

The Realities of Sexual Assault

Lady Gaga. Gabrielle Union. Bill Cosby. Jerry Sandusky. These public figures have accelerated our national conversation around sexual violence even though the alleged abuse was not recent.

Why would a victim wait so long to disclose or decide not to disclose abuse at all? Imagine you are a victim. A part of you is violated that was once private, once yours. Now you must tell an officer you've never met before about the most intimate details of your victimization. Then you must endure an invasive and sometimes painful medical exam and treatment. Then your body, the evidence, must be photographed. And then comes the worst part- you must prove to the justice system that this happened. You must find words to describe the unspeakable. And your body, the evidence, is there every step of the way, reliving the trauma again and again. There is no escape and it may be years before the perpetrator is brought to justice if it happens at all.

And how else does disclosing affect your life? You may be questioned or judged by others. While sexual violence can occur anywhere, half of sexual assaults occur within one mile of where the victim lives in a home, a care center, a school, a faith community or a public place. Four out of five rapes are committed not by a stranger but by someone who is known to the victim a friend, a partner, a relative or a caregiver. And often when they speak out, the victim is not believed. Trust is broken. Hope fades.

So there are many challenges around disclosing abuse. As a community we must change this dynamic and it begins with understanding the realities of sexual violence.

Who is the typical rapist? Fifty two percent are white. Their average age is 31. More than 1 in 5 imprisoned rapists report they are married.

Who are the victims? 1 in 2 women, 1 in 5 men and over 1 in 2 transgender people will experience some form of sexual violence during their lifetime. Children are also victimized, some before they are old enough to speak and most before they are developmentally capable of understanding what is happening. 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be sexually abused before their 18th birthday.

What do all sexual abuse survivors have in common? They need and deserve our support. April is national Sexual Assault Awareness Month. As a community we need to extend beyond awareness and take action. Learn about sexual assault. Invite a speaker to educate your community group. Volunteer or donate to your local sexual assault organization (Safe Alliance) or child advocacy center (Pat's Place). Urge elected officials to support legislation assisting survivors and holding perpetrators accountable. Educate youth that sexual abuse is a crime and teach them how to support one another as they work to end it. Ensure all people know how to access help should they ever be the victim of this insidious crime.

Although we may be unaware, we all know someone who has been victimized by sexual

violence. Now is the time to seize the momentum around this issue. Take action today to help put an end to this preventable tragedy.