors

- Trained advocates work with sexual assault survivors to help defuse their anxiety, give practical advice and offer counseling to avert feelings of blame and shame.
- Survivors need to re-establish control over their lives by making their own decisions on how to move forward and whether to report.
- Survivors experience additional stress from pregnancy and HIV fears, especially since the latter may take up to a year for any resolution.

### Quotable

In order to heal, sexual assault survivors need to come to terms with the past and also alleviate their present stressful symptoms. Dealing with sexual assault trauma alone can be very difficult. Counseling and referrals are available at the Houston Area Women's Center by calling the Sexual Assault Hotline at (713) 528-7273.

Houston Area Women's Center [www.hawc.org](http://www.hawc.org)  
1010 Waugh Drive, Houston, TX, 77019-3902

Tel: 713-528-6798 Fax: 713-535-6363 Quick Media Contact: 281-615-6737

Domestic Violence Hotline – 713-528-2121 Sexual Assault Hotline – 713-528-7273 (RAPE)

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