

## **April is Designated as Sexual Assault Awareness Month**

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It seems impossible that one could be unaware that sexual assault happens – at great regularity, everywhere in this country. In fact, every 98 seconds, an American is sexually assaulted (Rape Abuse Incest National Network). One need only to turn on a car stereo, the news, or tune into your preferred social media to hear of a rape or other sexual assault. Why does there need to be a month dedicated to getting information out about sexual assault? Even with the attention to those courageous enough to tell their stories, there seems to be a disconnect about the impact of these crimes. It is uncomfortable to even try to comprehend the extent of that impact.

Let's face it, we all would prefer to be comfortable.

We like to think of childhood homes where hugs are loving, and self-esteem is encouraged and supported. However, what if that isn't your reality? What if your story is the same as the 1 in 4 girls or 1 in 6 boys who experienced sexual assault prior to age 18? (National Sexual Violence Resource Center). What if you, too, had experienced events in your life that could permanently impair your ability to feel safe? What is someone's needing to feel power over you damaged your ability to have a healthy relationship, creating a pattern of emotional pain and shame? What if there had been someone in your life that took your sense of self away from you, leaving your physical health to deteriorate under the constant influence of cortisol and adrenalin that are the residual effects of having to be hyper vigilant to feel safe? These are hard things to consider. They can even be overwhelming. It seems too huge a problem to tackle, with too many ingrained obstacles and too little support. Although nowhere near that of a victim of sexual assault, the enormity of it can leave you feeling powerless. To some extent, this replicates the power and control dynamics of abuse. There are somethings that you, and everyone, can do to feel more comfortable and more in control. You can be an active and effective bystander. Begin by educating yourself on the realities of sexual assault.

Start with our young children and teach them that they can trust their own feelings which includes honoring their requests to not have to kiss Aunt Gertrude or sit on Uncle Harry's lap. It means saying "Tell me more about that." when a child tries to tell you how they are feeling or thinking rather than shutting them down or telling them that they are 'ridiculous'.

With our teens, keep the lines of communication open and let them know that you believe in them. Tell them know that you have confidence in their ability to make good decisions. Use 'teaching moments' that get presented through life in general or TV. Discuss things that you see together and share your values, without judgement. Ask them their opinion regarding what they see and their experiences. Let them know that sexual assault is NOT as consequence of poor judgement (underage drinking, questionable friend choices, etc.). Let your teen know that mistakes are human and that you will be there for them.

If someone trusts you enough to tell you their story of sexual assault – even pieces of it – you can listen, really listen, without judgement. Get rid of words like 'why' and 'should have' – they are words of judgement and shame – they only make matters worse.

Believe the victim – even if their story doesn't seem to make sense at first – the brain may take some time to sort out all the details, regardless of how long ago the assault happened. When a person begins to tell a story of horror, it can feel as if that harm just happened.

Don't press for all the details. Assure them that this is their story to tell, to whomever they wish to tell, when they are ready to tell. Thank them for trusting you enough to share what they could.

Ask them what they would like to have happen now. Do not presume that your sense of justice will be the same as theirs. If the individual is under the age of 18, the Division of Family Services must be called. (1-800-292-9582)  
Offer to call a sexual assault crisis hotline with them so they can talk to someone who is trained in what options are open to them. (ContactLifeline, Inc. 1-800-262-9800 and The YWCA Sexual Assault Response Center 1-800-773-8570).  
Ask for help for yourself when you feel overwhelmed. You will need your energy as we address the prevalence of sexual assault in our communities. So please take care of yourself.