

## Breaking the Wall of Silence Part 2: "Hush Little Baby..."

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The National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center reports more than 320,000 rapes occur each year in Texas. Sexual Assault/Rape is not about sex. These are violent crimes that are about power and dominance.

Sexual Assault is any kind of sexual activity that happens against your will to include:

- Vaginal, anal, oral penetration
- Inappropriate touch
- Sexual intercourse to which you have said no
- Rape
- Attempted rape

Penetration does not have to take place in order for it to be sexual assault. Sexual assault may also be verbal, visual and/or anything that forces a person to take part in unwanted sexual contact or activity (The National Center for Victims of Crime). Some examples of these are; sexual harassment, incest (sexual contact with family members), exhibitionism (the act of exposing oneself in public), and voyeurism (the watching of private sexual acts). Anyone can be a victim of sexual assault and the assault may take place in different situations, with a stranger in an isolated environment or with someone you know in a place familiar, such as your home, the home of someone you know, your school, church or work place (Lesia Oesterreich, MS. Family Life Extension Specialist; Human Development and Family Studies).

### **"Hush little baby..."**

Sexual abuse usually constitutes a lengthy process where harmless touching eventually crosses a line into sensual/sexual touching. When this happens to a child, the child may not even realize that the touching has become inappropriate because the abuser is someone that the victim knows and/or has before trusted. According to Lynn Parish of RAINN, statistics suggest that 93 percent of all juvenile victims of sexual assault know their abusers, 34.2 percent of the perpetrators are family members and 58.7 percent are acquaintances. Furthermore, according to Parish, predators often look for victims who are isolated and appear to be lonely and disconnected. They are also known for taking advantage of people who may appear to have fragile relationships (with parents or other care givers) or appear to have trouble fitting in with others their age. Predators will often exploit these kinds of victims by telling them how unusually mature, smart or gifted they are. They may also appear to their victims to show great empathy and concern that their unusual level of maturity can be easily misunderstood by everyone else but the perpetrator. This is known as the 'grooming process' and it can happen right under a parent's nose because victims are encouraged by their abusers to "keep it between us." The following are some behavioral changes that parents, care givers or friends might notice in someone who has been a victim of sexual abuse/assault:

- Change in appetite (has no appetite or eats more than usual)
- Sleep disturbances: Nightmares, difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Difficulty concentrating
- Fears about personal safety

- Exaggerated startle response (jumps at a small noise, or if their name is called)
- Numbness, uncommunicative
- Depressed - she/he may experience feelings of hopelessness
- Has difficulty being touched or expressing loving feelings
- Withdrawal or disinterested in participating in activities they once enjoyed.
- Doesn't feel like going out, going to movies, seeing friends, volunteering or participating in student groups, etc.)
- Seems detached from others [www.cabrillo.edu/services/health/pdfs/helping\\_a\\_friend.pdf](http://www.cabrillo.edu/services/health/pdfs/helping_a_friend.pdf)

### **“Don't say a word...”**

Close your eyes and imagine that your friend, child or the child of someone that you care about tells you that they have a secret that they have been keeping but that the secret is too big for them to bear alone and they need to tell someone. They have chosen you. It takes a while to form the words. When telling their story they may be detached, as if they weren't even there or their eyes may be filled with tears as they sob uncontrollably and inconsolably to the point where now you feel it difficult to ready yourself for the brunt of what is about to be said.

“I've been raped”, “uncle\_\_\_touched me in my special place”, “Mommy I hurt between my legs...”. “Daddy please, I don't want to go back to that place...” “The deacon touched me last Sunday...mommy are you mad at me”?

Your heart sinks and you may feel a whole range of emotions to include anger and rage, but what do you do? The overwhelming majority of friends, parents and caregivers who are chosen to hear this message garner their strength and obtain assistance for the victim and they continue to play a supportive role throughout the healing and recovery process. But sadly, not everyone who hears the victims 'outcry' will believe them. In fact, there are some who hear the 'outcry' of the victim and deny that it even happened. This leaves the victim with feelings of helplessness, fear and anxiety. It may cause feelings of distrust, anger and bitterness and in most cases causes the wall of silence that existed before to now become even taller and more difficult to climb. The wall for still others will become impenetrable, causing the victim to become even more vulnerable to further abuse not only from that perpetrator but from others. According to Lynn Parish of the Rape and Incest National Network ([www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)), victims who are sexually abused as children are 4.7 times more likely to be re-victimized. This does not take into account victims of sexual assault who are victimized as adults.

According to Parish, there are many reasons why parents may respond negatively to their child's outcry. According to Parish, some of the reasons are that they are overwhelmed by the news and feel helpless or doubt their ability as parent and protector of their children. For others, there may be a relationship with the perpetrator such that they are dependent on them for everyday survival (food, clothing, shelter). Some parents may be victims themselves and find the news too painful to hear as it reminds them of a time when they too were hurt. Parish goes on to explain that members of the clergy are no different from parents who some times don't tell that someone has been victimized by sexual abuse/violence. She stressed that for some in the church, there is a great lack of understanding and education with respect to both the affects of these kinds of offenses committed against people and the role of the church. Her advice for the church is the same as that given to parents; education, information and advocacy.

### **What do I do if someone has told me they have been sexually assaulted?**

Coming forth to tell of such events can be very traumatizing for the victim and for the person to whom they choose to make an outcry. It is most important that you remain calm. The most important thing that you can give a victim in this most crucial time is your ear. The following are some things you can do to support

someone who is making an outcry: let the survivor know that you care and that you want to be supportive. Think of it as basic first aid: it probably won't "fix" it, or make the trauma disappear, but it can help the survivor feel less isolated and more safe or supported. Communicate these points: I'm sorry that it happened. I'm glad you survived. It's not your fault.

### **Power and Control**

Sexual abuse takes away the victim's power and control. Afterwards, the survivor should be allowed to be in control and to make her own decisions. Even if you don't like the decisions she makes, and even if they're not the choices you would have made, you can best support the survivor's healing by supporting her decisions.

### **Self-blame and Guilt**

Many survivors blame themselves for the abuse. Tell her over and over again that no matter what she did, it was not her fault. She did not commit a crime; the assailant did. No one asks or deserves to be raped. If she feels guilty for not fighting back, tell her that no matter what she did when she was raped, she acted in the best manner she could. Fear often paralyzes people. Sometimes it feels safer to "cooperate" or submit to an assault; this does not make her a willing participant. Submission does not equal consent. She did what she needed to do to survive.

### **Just ask**

Ask the survivor how he wants to be treated, especially when doing anything that may violate his personal space. Even if you mean well and want to offer comfort, remember that the person who assaulted him took away his control over his body. He may not want to be touched or accompanied; if he does, he can let you know when you ask. For example: "Would you like me to come with you? Do you want a hug right now?"

### **Listen**

Be a good listener. Be non-judgmental and non-blaming. You weren't there; the survivor is the only one who knows what it was like.

### **Provide information, not advice**

Assist her in getting the help she wants and needs. This may mean providing phone numbers, transportation, information, etc. Provide her with accurate information about options and resources, but let her make the final decision about what to do, who to talk to and when.

### **You may need support, too**

Talk to someone else about your feelings about the rape. Sexual assault can also be traumatic for the friends, families, partners, and others close to the victim. You deserve support, too. You can call your local rape crisis center for support (Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault).

Lynn Parish of RAINN also advised victims of sexual assault to tell and keep on telling until you find someone who does believe you and is able and willing to help put an end to the abusive/assaultive behavior. Parish of Rape and Incest National Network further stresses that it is important for victims of sexual assault to get medical attention and seek counseling to help manage symptoms and feelings associated with the assaultive behavior.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "...we are called to speak for the weak...the voiceless". During the time it took to read this article, in Texas, three people have been raped and statistics show that it is unlikely that either victim will receive appropriate medical and counseling interventions.