

The Male Experience of Sexual Violence

The FBI annual statistic on sexual assault finds that 1 in 8 men will be sexually assaulted at some point in their life. This is a fairly conservative statistic, and most research shows that the number of men who experience sexual assault or sexual abuse in childhood or as adults is in fact higher. Yet, sexual assault is still considered by many to be a women's issue, and our cultural ideas about sexual assault make it very difficult for male survivors to disclose their experiences and reach out for support. In order to gain an understanding of men and boys' experiences of sexual assault and sexual abuse, it is essential to address some of the misconceptions about male survivors of sexual violence.

Myths About Male Sexual Assault

- Myth:** Sexual Assault of males is a rare occurrence.
Fact: A recent study in Canada (Sexual Offences Against Children) reports that an estimated one in three boys will be sexually assaulted before the age of 18. Also, in one study involving college men aged 19-24, 30% admitted to being survivors of sexual assault.¹ Both males and females are vulnerable to sexual exploitation.
- Myth:** Males are less traumatized by sexual violence or do not suffer to the same extent as female survivors do.
Fact: After sexual assault or sexual abuse, male survivors are just as likely as female survivors to experience effects from the experience. Just like female survivors, male survivors may experience Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, suicidal ideations, flashbacks, and difficulty trusting others. Survivors of sexual assault all have very personal reactions to their experiences, but they are all impacted in some way.
- Myth:** Males are only assaulted and abused by gay men.
Fact: The great majority of perpetrators against men and boys are heterosexual men. The motivation for sexual violence is to gain a sense of control and power over another person, not to achieve sexual satisfaction. Females also commit sexual assault against males.
- Myth:** Males assaulted by another male are, or become, gay as a result of the sexual assault.
Fact: A person's sexual orientation does not change as a result of a sexual assault experience. Some survivors do feel confused about their sexual orientation after a sexual assault or sexual abuse, particularly if they experienced physical arousal during the assault.

¹ Volunteer Training Manual, Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton

For example, if a straight man is sexually assaulted by another man and has an erection during the assault, he may worry that this must mean that he is gay or that he wanted to sexual assault to happen. Yet, it is very common to experience arousal during a sexual assault. This arousal can be a fear response, or it can be because a healthy body usually physically responds to sexual touch, even if the touch is not wanted.

- Myth:** Males can protect themselves from being sexually assaulted.
- Fact:** Males and females alike are vulnerable to sexual assault. Because men are often physically stronger than women, some people mistakenly think that men should be able to defend themselves. Yet, there are many ways that perpetrators commit sexual assault, and most often, coercion is used. Any person of any size or physical strength can be coerced.
- Myth:** You can't sexually assault a man because men always want and are ready for sex.
- Fact:** Sexual assault is not sex. If a man wants sex, he wants to choose who it is with and what it consists of. Sexual assault is an act of violence that takes away any choice or control the person has. Our society's expectation that men always want sex can be very damaging to male survivors who therefore feel that they "should have wanted" this experience and thus cannot be upset about it.

Reactions to Sexual Violence

All survivors of sexual violence have individual reactions to sexual assault. Yet, there are some common thoughts and experiences that many survivors have.

Confusion about Sexual Identity

Sexual identity is a very important and common issue that male sexual assault survivors struggle with. Many survivors of sexual assault find themselves asking whether they are straight, gay, or bisexual, and wondering if the assault has influenced their sexuality. Although no one is sure how sexual identity is determined, we do know that is not determined by the sexual assault.²

Males who have been sexually assaulted often grapple with a number of questions depending on whether the perpetrator was a male or female. If the perpetrator was male, it may be harder for a male survivor to trust men or develop same-sex relationships after a same-sex assault. Also, in a same-sex assault, sometimes a male survivor feels that he "must" be gay and that is why the perpetrator was "attracted" to him. Heterosexual male survivors may fear being perceived as gay if others find out that the perpetrator was male. Homophobia is prevalent in our

² When Males Have Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Adult Male Survivors, by John Napier-Hemy, 1994.

society, making it difficult for male survivors to disclose about their abuse or to acquire support or information.

If the perpetrator was female, the survivor may have difficulty defining his experience as sexual assault. It is not widely understood that females can commit sexual assault, and our society teaches men that they should consider themselves “lucky” for receiving sexual attention from a women. Consequently, many males exploited by females often do not label their experiences as “sexual abuse” or “sexual assault”, and may find it especially difficult to disclose their experiences. Yet, even if these survivors do not define their experiences as sexual assault, they will still experience the after effects of the assault.

Many males sexually assaulted by females are ashamed to disclose about their experiences because they fear they may be seen as weak or “unmanly,” and that they should have been able to protect themselves. Yet, a female can coerce a male into unwanted sexual activity just as a male could. In addition, it is important to be aware of society’s reluctance or inability to acknowledge female perpetrators, and this may be a result of the socialized view that women are exclusively protectors and nurturers and are not capable of violence.³

When a man is sexually assaulted by his partner, feelings of confusion and disbelief may be intensified. It is often the case that a male survivor may reframe this as a “bad sexual experience” rather than a sexual assault. The survivor may even believe the myth that men “always want sex” and feel emasculated as a result of the sexual assault because he did not want sex at that time.⁴

Difficulties with Physical Functioning

It is very common for male survivors of sexual assault to experience problems with sexual functioning. Painful erections, difficulty maintaining erections, premature ejaculation, lack of desire, or an obsession with sex may all stem from the male’s sexual assault experience.⁵ These experiences are a result of learning to associate sex with sexual assault; sometimes even healthy sexual feelings and contact can become triggers. Working through the sexual assault can help a survivor overcome these issues.

In addition to the difficulties related to sexual functioning, it is very possible that a male survivor may also experience a number of physical symptoms after sexual assault such as: irregular eating and sleeping patterns, frequent headaches, nausea, blurred vision, choking sensations, or pains in the genital area, buttocks or back⁶. Of course, these symptoms may not be due to solely the experience of sexual assault; however, there may be an association.

³ Betrayed as Boys, by Richard B. Gartner, 2001

⁴ ⁵ ⁶ When Males Have Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Adult Male Survivors, by John Napier-Hemy, 1994.

Difficulties with Intimacy

It is quite normal for men to have difficulties with trusting others after being sexual violated. This distrust might transfer to co-workers, friends, family, those in authority, and more generally to any intimate relationship. To be sexually assaulted is a violation of trust, especially if the perpetrator was known to the survivor.

It should be noted that each individual's reactions are different and might be experienced and manifested in many forms and to a different extent. It is quite possible that a male survivor of sexual violence may demonstrate all or none of the above. Again it is necessary to keep in mind that individual survivors have their own personal experience, which should not be judged or criticized.

Anger & Shame

As a result of societal misconceptions and beliefs, males are “restricted” to a certain array of emotions. In our society it is quite acceptable for males to express, and even act out, their anger. It may even seem “healthy” for a male survivor to express his anger; however, if emotional responses are limited to only anger, this may result in the suppression of other relevant and valid feelings.⁷ Usually anger is an emotion that is covering another deeper emotion such as hurt, shame, or fear. It is important to be able to recognize and feel these underlying emotions. Yet, males are often socialized not to show or share their emotions, and they may be teased and criticized if they do so. It is extremely important that survivors have a person to talk to who can accept their feelings and not judge their emotional expressions.

Shame is also an underlying emotion commonly experienced by male survivors. In our society, males are socialized to be strong, tough, and courageous, and therefore a male survivor may experience shame if he feels that he did not live up to society's ideas of “manhood.” The survivor may also feel shame if he blames himself for the assault, or if he feels that he could have stopped it. Also, having a physiological response to sexual stimulation and activity often leads to feelings of shame. As mentioned above, it is normal to experience physical arousal to stimulation; however, many male survivors may interpret this as if they had enjoyed, and did not prevent, the assault.

Recovery

Recovery from sexual assault is a personal and private journey. It is a process that takes time and energy, and it can be difficult and overwhelming at times. Through the healing process, a survivor can come to a place where he understands that the sexual assault was not his fault, and where he no longer feels that he is being controlled or influenced by emotions or memories from the sexual assault.