Enabling Peace by

Hi-Line's Help for Abused Spouses   800.219.7336 or 406.278.3342

Breaking the Silence

Victims of Sexual Assault

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VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

Sexual assault is one of the most traumatic types of criminal victimization. Whereas most crime victims find it difficult to discuss their victimization, sexual assault victims find it especially painful.

One obvious reason for this is the difficulty that many people have in talking about sex. A more important reason, however, is many victims of sexual assault are intensely traumatized not only by the humiliation of their physical violation but by the fear of being severely injured or killed.
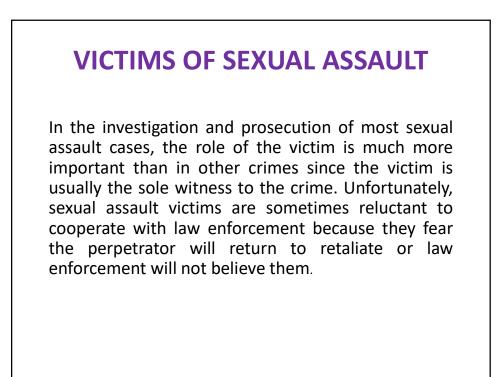
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VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

The three primary responsibilities of law enforcement in sexual assault cases are to:

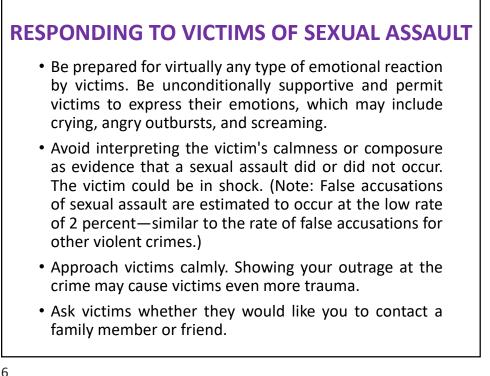(1) Protect and interview the victim;

(2) Investigate the crime and apprehend the perpetrator; and

(3) Collect and preserve evidence of the assault that will assist in the prosecution of the assailant.

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VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

In the investigation and prosecution of most sexual assault cases, the role of the victim is much more important than in other crimes since the victim is usually the sole witness to the crime. Unfortunately, sexual assault victims are sometimes reluctant to cooperate with law enforcement because they fear the perpetrator will return to retaliate or law enforcement will not believe them.
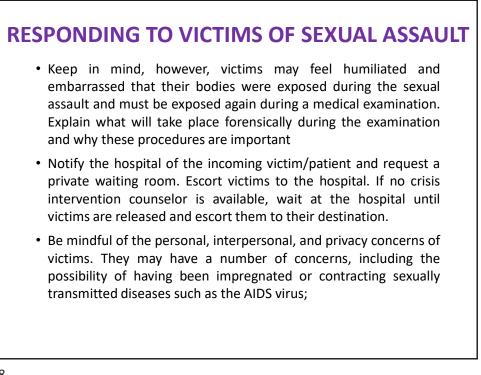
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VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

Only those who have suffered the trauma of sexual assault themselves can begin to understand the depth and complexity of the feelings experienced by sexual assault victims. Even so, your approach as a first responder to sexual assault victims can significantly affect whether the victims begin the road to recovery or suffer years of trauma and anguish.

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RESPONDING TO VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

- Be prepared for virtually any type of emotional reaction by victims. Be unconditionally supportive and permit victims to express their emotions, which may include crying, angry outbursts, and screaming.

- Avoid interpreting the victim's calmness or composure as evidence that a sexual assault did or did not occur. The victim could be in shock. (Note: False accusations of sexual assault are estimated to occur at the low rate of 2 percent—similar to the rate of false accusations for other violent crimes.)

- Approach victims calmly. Showing your outrage at the crime may cause victims even more trauma.

- Ask victims whether they would like you to contact a family member or friend.

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RESPONDING TO VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

- Offer to contact a sexual assault crisis counselor. Ask victims whether they would prefer a male or female counselor. In addition, ask the victims whether they would prefer talking with you or a law enforcement officer of the opposite sex.

- Be careful not to appear overprotective or patronizing.

- Remember it is normal for victims to want to forget or to actually forget, details of the crime that are difficult for them to accept especially to check for possible internal injuries. In addition, a medical examination can provide evidence Encourage victims to get medical attention, for the apprehension and prosecution of the victim's assailant.

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RESPONDING TO VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

- Keep in mind, however, victims may feel humiliated and embarrassed that their bodies were exposed during the sexual assault and must be exposed again during a medical examination. Explain what will take place forensically during the examination and why these procedures are important

- Notify the hospital of the incoming victim/patient and request a private waiting room. Escort victims to the hospital. If no crisis intervention counselor is available, wait at the hospital until victims are released and escort them to their destination.

- Be mindful of the personal, interpersonal, and privacy concerns of victims. They may have a number of concerns, including the possibility of having been impregnated or contracting sexually transmitted diseases such as the AIDS virus;

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RESPONDING TO VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

- The reactions of their spouse, mate, or parents; media publicity that may reveal their experience to the public; and the reactions and criticism of neighbors and coworkers if they learn about the sexual assault.

- Interview victims with extreme sensitivity. Minimize the number of times victims must recount details of the crime to strangers. If possible, only one law enforcement officer should be assigned to the initial interview and subsequent investigation.

- Offer to answer any further questions victims may have and provide any further assistance they may need.

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RESPONDING TO VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

- Encourage victims to get counseling. Explain your recommendation for counseling is based on having seen other victims benefit from it in the past. Explain they may experience posttraumatic stress symptoms in the next few months. Identify and refer them to support services for assistance.

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