

RESOURCE BOOK  
FOR  
SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

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WOMEN IN TRANSITION  
therapy groups for assault victims

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**U.S. Department of Justice  
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## **ABOUT WOMEN IN TRANSITION**

**Women In Transition is a non-profit agency providing therapy groups working in conjunction with private physicians and therapists; the state attorneys office; law enforcement and the victim advocates of Orange, Osceola, and Seminole Counties; and other agencies dealing with victimization issues in coordinating the treatment of sexual assault survivors.**

**Group treatment is provided for adult and adolescent survivors and their significant others. Present statistics tell us that only one out of ten women report their assault to any law enforcement agency, and that most of the women receiving any intervention are the ones who do report. At Women In Transition, services are provided for all survivors, regardless of whether or not they choose to report their assaults. We encourage women to report, however, we respect the rights of those who choose not to report, understanding that this is a very personal decision. Our main concern is providing quality therapeutic care to sexual assault survivors and their significant others as they work through their healing processes.**

**Women In Transition also provides a resource library for group members and is involved in community and educational services in the tri-county area.**

## **TYPES OF IMPACT ON SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVIVORS**

### **Physical Impact**

- \* Injury/Shock
- \* Loss or Increase of Appetite
- \* Sleep Disturbance
- \* Pregnancy
- \* Sexually Transmitted Diseases/AIDS Issue

### **Economic Impact**

- \* Medical Costs
- \* Legal Costs (Civil Damages)
- \* Time Lost from Work/Loss of Job
- \* Cost of Counseling/Therapy
- \* Divorce or Separation from Significant Other
- \* Loss of Privacy; Difficulty Living Alone
- \* Change of Residence
- \* Withdrawal from School

### **Social Impact**

- \* Community Stigma (Real or Imagined)
- \* Marital or Other Family Problems
- \* Divorce or Separation from Significant Other
- \* Loss of Trust in Others
- \* Disturbance in Coping Mechanisms

### **Emotional Impact**

- \* Feelings of Helplessness
- \* Loss of Control
- \* Fear of Retaliation, of Meeting Attacker, of Being Alone
- \* Disrupted Sexual Functioning
- \* Depression (from Mild to Severe)
- \* Loss of Self Esteem
- \* Loss of Sense of Future
- \* Feelings of Shame, Self-Blame, Guilt, Humiliation
- \* Inability to Deal with Own Rage and Hostility
- \* Repression
- \* Denial

## **STAGES OF HEALING**

Survivors of sexual assault consistently describe certain symptoms over and over. These symptoms appear in two stages:

- 1) The immediate or acute phase; and
- 2) The long-term reorganizational process.

The acute phase is time-limited like any crisis and may last from a few days to 6-8 weeks. During this time survivors may have trouble sleeping, lose their appetite, and feel pain in areas of their body that were affected by the assault. Mood swings and a lowered ability to cope with other people are frequently reported.

As the survivor moves out of the acute phase and starts to resume "life as usual" they are not finished with the process, but have started the long-term reorganization phase which lasts on an average of one to two years. Wanting to get away, like going to visit relatives in another city, moving to another neighborhood or getting an unlisted phone number are frequent responses. Nightmares and phobias (fear of crowds, of being alone, of certain smells, places, etc.) happen to many survivors for a long time after the assault.

A frequent reaction to an assault is silence. Survivors often choose not to report and to tell no one. Some survivors manage to push the thoughts about the incident out of their awareness, however, the emotions remain strong until the healing process begins. At the point they are willing to deal with the experience, the healing process begins to take place. Support in working through the belated anger, fear, confusion and sadness that surfaces will lead to the integration of the assault experience into their life as an accepted part of their history. Healing will allow the incident to become a memory of a painful event not an ongoing painful experience.

## **SEXUAL ASSAULT: MYTHS AND REALITIES**

**MYTH #1: Sexual assault is an impulsive act of passion.**

Fact: Sexual assault is an act of violence, power and control, not of sexual desire. In 71% of sexual assaults, the assailant had a definite plan of action that was thought out in advance.

**MYTH #2: Men sexually assault victims because they want sex.**

Fact: The major motive for sexual assault is aggression, violence and domination. Most men who sexually assault women have "normal" personalities with tendencies toward violence/aggression. Many are married or have girlfriends.

**MYTH #3: The man who sexually assaults is a stranger.**

Fact: Between 50-65% of sexual assault victims know their attackers at least casually. In 20-30%, the offender is well-known to the victim and is in a relationship one would normally trust.

**MYTH #4: Most men who sexually assault are black and most assault victims are white.**

Fact: An estimated 90% of sexual assaults occur among members of the same racial/ethnic group.

**MYTH #5: Most attacks happen on the street.**

Fact: About half of all sexual assaults occur in the victim's or the attacker's home.

**MYTH #6: Women who go out alone at night are asking to be attacked.**

Fact: A woman's behavior does not give any man the right to commit violent, nonconsenting acts against her.

**MYTH #7: Women who get attacked wear provocative clothes.**

Fact: Sexual assault has occurred to women wearing all types of clothing.

**MYTH #8: No woman can be sexually assaulted against her will; a woman who does not resist has not really been assaulted.**

Fact: Sexual assault is a crime of violence. In 85.1% of reported cases, some type of force was used, such as choking, beating, or use of a weapon.

**MYTH #9: Women secretly enjoy being sexually assaulted and/or have fantasies which reflect their desire to be sexually assaulted.**

Fact: In nearly all cases of sexual assault, violent force or threat to one's life is used or implied. In sexual fantasy, the woman chooses the circumstances & characteristics of their seducer. When a woman is assaulted, she is never in control.

**MYTH #10: Rape will never happen to me.**

Fact: For females, there is a 1 in 4 chance you will be sexually assaulted some time in your life.

## **SEXUAL ASSAULT GROUP FOR WOMEN**

**Purposes of Group:** to provide accurate information and support to the recovering sexual assault survivors.

### **Belief - Rape is something that happens to other people**

**Facts:**

- \* Rape is an act of violence, not a sexual act.
- \* Rape is about power and control.

**Question #1: Why me?** Our society teaches that we live in a basically just world in which "bad things happen to bad people and, conversely, good things happen to good people." The truth is that bad things happen to everyone...they are a part of life. However, having been brought up believing in the idea of a "just world" often causes much confusion for the survivors who search for reasons to explain why they were singled out to be victimized.

**Effects:** Sexual assault survivors will typically feel a sense of **helplessness** and **lack of control** following the incident. Generally, a person does have some control over what occurs in his/her life. In the case of sexual assault, however, that control was stripped from the victim. In order to speed up the healing process, it is imperative that survivors be encouraged to make their own decisions, taking control back in their lives as quickly as possible.

**Question #2: What did I do wrong?** Sexual assault survivors will often wrongly believe that their actions or lack of actions must have in some way caused the sexual assault. From the time most of us are small children, we are taught that bad things happen to us when we are careless or do something wrong. In order to prevent a sexual assault from ever happening again, victims will attempt to find an exact reason/cause for the assault. If they can figure out what they did "wrong", they feel they can be



safe by never doing that again.

**Effects:** This wrongful acceptance of responsibility will often lead survivors to blame and **criticize** themselves, as well as look for **fault** in the ways in which they handled the assault. It is important that each survivor realize they did the best that they could do under the circumstances and it is the assailant, not the survivor, that is responsible for the sexual assault.

**Question #3: What if? If only?** In an attempt to regain control in their lives, survivors will commonly replay the sexual assault over and over again in their minds, thinking of ways in which they might have reacted differently or changed the scenario to prevent the sexual assault from occurring. One of the hardest truths for a survivor to accept is that in the case of sexual assault, they did not have control of the situation and were at the mercy of someone who could cause them great harm, even death.

**Effects:** By focusing on the "what if's" and "if only's", survivors often will get stuck in their healing process. The sad truth is that no matter how often it is re-thought, there is nothing that can be done to change what happened. It is of much greater importance that the survivor get below the thoughts and look at their feelings (i.e., sadness, hurt, fear). Without dealing with these emotions, the survivor will never be able to integrate the experience and put it in its proper perspective...as a memory of something painful that happened in the past.

**REMEMBER: A SEXUAL ASSAULT IS POTENTIALLY A LIFE-THREATENING SITUATION. WHATEVER A VICTIM DID TO SURVIVE WAS THE RIGHT THING TO DO.**

## **GROUP FOR ADULT SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT**

**WHEN:** Call for available days and times

**WHO:** Women 18 and over

**LIMIT:** 10 participants

**ISSUES ADDRESSED:**

- \* Stages of Healing, Acute/Ongoing Phases
- \* Flashbacks
- \* Eating Disorders
- \* Sleep Dysfunction
- \* Memory and Concentration Problems
- \* Depression and Suicidal Tendencies
- \* Sexual Dysfunction
- \* Anxiety
- \* Trust with Significant Others
- \* Loss of Control/Helplessness
- \* Self Blame
- \* Court Process

## **GROUP FOR ADOLESCENT SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT**

**WHEN:** Call for available days and times

**WHO:** Adolescents 13 to 17

**LIMIT:** 10 participants

**ISSUES ADDRESSED:**

- \* Stages of Healing, Acute/Ongoing Phases
- \* Rape Trauma Syndrome
- \* Flashbacks
- \* Eating Disorders
- \* Sleep Dysfunction
- \* Memory and Concentration Problems
- \* Depression and Suicidal Tendencies
- \* Substance Dependency
- \* Sexual Acting Out
- \* Anxiety
- \* Trust
- \* Loss of Control/Helplessness
- \* Self Blame
- \* Court Process

**SIGNIFICANT OTHERS**  
**Boyfriend/Spouse, Family, Friends**

- \* Significant others are dealing with their reactions at the same time the survivor is dealing with theirs. They may be experiencing confusion, powerlessness, helplessness, blame, sadness and fear.
- \* Because of the lack of information, significant others who are close to the survivor may ask questions about the assault that indicate a lack of understanding of what the assault was like for the survivor.
- \* Significant others may view sexual assault as a sex crime rather than a violent crime.
- \* Significant others may mistakenly blame the survivor or themselves for the assault.
- \* Significant others may believe that not talking about feelings and thoughts will make them go away.
- \* Significant others may want to make decisions for the survivor, not realizing the importance of the survivors making their own decisions so they can regain control over their life.

- \* In trying to cope with their own feelings, significant others may become overly protective.
- \* Significant others may have a hard time listening when the survivor discusses the assault.
- \* Children can sense something has happened and need information so they can deal with their feelings. What children imagine is sometimes more frightening than the actual facts.
- \* Partners may express a desire "to get the guy", and or their doubts, i.e. "if only..."
- \* Sometimes when the survivor seeks comfort, boyfriends/spouses may pressure the survivor for more physical intimacy than they desire and/or avoid closeness.
- \* Partners sometimes believe intimacy will erase the trauma of the assault.

It is up to the survivor to decide what to tell and to whom. Understanding the dynamics of sexual assault will speed up the healing process and help you and the survivor complete the experience.

## **HOW TO EFFECTIVELY SUPPORT THE SURVIVOR**

### **What does the survivor need to know?**

- 1) You believe her;
- 2) She hasn't done anything wrong;
- 3) It is all right to feel any feelings (anger, fear, sadness or hurt) that she is experiencing;
- 4) You can't fix it for her and you will be there to support her.

### **What is support?**

- 1) Non-judgmental listening;
- 2) Allowing her to decide when to talk and what to tell;
- 3) Asking what you can do;
- 4) Letting her make her own decisions;
- 5) Taking care of yourself.

## **GROUP FOR SIGNIFICANT OTHERS**

**WHEN:** Call for available times

**WHO:** Spouses, boyfriends, family members and friends

**TYPE:** Ongoing

**LIMIT:** 10 participants

**ISSUES ADDRESSED:**

- \* Your reactions to your loved one's assault
- \* What the victim will be going through
- \* How to handle others' questions about the assault
- \* Blame
- \* Responsibility
- \* Depression
- \* Anxiety
- \* Trust/Intimacy and Closeness
- \* Re-establishing communication
- \* Getting on with life

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