

Talking Helps: Information for Victims of Sexual Assault

Sexual assaults are serious, violent and frightening crimes directed against women, men and children. According to Montana Law, sexual assault occurs when a person knowingly subjects another person to any sexual contact without consent. Sexual assaults disrupt the lives of many people, not only victims but also those who fear becoming victims. Sexual assault creates psychological trauma for victims and those around them, and often limits women's mobility and therefore their freedom. All must share the concern for this crime and efforts to eliminate it.

FACTS ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT

Facts about sexual assault often have not been accurately reported in our society. Most people have grown up with a variety of false beliefs about sexual assault. These beliefs have been handed down from generation to generation through individual interaction, media (movies, TV, magazines and books), religious beliefs and through a lack of education on the subject. It has only been in the last ten years that people started studying sexual assault and finding that most ideas about sexual assault that have existed for centuries are wrong.

These false beliefs have many negative effects on the victim in particular. Many sexual assault victims feel shame and guilt because of society's false beliefs and, as a result, only 1/5 to 1/10 seek the help they need or tell anyone what has happened. These false beliefs also result in low conviction rates of offenders. And finally, these false ideas contribute to sexual assault in our society by not recognizing the offender as responsible for his or her behavior. In fact, they tend to blame the victim for the sexual assault.

The facts about sexual assault are not always easy to accept. They may challenge some of your most basic beliefs and values. But we must educate ourselves as to the truth.

Fact: Sexual assault is a violent crime. Research shows that those who rape do not do it because they are sexually aroused and can't control their sexual urges but rather to dominate and have power over another person. They need to be violent in a sexual way in order to make themselves feel better. Sex is used as a weapon. Rape does not occur because of a need for sex. Most rapists are married or have available sex partners. In addition, 80-90% of all rapes are planned and not spontaneous acts. In about one-third of the cases, a weapon is used or threatened.

Fact: Most rapists are not insane. Studies show that those who rape have a low self-concept and a tendency toward violence. But they are very average in most aspects of their lives. Rapists come from all economic classes and occupations, and are all ages, colors and religions. Some are "pillars" of the community. Rapists should be held responsible for their actions.

Fact: 60% of adult rapes are between people who know each other. 85% of child victims are molested by people they know well. We have grown up with the idea that rapes usually happen between strangers. The notion that most rapes occur in the dead of night behind bushes or in a

deserted alley is simply not true in most situations. Many rapes occur in the victim's own home, and the assailant is frequently someone who is known.

Fact: Rape does happen within marriage. Anytime one partner forces the other to have sexual intercourse against their will, rape has occurred. As a result of the rape the victim may experience emotional and physical trauma.

Fact: The majority of males who sexually assault other males (adults, adolescents and young boys) are heterosexual men. Many people refer to a male raping another as "homosexual rape." This is misleading. Males who rape other males do it for the same reasons as those who rape females. They need to express power and dominance over another person and use sex as the weapon. Approximately 10% of reported victims are male.

Fact: Some women have successfully defended themselves and have been able to get out of the rape situation. Women have defended themselves in a variety of ways: yelling, running, fighting back, etc. It is difficult to predict how a rapist will react to resistance. Depending on who we are and what our situation is, each of us must decide how we are going to react. We do have options for coping with an attack, and they are increased if we think ahead of time how we might react if assaulted.

Fact: For the most part, children do not lie or make up stories about being sexually abused. Children are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse because of their age, size and training, which instructs them to trust adults and do what adults say without question. It can be difficult when faced with a child's report that he or she has been sexually abused and the person reported as an offender denies it. (This is very common behavior for child molesters.) It may be very difficult to believe that someone you know quite well has molested a child close to you. Adults should proceed in protecting the child and obtaining help for her/him on the basis of the child's report.

Fact: Falsely reporting a rape is very uncommon. Statistics show that the number of false reports is low, and is at the same rate of false reports for other crimes. Some people believe that women lie about being raped to get back at particular men or for other reasons. Consequently, when victims tell someone about the assault and are not believed immediately, they may not seek out the help they need. The fact is that very few victims lie about being raped.

SELF PROTECTION

The only definite statement that can be made about protecting yourself from sexual assault is that there are no pat answers. Every situation is different. What works in one case may not work in another. A victim should do whatever seems best at the time.

In some cases, preventing sexual assault is a matter of increasing your options, feeling committed to the belief that you can defend yourself and that you have the right to do so.

Many communities offer workshops on self-protection. This training can help you formulate your strategies and prepare you for resistance if that becomes necessary. For suggested referrals, call a victim assistance program in your area.

Children. We teach children how to prevent fires and how to avoid car accidents. Sexual assault, however, is difficult for adults to talk about and even more difficult for adults to discuss with children. The point is to teach children about the potential for sexual assault, and to make it clear that their bodies are their own and no one has the right to abuse them. Children need to know that they can talk with you at anytime.

TALKING HELPS

Sexual assault is difficult to think about, much less to talk about.

However, only when we open the subject of sexual assault to enlightened discussion will we dispel the false beliefs many people have about sexual assault victims.

Unless we acknowledge this horrendous crime, and change our beliefs, sexual assault will continue to be the fastest rising violent crime in the country, and one of the most difficult to prosecute and obtain a conviction. Many sexually assaulted persons will continue to hide the fact that they have been assaulted, rather than seeking help.

If you are a victim of a sexual assault, a victim assistance program has specially trained people who can help you during this confusing time. This is a completely ***confidential*** service available to you. All you have to do is dial the number. They are there to help you find answers to questions about medical, legal and emotional concerns you have. For information about a victim assistance program in your area, call your local law enforcement agency or the Crime Victim Compensation program at (406) 444-3653 or 1-800-498-6455.

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Web address: www.doj.mt.gov/victims/victimcompensation.asp
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