

When the Rapist is Her Partner

AN INTIMATE PARTNER SEXUAL VIOLENCE TRAINING WORKSHOP

IPSV AND SECONDARY WOUNDING

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Trauma expert Aphrodite Matsakis has written at some length about “Secondary Wounding” and defines it as responding to survivors of trauma with disbelief, denial, minimization, stigmatization, or refusal of help. Secondary wounding may compound the original trauma, or in some cases, cause the survivors to feel even worse than the rape itself. Further, women who have survived abusive relationships experience more secondary wounding than any other group of trauma survivor.ⁱ IPSV survivors frequently experience elements of secondary wounding, including by professionals.ⁱⁱ At least part of the reason for this is that service providers – legal, medical, counselling and other—are drawn from a wider society that is largely accepting of misconceptions that pass for fact about IPSV. Many of the misconceptions are based in ideas about what constitutes “real” rape, what a “good” victim does, and beliefs about women’s tendency to level false accusations.

Yet, it is essential that help-seeking survivors of IPSV do not encounter secondary wounding as a result of reaching out. At worst, this can prolong the danger to them. To avoid secondary wounding:

- Never minimize the sexual assault. Do not say or imply that it is less serious because it was her partner, or that it must have been a “misunderstanding” or “kinky sex.” Don’t make statements such as “At least he didn’t beat you.” Women who have experienced sexual assault without accompanying physical violence may still be traumatisedⁱⁱⁱ, and they deserve help. *And it is still rape.* Don’t suggest that if she remained in the relationship, the rape cannot really have been serious.
- Do not blame the survivor; for example don’t make statements like “Why don’t/didn’t you just leave?” Recognize that leaving can be a dangerous and difficult process, with the danger to women escalating as they are exiting.^{iv} Never suggest that the assaults are her fault because she provokes her abuser, or because she has an obligation to “submit.” The perpetrator is always responsible for the abuses he commits.
- Do not stigmatize her, for example, don’t assume that she’s “weak” for being abused or that some women “like” to be raped. Never suggest that she’s “crazy” for loving the perpetrator.
- Believe her. Challenge any false belief you may hold that women frequently lie about rape. False accusations are actually rare – and women laying charges for partner rape are (unfortunately) a tiny minority.^v Being called a liar – either directly or indirectly - can silence women who desperately need support. There are also ways to imply that you don’t believe her without directly stating it, for example saying, “He doesn’t seem like the type” or I believe you *but* I wasn’t there.” Please note also that substance

abuse or mental health issues are not sufficient reasons for disbelief. She may have developed these – or pre-existing conditions may have worsened - as a result of her experiences of sexual and other abuse.^{vi} The perpetrator may attempt to use such issues as evidence that she is unreliable.

- Don't refuse help – if you cannot provide what she needs, get familiar with services that can do so.

Other poor responses that comprise secondary wounds are silence, refusal to acknowledge the sexual assault as a problem, “neutrality” about what has happened to her (neutrality *always* sides with the perpetrator, whether you intend to do that or not), and lecturing her about what to do. Listen, validate, and let her know you think she deserves to be safe. Suggest options, and don't stigmatize her if she isn't ready to take them. You can say something like, “Partner rape is a terrible and intimate violation. Would you like to see a sexual assault counsellor? I have some numbers here if you need them.” Or, “You don't deserve to live with the threat of rape. Your safety is a priority. Would you like to speak to a domestic violence worker? When you feel ready, I can support you in doing that.”

Be as unlike her abuser as possible – remember that abusers frequently minimize their abusiveness, blame her for it and tell her what to do. Always convey respect in your interactions with her. If you do this, you will help her begin to question the disrespect her abuser treats her with.

Educate yourself about IPSV and be prepared to challenge any myths about it that you may have subscribed to. In this way, you will avoid secondary wounding responses and you may even help save a life.

ⁱ Matsakis, A. (1992) *I Can't Get Over It: A Handbook for Trauma Survivors*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

ⁱⁱ Easteal, P. and McOrmond-Plummer, L. (2006) *Real Rape, Real Pain: Help for Women Sexually Assaulted by Male Partners*. Melbourne: Hybrid Publishers.

ⁱⁱⁱ Russell, D. (1990) *Rape in Marriage*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

^{iv} DeKeseredy, W.S. and Schwartz, M.D. (2009) *Dangerous Exits: Escaping Abusive Relationships in Rural America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

^v Easteal, P. and Feerick, C. (2005) “Sexual assault by male partners: is the license still valid?” *Flinders Journal of Law Reform* 8, 2, 185–207.

Easteal, P. and Gani, M. (2005) “Sexual assault by male partners: a study of sentencing factors.” *Southern Cross University Law Review* 9, 39–72.

^{vi} Easteal, P. and McOrmond-Plummer, L. (2006) *Real Rape, Real Pain: Help for Women Sexually Assaulted by Male Partners*. Melbourne: Hybrid Publishers.