



Sexual Assault Response Services *of Southern Maine*

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Myths Concerning Male Sexual Abuse

Most of us grow up thinking that sexual violence only happens to women. This, often times, leads to isolation and shame for male survivors of sexual violence. Culturally, we tend to disbelieve, blame the victim and/or ignore men and boys who disclose histories of sexual abuse. We know that 1 out of 5 males will be assaulted before their eighteenth birthday. The following information is a look at some common misconceptions about male sexual violence in our culture. As you read the information, imagine yourself as a male survivor. How would these myths hinder your ability to recover and heal from such trauma?

MYTH #1: Boys and Men Can Not Be Victims...If they didn't want it, then they could fight back and overpower their attacker.

This myth, instilled through masculine gender socialization and sometimes referred to as the "macho image," declares that males, even as young boys, are not supposed to be victims or even vulnerable. We learn very early that males should be able to protect themselves. In truth, boys are children-physically and emotionally more vulnerable than their perpetrators. Many people are not able to recognize that sexual assault is often a way for the perpetrator to exercise power and control over a victim. IN MANY CASES physical force is not even a component of the violation. Instead victims describe components of extreme coercion, threats, manipulation and implied violence as being integral to the sexual assault. Because of this, we know that it is usually not a matter of 'just fighting back.'

MYTH #2: Most sexual abuse of boys is perpetrated by homosexual males.

Pedophiles who molest boys are not expressing a homosexual orientation any more than pedophiles that molest girls are practicing heterosexual behaviors. If we are able to recognize the act of sexual violence as an act of power and control, who's ultimate end is to violate, degrade, humiliate and disempower the victim, we will then recognize that sexual 'preference' or 'orientation' has very little to do with the act itself. Violating someone sexually achieves these feelings of ultimate power and control. It is not about sexual orientation. The vast majority of sex offenders identify themselves as heterosexual.

MYTH #3: If a boy experiences sexual arousal or orgasm from abuse, this means he was a willing participant or enjoyed it.

In reality, males can respond physically to stimulation (get an erection) even in traumatic or painful situations. Therapists who work with sex offenders know that one way a perpetrator maintains secrecy is to label the victim's sexual response as an indication of his willingness to participate. "You liked it. You wanted it", they'll say. Many survivors feel guilt and shame because they experienced physical

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arousal while being abused. Physical stimulation is likely to happen in a sexual situation. It does not mean the victim wanted the experience or even understood what it meant at the time.

MYTH #4: The ‘Vampire Syndrome.’ Boys who are sexually abused, like the victims of Count Dracula, go on to ‘bite’ or sexually abuse others.

This myth is especially dangerous because it creates a terrible stigma for the child, that he is destined to become an offender. Boys may end up being ‘treated’ as potential offenders versus victims who need support and help. While it is true that most perpetrators have histories of sexual abuse, it is NOT TRUE that most victims go on to become perpetrators. Research by Jane Gilgun, Judith Becker and John Hunter found a primary difference between perpetrators who were sexually abused and sexually abused males who NEVER perpetrated: non-perpetrators told about the abuse, and were believed and supported by significant people in their lives.

MYTH #5: Males abused by other males are or will become homosexual.

Many boys who have been abused by males believe that something about them sexually attracts males, and that this must mean that they are homosexual or effeminate. Because of this, many sexually abused males spend a considerable amount of time being confused about their own sexual identity, orientation and also how they are perceived by society. The sex offender’s inability to develop and maintain healthy sexual relationships and his/her need to act out feelings of power and control is the problem—not the ‘perception’ that the victim is homosexual. Additionally it is unlikely that someone can make someone become a homosexual or heterosexual. However, as stated above, same sex sexual abuse can certainly distort a young person’s perceptions of himself and force him to question his identity; an example of the long term emotional consequences of sexual violence.

MYTH #7: If the perpetrator is female, the boy or adolescent should consider himself ‘lucky.’

To be used as a sexual object by anyone, male or female, is always abusive and damaging. ‘You can’t rape the willing’ is a spin-off of this myth. This myth implies that boys and men are ALWAYS up for sexual activities, and do not have the right to set sexual limits. Our culture reinforces the notion that males will take sex anytime, anywhere; and men are expected to live up to this concept. If a man or boy doesn’t want sex, especially from an adult female, then he must therefore be defective. In reality, premature and/or coerced sex, whether by a mother, aunt, older sister, teacher or other female authority figure, causes confusion at best, as well as rage, depression, and other problems.

FOR ANY MALE WHO HAS BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED, BECOMING FREE OF THESE MYTHS IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THE RECOVERY PROCESS.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO TALK ABOUT THIS HANDOUT OR ANY OTHER PART OF YOUR RECOVERY PLEASE CALL THE HOTLINE, NIGHT OR DAY, AT 1-800-313-9900.