



Sexual Assault Response Services *of Southern Maine*

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Barriers That Male Survivors Face When Speaking Out

Despite the progress of the sexual assault movement over the past 20 years, one significant component of our culture of sexual assault is that the male survivor has gone relatively unacknowledged. Studies have revealed that some ten to twenty percent of all adult males have endured some form of sexual violence before the age of 18 (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis and Smith, 1990; Fromuth and Burkhart, 1989). Research has also clearly illustrated that such abuse is often devastating to the male survivor and can lead to low self esteem, depression, suicide attempts, anxiety, substance abuse, sexual identity confusion, sexual dysfunction, aggressive acting-out and distrust of others (Briere, Evans, Runtz and Wall, 1988; Lew, 1990; Hunter, 1990). Given the staggering prevalence and findings indicating the blatant destructive impact sexual violence can have on men and boys, the question remains as to why male survivors have gone unrecognized for so many years.

The following factors may contribute to the silence and suppression of the voices of many male sexual assault survivors:

- Stereotypes dictate that a man is expected to display physical strength, be self-sufficient, show little emotion and take pride in one's heterosexual prowess. The mere existence of pain and suffering, therefore, cracks the very foundation upon which most men build their identity.
- When men do come forward (only 1 in 7 men ever report the crime), they are often faced with disbelief, ignorance and stigmatization not only from society at large, but also well-intentioned loved ones.
- The myth that males are eternally sexually receptive still predominates our culture. Therefore, the myth implies that men can not be sexually assaulted since they are always willing to engage in sexual activity with any cooperative participant.
- Male survivors fear being labeled as 'less than a man', 'homosexual', or 'weak,' if they disclose abuse. These traits are considered unbecoming of the traditional male.
- Same sex sexual abuse is culturally often labeled a homosexual act; which it clearly is NOT. While many males are perpetrated by other males, we know that these perpetrators often identify as heterosexual and are either married or partnered in heterosexual relationships.
- Research is often conducted primarily on female survivors, perpetuating the message that only females are vulnerable to victimization.
- Uncomfortable jokes are made about prison rape, which not only serves to make light of sexual violation, but also suggests that jail is the only context in which males are sexually assaulted.
- Movies such as *Private Lesson* and *White Palace* glorify male sexual abuse by characterizing such experiences as uncontrollably exciting or as a fantasized 'initiation' to one's unexplored sexuality.

How Can We Begin To Change These Misconceptions:

- Recognize that men and boys can and will be sexually assaulted.
- Be aware of the biases and myths surrounding sexual assault.
- Recognize that harmful sex-role stereotypes create narrow definitions of masculinity, as well as lies about homosexuality. This makes it difficult for males to safely disclose sexual abuse.
- Communities must help to create safe environments where males can speak up, reach out and heal
- We must recognize the destruction resulting from secrecy, lies and isolation.

Adapted from Men's Rape Prevention Project, 1998

Help, Hope, and Healing