We Sent Them Home...Now What?:
Mitigating Sexual Assault Through Education & Response During a Pandemic
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*Trigger Warning: This article provides context for the complex, multifaceted issue of sexual violence response and education during a crisis and may be a trigger for some readers.

During sexual assault awareness month (April), practitioners typically have go-to strategies for large scale education to develop awareness, understanding, and [hopefully] empathy around sexual and interpersonal violence. Education during the time of COVID-19 is different, and albeit difficult. How do we educate students on prevention efforts when they are no longer on campuses, in residence halls, at usual chapter meetings, or able to be gathered in one common space? The truth is, now more than even, we need to continue sexual assault education in our COVID-19 response.

Generally speaking, disasters of nearly any type create an increased vulnerability to sexual violence. Like a rising tide elevates all ships in the harbor, the rise of one disaster increases the percentage of interpersonal and sexual violence due to high stress situations, crowded spaces, stay at home measures, and limited resources to at-risk populations (Sullivan, 2017). In one example, after the Loma Prieta earthquake in Santa Cruz County, CA in 1989, reports of sexual violence rose 300 percent (Enarson, 2012). In 2014, after the Ebola outbreak began in Sierra Leone, a country in west Africa, there was an estimated 40 percent increase in sexual assault reports (Devries, 2015).

Furthermore, the strategies of shelter in place, stay home, and becoming socially distant — which are recommended by the Center for Disease Control to prevent the spread of COVID-19 — provide a stark juxtaposition for survivors of interpersonal and sexual violence. These prevention strategies are typically what survivors experience; only now, the pandemic is doing the work of the abuser. Combine this with the closure of non-profit response teams, offices, and university resources, barriers of leaving a potentially abusive partner or home, and the lack of friends, brothers/sisters/siblings, and advisors checking in on students. We are wading into a necessary response that our communities are not equipped to handle upon their return to campus.

Now is the time to continue education and create space for common conversation on sexual assault prevention. To develop context, we can turn to examples in modern history to learn how to continue appropriate response, education, and training during a crisis. In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina ravaged the southeast and directly hit New Orleans, Louisiana shutting down
the city for months. It was the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history and more than 1,800 lives were lost (Augustyn, A., et. al., 2005).

Post Katrina, the Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault (LaFASA) and the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) began research and worked to develop resources to help mitigate sexual victimization in times of disaster. As much of the resource guide provides large scale action items and policy change after a natural disaster in a city, many elements can be edited and promote thought about how to educate and prevent sexual misconduct from occurring during any large-scale crisis (Klein, A., 2012).

As we look to sexual assault prevention, education, and response in this pandemic, we must think about the response to the needs of our students and how to continue education and training; creating space for our students to understand how this directly impacts our work and their experience. Below outlines a series of ideas for continuing education around sexual violence in periods of social distancing such as COVID-19.

1. Collect and send out information on university, local, and national resources. During time away from campus, it is important to understand and be able to articulate what resources students can access and utilize. Is your University Title IX office open? Is the chief investigative reporter hosting interviews? Does your counseling services offer free, online sessions for those processing? Is there an emergency fund for students who may need financial assistance for safe housing? What about access to food? Be sure to cover the bases for the hierarchy of needs when providing resources. For those who are further away, what local, city, regional, or state resources can you provide them the information with? Are there any free online crisis response services you can utilize for your students? Take it a step further and support those non-profits with time, talent, and treasure. If your budget allows, use that fiscal year money you were planning to use for a speaker to provide funding for survivor support; asking the non-profit to do some education with your students at a later date and time.

2. Set up “open office hours” via Zoom, WebEx, etc., to check in on students and discuss common material. Collaborate by involving other offices that may be able to help address the topic of sexual violence education. Consider it a virtual round table. Utilize national programming or send out videos that educate on the topic. Common definitions allow for common conversation. Creating or utilizing existing material focusing on the definitions will ensure students are grasping the material. The follow up would be to hold open office hours and provide resources for those who may need to process or feel triggered. Directly
email students from clubs or organizations with this vested interest, or even positions (think risk manager), with a personal invitation to join your virtual time.

3. Do not assume one size fits all. Education and outreach for help looks differently for every individual. Students who are undocumented, differently abled, or those who identify as LGBT+ may change the help they need or are able to get outside of a college campus. Consider this when collecting resources and include multiple offices or resources for underrepresented student populations. There is also a culture component to sexual violence education and with students back home, cultural norms may play a larger role in decision making and information intake. Consider ways to engage all communities and present information in meaningful and culturally respectful ways.

4. Allow students to opt in. Reporting, processing, or receiving education may seem as a nicety in a time of necessity. When considering the hierarchy of needs for students — or for ourselves — it is important to consider that this information may be overwhelming during an already stressful time. Make the information easy to digest or allow students to dive into topics at their own pace/time. Set up an ongoing education database via Teacherly for those who wish to continue education through self-directed curriculum. Follow up with students you see have started or completed the material with resources and an invitation to your open office hours.

5. Assess! Assess! Assess! In public health, developing prevention strategies is only part of the solution. In our work, it is the majority of what we assume is the solution. The assessment of those prevention strategies is what creates lasting and meaningful change; providing researchers and practitioners with the data to edit and/or enhance the speaker we bring to campus, the cohort style advocate program we host, the webinar we host, or the curriculum we send out. Perhaps in this pause, it is valuable to assess the work we are currently doing around this topic in order to prepare ourselves with a clear path to move forward.

6. Consider the long-term impacts of a lack of sexual assault prevention education in the response of a pandemic. After a crisis, the needs of humanity shift, and the return to campus may re-traumatize a survivor. Depending on the survivor story, recovery can take time and require long-term resources. At minimum, providing organizations and leadership with the knowledge and skills needed to provide support to a brother or sister upon the return to campus could be the catalyst in entering a stage of post-traumatic stress versus the beginning of healing.

At a minimum, communicating best practices and resource sharing are the best tools to ensure common definitions are being sent from all inbound communication to students (i.e. advisors, headquarters staff, volunteers, alumni, university, office, etc.). Taking it further, create a support...
group for people who identify as a survivor (with approval from or in collaboration with the Title IX office) or who need assistance to feel safe during this time of increased vulnerability; creating a safe space while providing counseling sessions if appropriate. Typically, students will utilize each other for processing and even disclosing information. Preparing students and leaders with tangible and realistic ways to respond to a disclosure of sexual assault will create safe and impactful communities. Teach students about trauma-informed response protocol with direct quotes on what to say to a survivor. Normalizing response language and resource sharing within a community creates normalcy where survivors feel believed and supported.

If you or someone you know is in direct need of assistance, support, or resources during this time, investigate your university’s policies, procedures, and resources. To dive deeper visit RAINN.org or NSVRC.org for more information on this topic. If you need immediate access to a counselor, visit www.crisistextline.org/sexualabuse or text HOME to 741741.

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References