

OP-ED: Support survivors of sexual trauma

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April 24 2018 8:25 AM



By the time you finish reading this article, four more people will experience sexual assault. Every 98 seconds, another American is sexually assaulted according to RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network). Sexual assault is never the victim's fault. Whether the assault occurred recently or years ago, everyone has the right to be heard and be supported.

The probability that you know someone who has experienced sexual trauma is high. Nearly one in five women and 1 in 67 men in the U.S. have experienced rape or attempted rape some time in their lives, according to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center.

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Recent movements, campaigns and public discussions happening across our nation about sexual harassment, assault and trauma are creating change and refining many views on an issue that, unfortunately, has been happening for decades and harming thousands of Americans each year. Here are several things you can do to help.

Know the Misconceptions

We can all stop the spread of false information about sexual assault and trauma by knowing the misconceptions that exist. Sexual assault is about power and control. It's not about sex.

Rarely is an individual sexually assaulted by a stranger. Out of the sexual abuse cases reported to law enforcement, 93 percent of juvenile victims knew the perpetrator, according to RAINN. Sexual harassment, assault and trauma can happen to anyone. It is not limited to one industry, age group, gender, race or community.

The effects trauma has on a child or an adult's life can also be underestimated. It can influence a person's mind and behavior and impact every part of their life. The process a person takes to identifying trauma as a root cause can vary from person to person, so having a clinical team and professionals who incorporate evidence-based practices, like cognitive behavior therapy and individualized treatment plans can help a child or adult experiencing trauma build a network of support and rebuild their life.

Don't Blame the Victim

Statements like "Why didn't he or she run?" or "They should take self-defense classes," can come across as blaming the victim without a person even realizing it, making it more difficult for an individual who has experienced sexual assault to speak out about his or her experience. Studies show the majority of sexual assaults are not reported. Sexual assault thrives on secrecy and blaming the victim. Speak up and support victims of sexual assault.

Provide Support

Everyone can support individuals going through sexual trauma by listening to them, believing them, and when they're ready, offering to help connect them with advocates who are dedicated to supporting survivors of sexual assault.

The National Sexual Assault Hotline, 1-800-656-HOPE (4673), is free and confidential. Trained staff members are there 24/7 to listen, support, answer questions and provide resources. At Centerstone, we offer hope and healing for all who have experienced sexual trauma.

Sexual trauma should not ultimately determine an individual's future life path. Each of us has the capacity to ensure no one journeys on their path to healing alone.