SEXUAL ASSAULT ADVOCACY

Learning How to Respond to Survivors the Right Way

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Respectfully Responding

Sexual assault is a sensitive topic that unfortunately many college students have become far too familiar with. More and more college students are falling victim to sexual assault and that also means more and more students know someone who has survived an assault whether that be made apparent to them or not. Being assaulted in this form is something that is very personal and consequently difficult to talk about. Often times survivors of assault confide in their friends or peers before choosing to or to not seek professional help. That being said, it is becoming more and more important that college-aged students in particular, learn the proper ways to respond to those who have been assaulted.

There has been a wide array of literature studying sexual assault in relation to the demographic of college students. Studies have found that about 20-25 percent of college aged women can be expected to experience either an attempted or a completed sexual assault (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). Although men have been found less likely to experience sexual assault than women, that is not to say that they do not at all, and it is important to include them in the conversation when using the umbrella term of "survivors."

Now although many college campuses have implemented services to help support these survivors on their road to recovery, that does not necessarily mean that these services will be used. Additionally, even though professionals have the education and experience to know how to best respond to survivors, studies have found that those who have been assaulted are much more likely to confide in their peers in comparison to service providers (Allen, Ridgeway, & Swan, 2015). Furthermore, modern research has concluded that families and peers can many times encourage or connect survivors of sexual assault to formal help-seeking resources (Campbell et

al. 2010). This is all to say that formal services can be beneficial to victims of sexual assault, but they are often not the first-place individuals go if at all.

Disclosing that one has been assaulted is crucial because it can result in positive effects. The disclosure of traumatic events has been identified as important step in recovery and can be directly tied to bettered health (Ricker, Wiemann, & Vaughan, 2005). Depression, substance use, PTSD, risky sexual practices, and sexual pain can often be developed after one is assaulted, however, with proper disclosure and the appropriate response these negative effects can be reduced (Fleming, Belanger, & Bonanno, 2020). Seeing as that peers of survivors are among the most likely to be disclosed to, it is necessary they learn the best ways to respond to their friends so they can kickstart the healing process correctly.

Again, sexual assault is a very personal and tricky topic for not only survivors to deal with, but also for responders to react to. It can be painful for friends of survivors to hear about their companion's traumatic experience, as well as equally difficult to respond with consoling rhetoric in that moment. When initially hearing that someone you love has gone through something so horrific feelings like anger, anxiety, disbelief, sadness, and guilt may arise. However, it is still essential that you remain calm and think about the discloser's emotions first.

RAINN is the largest anti-sexual violence organization, and they offer a plethora of phrases to tell survivors if they ever choose to disclose their assault. One thing that RAINN claims is very important when responding to someone who has been assaulted is to make sure they understand they are believed. Phrases like, "I believe you." and "You are so brave." can reassure victims that their story is valid. It is common for many survivors to fear they won't be believed since many times assaults like these can become a case of he said she said. Consequently, this is why these phrases are important to start off with. Other phrases respondents

should try to incorporate into the conversation are “It is not your fault.” and “You did nothing to deserve this.” It is common for survivors to blame themselves after being assaulted, these phrases communicate that they are not responsible for what has happened to them. Another phrase RAINN suggests peers should try and use is “You are not alone.” Going through a traumatic experience can be very isolating, and make the particular individual feel like it is them against the world. By letting them know they are not the only one, reiterates both that you are there if they need support and that they are not the only one who has experienced assault.

While having these tough conversations it is paramount that the respondent empathizes with the survivor. Never in these discussions should the respondent appear cold or disinterested. Examples of phrases that communicate empathy are “I care about you.” “I am here to help you in any way I can.” “I’m sorry this happened.” and “I’m so glad you are sharing this with me.” Using these phrases or ones similar to them shows survivors that you genuinely care about them and that they can rely on you to be there for them whether that be right now or also in the future.

Recovery is not always a linear process and also one that does not stop when it reaches a certain amount of time. Everyone deals with trauma in their own way and on their own clock, and that is why continuing to support your friends past the first time they reveal their assault to you is equally as important. Continuing to show your support can be done in various ways, like checking in with them periodically. Although the event could have happened a long time ago, that does not necessarily mean that the survivor is over it. Reminding your peer, friend, or family member that you are still here for them shows them that you still care and also reiterates that they do not have to struggle alone. Although many survivors are hesitant to seek help through outside sources, it does not hurt to remind them there is professional resources out there if they need

them. Talking to someone who has been trained to respond to survivors, can also provide a source of healing.

“You are Believed” Poem

What many people don’t understand is that

Violence does not always define assault

Force can be nuanced and sneaky and coercive

It leaves you questioning your own sanity

Your own soundness

Was that assault?

Am I being dramatic?

I feel gross

I don’t want to think about it anymore

Should I tell someone?

Am I crying wolf?

I don’t want to think about it anymore

I lay there dead

I did not move

I don’t want to think about it anymore

Insights from Lanie Stutz

Lanie Stutz is a member of CARE at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. CARE stands for Center for Advocacy, Response, and Education. Their office is located on the third floor of the Nebraska Union in between the Woman's Center and the LGBTQA Center. This organization's aim is to help sexual assault or domestic assault survivors in a variety of ways. Their mission is that they "believe in the strength and resilience of individuals and communities impacted by sexual/relationship violence." They offer educational opportunities as well as a safe space to provide confidential support for those who may be dealing with these kinds of issues.

As I interviewed Lanie, I got to know that she was pretty much an expert at responding to those who have been sexual assaulted. Knowing that, I came to her seeking advice on ways that I myself, as well as other college students can properly respond if someone decided to confide in them that they have been assaulted. There were three big take-aways I learned from Lanie that I thought academic research was really lacking. The first being, avoid asking questions when a victim of assault chooses to confide in you. The second being, avoid pushing the idea of reporting the assault in the beginning stages of the support process. Lastly, the third was a great way to show continuing support to your friends after having those initial conversations, is to provide a sense of normalcy.

Although many of the academic sources I found provided good insight on why people choose to come to their peers before choosing or not choosing to seek professional help, they did not offer a lot of insight on what to do or what not do when responding to someone who may have been assaulted. One thing that Lanie said respondents should try to avoid doing is asking questions. She said that it is not always important to know context. Although it is human nature to implore and be curious about the details of what happened, questioning survivors can

sometimes give off the impression that you do not believe them. Furthermore, you do not want to make the person who is coming to you to share this information feel any less comfortable about sharing what has happened and asking questions can often times make survivors feel this way.

Another thing that Lanie talked to me about that I felt a little misinformed about, was avoid pushing the idea of reporting the assault right away. One of the first things you should ask survivors is what are you needing? Questions like "How can I help?" and "What are you looking for?" are helpful because that way you are not pushing any ideas on them, but rather giving them the tools to decide how they want to precede with things. Not every survivor wants to report what has happened to them. Additionally, it can feel overwhelming for them when we respond by putting some sort of pressure on them to partake in a certain action. Lanie also pointed out that investigations can remain ongoing even if the reporter wishes for them to stop. A lot of the times people know the person who assaults them, although reporting seems like the right thing to do, survivors often fear it can complicate other relationships they hold in their lives.

Lastly, an answer I really was interested in knowing was how to provide continuous support to survivors after they confide in us without possibly triggering their trauma. Lanie's answer to this was providing them a sense of normalcy. In this case, this might take form in a variety of ways. Inviting the survivor to go out to dinner or to hangouts that might not involve alcohol is one way to do this. Sending check-in texts that do not involve a lot of contexts, is another way this can be done. Saying things like "How are you?" "What are you doing?" are ways you can check in with survivors without directly or indirectly referencing what has happened to them. Saying something like "How have you been doing since the rape?" is one example of how providing context can come off as more triggering than caring. Detailing what has happened to them is not necessary when checking in. Sending them old photos if you have

some together, or a funny post is also another way you can let them know you are thinking about them without possibly triggering a bad experience.

Magazine Collage Explanation

One of the mediums I am using for my literacy tool is presenting a magazine collage. On both sides of the collage there are pictures of hands and a variety of phrases, however the left side of the poster manipulates these items in a positive way and the right side in a negative way. On the left side, the positive side, I included images of hands holding one another, some in the formation of a circle and others in the formation of a heart. In addition to this, I included quote bubbles with phrases that are appropriate to say to survivors when they confide in you. Quotes like: “I believe you.” “I’m sorry this happened to you.” “You did nothing wrong” etc. are some of the phrases that are included. On the other hand, the right side of the poster, the negative side, includes hands that are depicted in a more physical and accusatory way. I do not want to trigger anyone that views this image who might also be a survivor of sexual assault, so this depiction is watered down. However, that being said, one image on this side is a woman with her head in her hands showing signs of distress, one hand gripping another’s wrist, etc. In addition to this, quote bubbles are displayed on this side but instead have negative connotations. Some of these quotes include: “Are you sure that’s what happened?” “She was asking for it.” and “No no no stop.”

The reason I wanted to split the image in half, is because I want to represent the way that people can respond and represent sexual assault both positively and negatively. Sometimes opening up to people can be really helpful for survivors and offer them an outlet for healing, but on the other hand people can also trigger one another and partake in victim blaming behaviors if they respond incorrectly. Choosing to represent these two things with magazine clippings was also intentional. Magazines are a form of media and are heavily saturated with imagery. Imagery can display a certain message just as well as words can if done correctly, and that is why I am choosing to make the poster in this way. I also believe that presenting my message in this way

can be both informational for the audience, and hopefully less triggering for those viewers who may have been affected by sexual assault in the past.

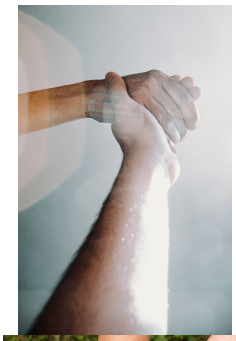
Are you sure that's what really happened?

I BELIEVE YOU

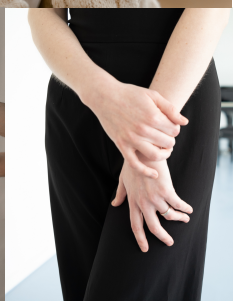
I'M SORRY THAT HAPPENED TO YOU

SHE WAS ASKING FOR IT

THANK YOU FOR SHARING THAT WITH ME



YOU DID NOTHING TO DESERVE THIS



NO NO NO STOP

HOW CAN I HELP YOU?

“It gets Better” Poem

Know that it is not your fault

What happened to you is not a result

Of something that you have done

Know that you are not alone

Your friends are only a phone

Call away

Know that people are there for you

To help you and get you through

The pain

Know that yes this is tough

But when times get rough

You will come out stronger

Know that you will get through this

This does not define you.

Appropriate Ways to Talk/Teach about Sexual Assault

The dichotomy that many educators and even everyday people run into when talking about sexually assault, is deciding whether conversations surrounding sexual assault are productive or triggering. Many educators have struggled to teach and talk about this subject, because even though most of them agree it is a prevalent issue that demands attention, they also struggle with how to talk about it in a sensitive way around possible survivors. Researchers, too, are interested in this paradox, and there has been an array of research done to help find ways sexual assault can be talked about delicately in the face of survivors.

One thing that must be done before beginning to engage in conversations about sexual assault is providing a trigger warning. By using trigger warnings, it invites students to set their own boundaries as well as shifts the power dynamic between teacher and student, giving the student more agency (Crumpton, 2017). It also necessary that trigger warnings are presented before each topic because that way someone who is at risk of possibly being triggered can decide if they are capable of hearing the information, rather than possibly blindsiding them. Trigger warnings also give the student the power to decide if they want to be present when sensitive information is talked about. In a lot of situations of sexual assault, the victim feels powerless and out of control, trigger warnings also help to combat this because they give the survivor the power to control their future (Crumpton, 2017).

Moving past trigger warnings and when deciding how to begin to present difficult information, scholar Stephanie Crumpton offers a few more criteria. The first is being present when teaching the material. As a presenter, one must be focused and not distracted to show how serious they are about the topic (Crumpton, 2017). In addition to being present, the teacher must also appear hospitable. By doing this, they come off as more welcoming and approachable,

which is important seeing that those engaging with this kind of sensitive material might have questions or concerns (Crumpton, 2017). Another thing teachers of this literacy should be aware of is speaking too much or too fast. Students should not feel as though this is a subject that can be glazed over or not carefully considered. Furthermore, everyone processes information at different speeds. Leave room in the discussion for people to process the information, gather their thoughts, and voice their feelings if they chose to do so (Crumpton, 2017). Lastly, since sexual assault deals a lot with the unequal distribution of power, like what was briefly discussed in the reasoning for trigger warnings, this means that it is also important to communicate that the person presenting the information is equals with the receivers of that information. Learning spaces are about valuing everyone equally regardless of status (Crumpton, 2017).

In her article title, *Trigger warnings, covenants of presence, and more: Cultivating safe space for theological discussions about sexual trauma,* Stephanie Crumpton details the importance of using trigger warnings, being present, being hospitable, leaving room for interpretation and discussion, and coming as equals, as ways to approach conversations regarding sexual assault sensitively. For many educators finding ways to talk about sexual assault delicately is difficult, but the importance of keeping the conversation alive demands that they find appropriate ways to teach this. By following some of Crumpton's suggestions, these conversations can be both beneficial to members of the community and provide a safe space for survivors.

Recommendations

The first way I would recommend designing this literacy tool, is to one start off by presenting research and then to rely on imagery. I recommend doing it this way because with a topic as sensitive as this one, I would try to avoid the use of emotional appeals. It is never really physically apparent if someone has been sexually assaulted, so when making a literacy tool on this subject it is hard to know who in your audience has personal experience dealing with this. Furthermore, I would follow Stephanie Crumpton's advice on ways to teach this literacy in less triggering ways. I would also say that it is imperative that any presentation/literacy tool that is made surrounding the topic of sexual assault begins with a trigger warning. It is necessary that possible survivors are given the agency to decide if they want to be presented with this information before it has ever started to be presented.

Like I said before one can began by presenting research, or present images and explain them like my magazine collage but I also think that this literacy tool could be taught in other ways as well. Another way is having students discuss with one another ways they think would be appropriate to respond to someone who has been assaulted or discuss ways they think they should continue to provide support after that initial conversation is had. Students could also participate in an activity where they see a group of phrases and have to categorize whether each phrase is appropriate or inappropriate to say to someone who has been sexually assaulted.

Whichever way this information is presented, I want to reiterate the importance of beginning with a trigger warning, being present and hospitable, presenting yourself as an equal, and giving the audience enough time to interpret and discuss your content. I would also avoid the use of emotional appeals like presenting survivors' testimonies or poems when teaching this just in case a survivor is possibly in the room.

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