



Ohio Psychological Association: Official Statement

Survivor Silence: Ohio Psychological Association Statement

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Because of the recent sexual abuse claims made by Dr. Christine Blasey Ford against former White House secretary Brett Kavanaugh, many people have been left wondering why Dr. Ford is coming forward about an incident that she claims happened three decades earlier. Many people are questioning whether or not the claims are even true. Notwithstanding a delay in reporting, research shows that young women infrequently report experiences of sexual victimization to the police, or other authorities. Survivors of sexual violence are more likely to discuss their experience with an acquaintance. Even still, the fear of negative social reactions is prominent in their decision of whether or not to do so. Negative social reactions that result in feelings of hurt, shame, or rejection may lead the survivor to believe that they were responsible for the assault. Anticipated negative social reactions may impact the likelihood that they will disclose the experience to others in the future. The turmoil over whether or not to come forward may seem conflicting or confusing to some but research supports that it is more common than we think.

Sexual assault is a major public health problem that occurs across the life span, in a variety of social contexts, with incidents ranging in severity. In the U.S. about 1 in 3 women, and 1 in 6 men experience some form of sexual violence in their lifetime. 41% of female victims who reported history of completed rape, report that the first incident occurred before the age of 18 years old. Commonly reported outcomes following a sexual assault include feeling fearful (62% women, 18% men), concern for their safety (57% women, 17% men), and symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (52% women, 17% men).

Frequently, sexual assault survivors experience stigma around the assault. Stigmas associated with sexual assault include victim blaming from those close to them, including friends, partners, social service providers and society as a whole. Stigma is a dynamic social process that may lead to rejection of sexual assault survivors. The effect of stigma and rejection can then be self-blame: survivors may accept and internalize blame for the abuse and/or assault. Self-blame is a major reason many do not come forward right away or ever. Shame may account for survivors feeling unworthy and defective. Many of these concerns lead to avoidant coping or the pure silence of the sexual assault survivor's experiences.

Negative social reactions, self-blame, and shame are linked to poor outcomes such as PTSD, depression, psychological and physical distress, affect dysregulation, and maladaptive coping. If our social response to sexual assault were more supportive and helpful, it is likely that these poor outcomes could be avoided.

Awareness regarding sexual abuse survivor silence can help both the public and service providers to be more empathetic to sexual assault survivors, thus reducing stigma and negative responses.

Increased awareness should lead to intentional efforts to help survivors feel supported and empowered.

For more information and resources on sexual assault, see the following websites:

National Sexual Violence Hotline: <https://www.rainn.org/>

Sexual Assault Prevention: <https://www.endsexualviolence.org/>

References:

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