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A Parent's Guide to helping a Daughter who has been raped

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How this guide will help.

Rape is an act of violence which occurs when someone takes control over another by the use of physical threats or force, or by exploiting another person's inability to give or withhold consent for sex. While it is true that both women and men can be raped, it is most commonly done to females by males. Sexual assault (and attempted rape) is the fastest-growing crime in America, yet receives little helpful attention by media, educators, or politicians. Since rapes are usually unreported, nobody knows exactly how many actually happen each year, but estimates are that more than a half-million occur annually, or about 78 per hour.

Even though there is little public attention to rape, there are *many* scientific studies about rape, rapists, and effective forms of helping survivors. As a result, public awareness is improving, rape myths are being challenged, and survivors are finding better help today than in years past.

As you might expect, most resources to help rape survivors come from crisis centers, police stations, and specialized counseling programs. However, rape does not only affect the woman, but also her family, friends, and other loved ones. Because of this, people in relationships with rape survivors are called *secondary survivors*; we are not the ones who were attacked, yet we are still hurt and affected. Secondary survivors sometimes need help dealing with the trauma too, and our role as the victim's helpers makes it important that we prepare ourselves with education and counseling whenever needed.

I am a licensed clinical therapist, and in my practice I have worked with many families affected by the issue of rape. This booklet can help explain some of the things rape survivors have described as the most effective ways their parents can help them.

The role of men

Males can have some of the greatest effects on a woman's recovery. Depending on how we approach our role as helpers, we can either make her experience worse or better; we can either react badly and devastate her, or we can be one "key" in her recovery and healing. Since half of raped women turn to a male as their first source of help and advice, we play a crucial role in both the short-term and long-term experiences she has after the assault.

Although fathers often want to help the survivor, we are often unprepared to be effective. We might think of rape as a "woman's problem," or assume that it's something they can just "get over." Or we may assume they'll *never* "get over" it; that she will always be impure or "dirty" because of what someone else did. Maybe we realize we're even angry at *her*, being critical of her decisions ("you put yourself in that situation!") or wanting violent revenge against her attacker. As a result, a lot of poor decisions are made by well-meaning helpers.

If your wife, daughter, or friend is raped, this guide will give you ways to help her recover. You will learn what you should **and should not do**. You will learn what emotions she may be experiencing, and how to talk to her about them. You will also learn how to handle your own emotions about what's happened.

The role of women

Mothers are important in the healing process because mothers can reflect back to a daughter how loved and valued the daughter is. A mother can demonstrate for a daughter how a strong woman handles a rape experience by being honest about her pain and grief, and yet resisting the pressure to just “give up,” ignore the rape, or turn to self-destructive behaviors after the rape.

Countless young women who have been raped have said to me in counseling that it was their *mother's* emotional strength or weakness that most influenced the daughter's choice whether to tell anyone about the rape or not. That doesn't mean that if your daughter has hidden her rape from you for a long time that she doesn't have faith in you; hiding a rape is more common than talking about it, and it may be that your daughter lacks confidence in *herself* to be able to deal with it.

Also, many young women have found that they are most helped (or most *hurt*) by how their mothers handle their knowledge of their daughter's rape. A mother who is sensitive, supportive, and willing to talk and listen is obviously more helpful to her daughter than a mother who blames or scolds her daughter, gives the message that the mother is ashamed of her daughter, or avoids the topic altogether.

Rape myths that parents can overcome

There is no such thing as a “typical” rape, or even a “typical” rapist or “typical” victim. However, there are a lot of common elements and misconceptions that affect rape survivors, and understanding them will help you become sensitive to what she has faced--and *is facing*.

First--and I *cannot emphasize this enough*--rape is not about forcing someone to have sex. It is not sexual at all, in fact. This may sound like a startling and bizarre thing to say, so hear me out.

Although rape usually happens when a woman's body is hurt in what we consider a “sexual” way, rapists themselves tell us that their actions weren't about being aroused, attracted, turned on, or “horny beyond control.” Rather, it is a crime of violence in which the goal is to take **power**, not sex, from the person. **Sex is the *method* used to take power and control; not the goal of the control.**

Think of it this way: when someone mugs a person at gunpoint, the goal of the crime is to take something valuable from the victim, usually money. It is *not* about fulfilling a mugger's desire to point and use a gun. The gun (and the threat) is the method used to take something else from the victim, and rapists use sex as their weapon, not as the thing they want to get.

While most rapes don't involve a gun (in fact, few rapes involve a weapon at all), it is common that bodily injury can happen. This is a real danger: although an injury may have occurred, it is often in such a private place or done in such an unthinkable way to her body that many victims decide to never report the crime at all, keeping it a secret—but also preventing themselves from getting medical attention.

Since this is a violent crime where one person injures her body with one part of his body, it is crucial to understand that it is a *terrible* myth that the woman somehow “asked for” it, liked it, brought it on herself, wanted it, or is exaggerating the experience. Even when the attacker is

someone she is dating--a boyfriend, or even a husband--this is still a violent assault made by a person wanting control over the victim, not something she wanted or enjoyed (or gave in to and then later changed her mind by making up a “rape story”). No matter what you talk about with the daughter you are helping, it is never appropriate to hint or suggest, or even ask, that she may have liked it, brought it on, or provoked it.

A second related fact that parents often struggle with is that the woman is absolutely not responsible for her victimization. Not even slightly. No, not even 2% responsible. This is where we often have the urge to ask, “Yeah, but...?”

“yeah, but what if she...?”

“Yeah, but how about when...?”

Nope, nope, and nope.

Many often assume that the victim could have prevented the rape by taking certain precautions, avoiding certain situations, changing their appearances or behaviors, resisting more forcibly, not drinking, etc. It’s even easier to make these assumptions if she shows no visible injuries; we might assume, “Well, the guy apparently wasn’t violent, right? I mean, she’s not hurt, so clearly if she had fought back (or kicked him in the groin, punched him with car keys, etc.), then she could probably have escaped!”

Some parents even subconsciously wonder whether the victim gave subtle hints of consent if she *didn’t* resist as violently as he feels she should have. This assumption unfairly suggests that she shares some blame for the assault, and that if she were able to change enough things about her appearance, location, or behavior, she would be safe. It sounds like this: “If you had been tougher/stronger/smarter, maybe he would have gotten the message and stopped...!” This kind of attitude demolishes whatever strength and confidence your daughter has left.

Here’s why that’s all wrong: Women who have survived rape have reported in studies that fighting back made the attacks against her become *more violent* in 20-35% of the cases. In other words, the decision to fight the attacker can possibly threaten her own safety even more.

Rapes happen in every hour of the day and in any setting, and to every age group. When a person is being attacked, there are three instincts that can happen, and these instincts are chosen by the body, not the thinking mind:

1. **Fight.** Parents often assume this is the best instinct, and will even sometimes blame daughters who don’t make this choice. Courts often get this one wrong, too, by suggesting that if she didn’t fight back, she can’t claim he (the attacker) was raping her. “Where was your show of resistance?” “Why didn’t you fight back?”
2. **Flight.** This is the “run away” instinct. The risks here are that she may be stranded, and it may provoke more anger by her attacker which makes her risk of injury more severe if she is caught.
3. **Freeze.** This is the most common instinct--for both males *and* females, no matter how tough we try to talk when we’re not actually in that situation. A person feeling threatened may curl up, become tense, cover their faces with their arms, and even become silent. Again, courts and secondary survivors often misunderstand this instinct and blame the woman with the idea, “if she just froze, didn’t scream, didn’t fight, and just remained silent and still and numb, she can’t say it was an attack, right?”

There is nothing wrong with *any* of these instincts, except that victims will often look back at their experience in hindsight and criticize themselves later: “I feel so stupid,” she might think, “that I just stayed there! I didn’t kick or scrape or fight! Why didn’t I do more? It’s my fault for not stopping the attack!” Some women play the memories over and over in their heads for years because they keep thinking they did something wrong, or should have been able to stop it.

At this point, it is entirely *appropriate* to disagree with her and tell her she is wrong to blame herself--that it was not her fault, that her survival decisions are perfectly normal and may have saved her life, and that you support her.

Third, it is important to understand that there is nothing she could do differently that would prevent it. Rape victims will almost always find ways of blaming themselves for the assault by listing all the ways they could have fought differently, dressed differently, screamed differently, hit differently, or been somewhere different. Victims who blame themselves are trying to find a sense of control again: “If I can figure out what *I* did wrong, I’ll know what to change or never do again, and I’ll be safe. I can prevent being attacked again if I can figure out what mistakes I made, and not repeat them!” It’s a natural but unhealthy way for her to create a false sense of control over whether this could happen again.

In reality, we know that there is *nothing* about a victim that makes a rape happen. A rape happens when a man makes a decision to hurt a woman he feels he can control. Rapes happen because of the rapist, not because of the victim.

One of the *worst* ways to “help” a victim is to name a list of things she could have done differently, or did wrong. When a victim blames herself, this is the only time when it is proper, and necessary, to disagree with her and tell her she is wrong:

“No, it *wasn’t* your fault. This didn’t happen because of anything you did wrong, or how you dressed, or where you were. It happened because a very sick and angry person made a terrible decision to do this to someone. I am very sorry that it happened to you. You don’t deserve it, and it’s not your fault.”

Sometimes we think of all the ways a woman could “prevent” rape: Don’t go into bad situations, don’t dress in provocative clothes, don’t drink or use drugs, etc. The problem with this line of reasoning is that it suggests these behaviors *make rape happen*. Notice that they also suggest that the way to stop the rape problem is to make women guess all the things they should do differently so nobody will ever hurt her in the future: how she should act, dress, where she can be (and when, and with whom), and what she should do. This kind of thinking puts responsibility on women to predict the future and not to be victims, rather than putting responsibility where it belongs. And when women are raped, this thinking adds to their shame and humiliation by suggesting that they failed to follow unwritten rules, and therefore “deserved” whatever happened.

Let’s review. In this section we’ve learned these important things:

- Rape is a power crime, not a sex crime. Sex is the method of rape, not the goal.
- The victim is not responsible--even slightly--for what a rapist has chosen to do. Even if we disagree with some of her decisions during the incident, some of her responses are instincts

(not choices), and even when she *does* choose some of her actions, no choices make rape deserved, natural, or even likely. Only a rapist's choice to attack makes a rape happen.

- All humans--men and women--have three instincts when we feel our life is threatened: Fight, flight, or freeze. None of these choices is "better" than the other, so we should resist judging a victim who did something other than "what *I* would have done in that situation..."
- Nearly all rape survivors will blame themselves or feel guilty after the rape. This is an unhealthy but natural way for her to psychologically protect herself by trying to figure out what she "did wrong," so she'll be able to "fix it" and keep it from happening again. It is important that you not go along with it, and even disagree and insist that none of it was her fault.

You can help her by:

- Knowing the myths, and not falling for them
- Understanding what she is going through and why she blames herself
- Listening without asking prying questions, but also reminding her that she is not to blame
- Allowing her to make decisions to regain control (except the decision to blame herself; you will gently but solidly teach her that she is not at fault)

Her immediate needs

The time immediately after a rape is confusing, emotional, and charged with anxiety --for each of you. It is also a time of physical discomfort and high risk for her. Not only has she been terrorized and totally violated, but she fears that her closest companions may not be supportive or believe her. One of the most frightening experiences for a survivor is getting the courage to talk to you, and wondering how you will react. Your reaction can set the tone for her recovery in years to come. She will wonder,

"Will I need medical care?"

"Should I tell my family?"

"Should I report this to police?"

"Could it happen again?"

"Will I become pregnant? "

"What if I get a disease like AIDS?"

"Will others reject me now?"

"Am I ruined for the rest of my life?"

"Will I be an embarrassment to the people I love?"

"Can my life be normal again?"

Clearly, rape isn't something she can just "get over." The emotional effects can last for years, and unfortunately helpers like police, doctors, ministers, and lawyers can be insensitive. For example, if she reports the assault to a hospital, they will collect physical evidence to be used in convicting the attacker. This is an intimate, painful process. And even more distressing is that this evidence must be collected before she bathes, changes clothes, eats, drinks, smokes, or brushes her hair. The advantages to a medical exam, though, are these:

1. Evidence can be used to convict the attacker.
2. Physical injuries can be detected and treated immediately.
3. Preventative contraception can be given to prevent pregnancy.
4. Antibiotics can be given to combat infections, including many sexual diseases.
5. Psychologically, it becomes her way of gaining control again by not letting him “get away with it.” It feels like a way of fighting him back and talking a brave step for herself.

You should encourage her to seek medical help, but the decision should remain hers. Remind her that you can go with her through every step, and even though you can't be in the same room while the nurses are working, you will be right outside. An advocate from the local rape crisis center will arrive to meet you, and she will sit with the survivor through every moment of the examination to talk with her, help her, give comfort, and provide both of you with more information about counseling and other services available for free.

Even if she does not want to go through an evidence examination, or if the evidence has been lost because of delay, showering, etc., it is important that she see a (female) physician as soon as possible. Assisting her in this process tells her two things about *you*: first, that you understand that the attacker is at fault here, not her, and you place responsibility where it should be: on him. You will use proper methods to seek justice. Second, you are compassionate and calm and you want to be supportive and understanding of her. She is not going through this alone, but with a strong, dependable family.

What you should do

The single most common reaction among parents is intense anger toward the rapist, even wishing you could hurt him in revenge. This is normal and understandable--I would feel the same way. Yet this is a time when calmness is needed, and violent revenge would be the *wrong* way to help her.

Going after the guy can scare your daughter by making her wonder if the attacker will come after her for revenge because she told someone what he'd done, had him beaten up, etc. Retaliation by the rapist is possible in some instances. And it shows her that yet one more person she thought she could trust becomes violent as a way of handling angry emotions. She's just had to deal with one person like that; the last thing she wants to see is yet another person in her life using violence to achieve what a goal. That can make *her* feel guilty, as if she's imposed an emotional burden on you. She may see the fierce anger of your reaction and wish she hadn't stressed you out with one more thing for you to have to deal with. She may even try to take the role of being *your* comforter, counseling and soothing you when in fact she is the one in need.

Also, it's illegal. Assault and battery, no matter how much the guy might deserve it, is a crime and you could be prosecuted. That would mean that her helper might be fined or imprisoned, leaving her without a protector while her rapist is still free.

Your anger should never be directed toward her. In my professional work, I've actually seen young women who were far more damaged by a loved ones' scolding, “how could you be so stupid to get yourself raped?!” than by the rape itself. Words hurled in moments of frustration can be severe in this situation. Anger against her deprives her of an opportunity to talk openly with someone she can trust.

Avoid questions, especially those that begin, “Why...? Why didn’t you...? Why weren’t you...? Why were you...? Couldn’t you have...? Should you have...? Do you think that was a good idea...?” and other questions that begin with hints of blame, or make her defend herself. Even if you don’t blame her, she will anticipate hints that you *might*, so be very careful with questions. Rather than asking questions at all, try suggesting something honest like this:

“I don’t understand what you’re going through, but I care about you deeply. If you want to talk to me about this, I will listen. I want to be someone you can trust to be helpful to you, whenever you are ready.”

No matter how curious you are, avoid asking about details of the attack. If she wants to discuss them, listen to her but avoid pressing for more information. Never discuss with her whether she enjoyed any part of the attack (she didn’t!), because it is important that you don’t equate rape with sexuality, promiscuity, or infidelity. One mistake that some parents make when they talk about rape is that they tend to focus on the sexual aspects of the experience, rather than understanding the act as a violent crime of power and control. By misinterpreting rape in this way, families can make their daughters feel even more alone and misunderstood.

Males aren’t the only ones who misunderstand rape; females do too—including survivors. Convince her that you do not share those views that blame the victim for what another person has done. When you insist, “It wasn’t your fault,” I can almost guarantee that she will disagree with you, debate you, and list the reasons why it *was* her fault (and if she doesn’t argue with you in words, she’s probably doing it in silently her mind). But remain steadfast. Don’t debate her point by point, just keep assuring her, “I hear you, but none of this was your fault. I don’t blame you—not at all.”

The advantage of this won’t be apparent right away. It’s not like she’ll instantly brighten up and realize she’s innocent. But that’s not the point. The point is that when she *is* finally ready to talk—a month from now, a year from now—she already knows that she has at least one person in her life who won’t blame her.

Avoid taking charge, even if you don’t agree with the decisions she is making about how to handle this (unless she begins to rely on drugs or alcohol to cope with her pain). While you should encourage her to seek help, counseling, and medical attention, don’t overrule her decisions (That’s what the last guy did). It is important that she is the “decider” and you are the supporter.

Don’t feel shut out or hurt if she isn’t immediately open to you about the rape. It’s not a sign that she doesn’t trust you or has lost her love for you, it is a sign that she might not trust *herself* just yet. She will need a long time to grow strong again before she can discuss it with anyone, even you. Then again, some daughters are immediately open. But don’t disrespect her privacy by prying, inquiring, or pressing her to be open, even if you believe “it’s so we can deal with it and move on.”

Tell her you love her. Tell her you love her. Tell her again that you love her. Got that yet? Tell her you love her.

Talking with her

For your daughter, having to disclose the incident to you can be a source of fear. Many families undergo strain, and some marriages even collapse in divorce, in the aftermath of an assault when the system of communication breaks down. But there are several steps you can take to prevent this:

Be patient, open, and willing to *show* that you are loving. By allowing her to express her feelings *at the time of her choosing*, you can assist in her recovery from painful emotions and fears, and it shows her that you respect her enough to let her set the pace for recovery.

Do not pressure her or question her into opening up details of the attack, or how she feels, or how she feels *about you* (making it all about your feelings is selfish). When she is ready to talk, she won't be able to hold back—and that's when you need to be there. Do not express anger over her reluctance, like sighing "Fine!" and walking out or using guilt like "How can we deal with this if you won't be open to me?" Rather, say things like "That's okay. This is tough, and whenever you want to, I'm ready to listen" (notice the word "listen," not "talk").

Eventually, it will be necessary to discuss the impact of the rape on your relationship. I suggest doing this in the presence of a counselor who specializes in rape (not just "marriage and family counseling," but specifically a sexual assault therapist provided or referred by your rape crisis center).

What to say to other people

For your daughter, having to tell the incident to family is another source of fear so intense that many keep their attacks completely secret and *never* tell anyone. Family members often have responses similar to those of the victim herself: anger, shock, guilt, depression, and helplessness. It is important for them to demonstrate their concern for her, but some families aren't sure how to best do this. Here are some ways to help:

- Family members who feel helpless may display their own sense of shock by venting rage or threats against the rapist. They may think that by showing their anger toward him or making violent threats, they can persuade the victim to realize, "see? We're battling on YOUR side!" But again, such threats may further traumatize her or make her regret telling her family what has happened. Their anger should be expressed to a counselor or to you, but *not to your daughter*. Constant anger only escalates her tension, and can make her feel she has burdened her family with this trauma.
- Do not allow the assault to be trivialized or mocked through insensitive jokes or comments. Some people use "rape humor" or "just teasing" insults when they are uncomfortable with the issue of rape. These jokes are likely to hurt and scare her rather than raising her spirits. Similarly, avoid being entertained by music which expresses violent attitudes towards women, since this will give her a mixed message about you: "you claim you are caring and sympathetic, yet you allow your mind to be filled with forms of entertainment that degrade and humiliate us."

- Families sometimes overprotect their daughter by trying to convince her to change cities or schools, move elsewhere, carry weapons, enroll in self-defense classes, and essentially transform her own life into a 24/7 routine of self-surveillance. The risk of this is that it reinforces her own view of herself as fragile and powerless in a dangerous world, one in which she must accept responsibility for violence against her by others. It echoes her guilty belief that this was something that happened because she failed, wasn't prepared, or didn't react right, and now we're going help train her to *not be at fault again*--clearly the wrong message. It also prevents her from finding her own independent strengths. It is not supportive to cause her to feel that she has lost control over her life, or that she cannot be self-reliant.
- Family members may try to recruit close friends, ministers and clergy, co-workers, and others into becoming involved with the issue, but this can be a mistake in some cases. They may feel they are bringing help for their daughter, or that they are "just helping myself deal with it," but to your daughter this can seem like gossip or even betrayal of intensely personal information. Unless she is prepared to talk with others about the rape, you should discourage others from offering unsolicited advice or bringing people into the situation. But you should *not* discourage her from talking to the people of her own choosing, even if it makes you envious that she talks to others rather than to you.
- Encourage the family to respect her privacy. Although sometimes it is helpful for her to talk, at times she will need to deal with feelings alone. Endless attention focused on her can embarrass her and pressure her portray a phony image of "niceness" while masking her pain. Her alone times can be an important part of her recovery, since being alone after such a trauma is a sign of developing strength and self-reliance. Likewise, her poetry, journals, and art about the incident should remain private except when she chooses to reveal them.
- Amazingly, some families can even be callous and cruel about the assault. It is not rare that family members express their outrage and shock by attacking the victim herself, scolding her for "being so stupid" or "putting yourself in that situation," or chastising her "if you had only listened to me..." One family I worked with even used the rape as a means of discipline against their teen daughter, warning her that if she continually disobeyed "I'll just take you right back there and you can get raped again until you learn your lesson!"
- Some families may create an environment of constant activities and distractions as a way to keep your daughter from thinking about the rape, or going on with life as if it never happened. But what this does is creates a superficial phoniness around her, forcing her to act falsely pleasant as a way to hide pain. This approach can actually hurt her more by treating her as a source of shame to the family; it's like we're saying to her that the rape is so awful that we have to cover it up and bury it under a sugar coating, or else we would all be humiliated by her.
- Nobody should ever suggest that she was raped because of a mistake on her part. Young daughters especially are hurt by this idea since the rapist is almost always an acquaintance such as a boyfriend, friend, or other peer. This is especially true if drugs or alcohol were used prior to the rape. Many rapists deliberately goad their teen victims into drinking or using

drugs specifically *because* it will prevent the girl from reporting the rape to her parents or police out of fear that she will be punished for her behavior, rather than supported as a victim of a crime.

Let's review some of the tips we have learned:

- Your daughter will be confused after the assault, so it is important that you discuss the need for medical care. But it is entirely her choice whether to undergo an evidence-collecting examination.
- Men often have an instinct to seek revenge, but this is a poor option that can further traumatize the victim, rather than helping her.
- You are more helpful by listening than by asking questions. Allow her to choose what to say, and when, but without prying or rushing her to open up.
- When your daughter blames herself--and she *will*--it is important that you disagree and assure her repeatedly that she is not to blame for the rape, no matter what bad decisions she might have made before or after the attack.
- Family members try to be helpful in many ways that aren't always helpful. They should not invade her privacy, pretend it didn't happen, use jokes to cope, make threats, or express their anger to (or at) her.

Consequences and recovery from rape

Clearly the effects of rape are not brief and rape is not limited to a quick period of pain and healing. Some survivors may take months or even years to recover, but you can help by understanding the stages of her recovery and how to help each one. It is rare that a daughter will reveal to her parents that she was raped right after it happened; most parents learn about this after she has kept it a secret for a long time while her social problems have worsened at home and at school while you have been mystified. Some daughters begin strange behaviors such as deliberately cutting or hurting themselves, others may begin to use drugs, or she may suddenly become very moody and withdrawn—more so than is normal. Parents are often baffled by these symptoms before learning of the rape.

Some daughters express themselves very openly, while others may hide how they feel. Some become very emotional, and others become almost stoic and blunt about it. Immediately after the attacks, rape crisis workers report that victims often laugh and joke and become entertaining *at the hospital* before and during the rape exam. These are all normal ways to react, and even the victim who becomes seemingly merry out of shock is only doing this as an alternative to complete devastation.

The symptoms that happen after a rape are often called “Rape Trauma Syndrome” (RTS), which describes a series of stages toward her recovery.

The first phase, **acute**, begins with the woman's initial responses right after the incident. The symptoms may include shock, denial, fear, confusion, grief, and trouble making decisions.

The most common fear at this stage is that “nobody will believe me.” Incidentally, the single experience most often named by survivors that helped them heal the *most* was “whether someone I trusted believed me.”

During the acute stage there may also be physical symptoms: soreness or injuries from the attack, bleeding, headaches or migraines, lowered immune system, tiredness, nausea, and lack of appetite. Many daughters try to conceal these symptoms from you. Your daughter may have experienced them privately while pretending in front of you and others that everything in her life was continuing normally.

The young survivor also experiences emotional symptoms that manifest as changes in her personality. Mood swings are common, including lashing out at people close to her who are her helpers and supporters. Part of this is a coping skill: she is testing you to see if you are durable as a supporter, and whether you will become angry and attack her or whether you are reliable, calm, and understanding. These are things she wants to know before trusting you as a helper; do not let your feelings become bruised by this “testing” process, no matter how intimate you were before the attack.

Your daughter may have done all of this “lashing out” behavior before she has even disclosed her rape to anyone, which has probably hurt and confused you. You may have seen her start smoking, drinking, or using drugs, or having problems at school, or getting involved in toxic relationships with bad boyfriends, self-injuring (cutting or scratching herself), or having bizarre mood swings—all while telling you to “butt out” and “leave me alone!”

The second phase is one of *apparent* stabilization. She may claim that she has “forgotten” or “dealt with” the rape and resent anyone (or anything) that reminds her of it. It may seem that she has resolved her feelings, but if anything the rape is *constantly* in the background of her thoughts and is still very upsetting. In my work as a therapist with teens, I encounter teen females several times *a week* who announce that even though they were raped two years ago (or two weeks ago, or whenever), they are “over it,” they are “fine with it,” and it’s “not an issue” despite their current drug use, abusive relationships, alcoholism, depression, self-mutilation, or suicide attempts. They beg me and their parents to discharge from therapy, or they go into a “honeymoon phase” of acting pleasant, making it seem like they have genuinely improved. When I bring up the rape they often fuss at me: “Why do we have to talk about this? It’s I the past!”

Since this is still a stage toward her recovery, do not bluntly contradict her by saying, “no you haven’t dealt with it!” Instead, congratulate her on her strength and her effort to return to a stable lifestyle again, and simply add “if you have feelings about it that come up again, I am still here to talk to at any time.”

But be aware that a relapse into negative behaviors is common and likely. And here’s something confusing you should know: her chances of “relapse” into her old problem behaviors are greatest when things seem to have been “going well” for a while. Don’t give up on counseling just because she relapses into depression, self-harm, moodiness, or even substance abuse. If anything, make sure counseling is consistent.

The third stage is marked by the return of the distress responses she experienced earlier (depression, anxiety, fear, insomnia, nightmares, drug use, tension headaches, etc.). To her, this can seem like a failure to cope or a complete collapse of her strength, and that will frighten her and perhaps aggravate you. You may wonder, “what happened? She was doing so well!” She’ll

probably wonder the same thing, and then feel depressed as she sees her second-stage strength appear to crumble: “I’m a failure! I’m slipping right back down again!” Some survivors even have suicidal thoughts at this regression stage (because they think they’re failing themselves and everyone else, or they start to believe that these painful feelings will apparently never go away). This is where family relationships undergo the most stress because husbands, parents, and others hadn’t planned on “getting more of the same.” Arguments are common, and her criticisms of you and herself become very sharp.

One teen girl I worked with had repeatedly run away from home, started screaming at her parents in the middle of stores, and was frequently swearing and hitting at home. She discharged from treatment after a week of unproductive family therapy sessions. Only two weeks later she was back, and her behaviors had worsened. Finally she disclosed that she had been raped not once but twice by some friends of her brother. With that crucial information we were able to repair the family relationships—she was in the third stage of recovery but had never told anyone what was really going on with her. Her family had simply thought she was “being bad” and treated her as such, which only reinforced the feelings of shame and insecurity the rape had caused. After her discharge that time, the father disclosed to me privately that if she hadn’t improved he had been prepared to give up on her and abandon the family, but that by addressing the rape trauma syndrome she had improved and he was finally able to understand her behaviors.

Often in counseling groups with teens, the very same girls who insisted “I’m over it and I’m fine” become deeply troubled when the topic of rape comes up during our sessions. These same girls who were convinced they were “over it” become sad, tense, and often leave the group feeling emotionally worse than when they came in. Within minutes or hours of the end of a counseling session, these girls are often involved in arguments, fights, cursing tantrums, and “acting out.” This is a natural pattern in which the girl is confronting her own insecurities, and the fact that something painful has just been opened. If we failed to understand the cause, it would be easy to react to her harshly and with little patience. But when we know that she is reacting to difficult issues in her recovery, it is easier to respond more appropriately to her.

There is no easy way to coast through the recovery process, but counseling can help. It can teach her to recognize the steps of her recovery so she isn’t so frightened when they happen, and it can teach you how to help her cope. Rape crisis centers usually offer free counseling to survivors at any point, no matter how long after the rape has occurred. I suggest using these counseling opportunities because the counselors will be specially trained and familiar with RTS. You can also try these steps:

- Do not tell her that she “shouldn’t think about it” or “shouldn’t feel that way.” Telling her to ignore her feelings prevents her from resolving them. Even if she seems to be lashing out at herself or you, try to remind yourself that her anger really isn’t personally directed at you regardless of what she says. If we suggest that she is coping poorly or being immature in her efforts to control her emotions, we only make her feel guilty about herself and she will become unwilling to share her thought and feelings with you later.
- Try not to get irritated when her emotions and needs put demands on you. Ironically, fathers—who often seek the role of “provider” and “caretaker” for those who depend on us—later resent the very dependency we initially encouraged. She will need a lot of care. *Do not* skip counseling appointments or abruptly drop any prescribed antidepressant medications (sudden

abstinence from such medications can plunge a person into suicidal risk, even *without* the added weight of a rape). Also, do not give up on a counselor just because your daughter has relapses or complains that her counselor “makes her mad.” The emotional walls around a rape victim’s pain are as strong as cement, and the work of getting through them in counseling can be painful and upsetting for your daughter.

- Do not become angry if her recovery is progressing slower than you would like. People recover in their own ways and at their own speeds. If we impose a schedule for her recovery we aren’t helping; we’re just showing that we don’t understand her. That can cause her to feel distant or resentful; it can also cause her to think of herself as “weak” if she is not recovering as quickly as her family thinks she should.
- Do not act out in violent ways around her, such as fighting, cursing, or driving angrily. It is a mistake to think that these are healthy releases of anger, especially around a person who has been through trauma. Similarly, turning to alcohol, the internet (becoming a “computer junkie”), or workaholicism can leave her isolated and angry.

What fathers need to know

Fathers can be powerfully affected by the rape of a daughter, and the emotional pain is especially severe. Most fathers feel protective and responsible toward their daughters, and may have particularly intense feelings of anger, hurt, and blame. It is absolutely essential that you be aware of the stresses on her. You should keep in mind:

- It is common that rapes committed against teen victims involve drug or alcohol use. In fact, some perpetrators deliberately involve these substances for several reasons: first, it makes victim-blaming easier. Rather than being helpful, family and others might assign part of the blame to her: “you put yourself in that position! If you hadn’t been doing those things...” Second, perpetrators know that teens will seldom report rapes if the victim herself has been drinking or using drugs. A rapist is aware that if he can get a 15-year-old girl to drink or use pot, he is virtually assured that she will be too scared to tell her parents (or police) about the assault. If she confides in you, focus on her recovery, not on poor judgment that’s often easy to blame.
- Rape may have been her first “sexual” experience, and this can cause her to have unrealistic and frightening beliefs about intimacy and relationships. It is important that she understand that adult intimacy will not leave her feeling dirty or spoiled, that rape does not ruin her chances of enjoying relationships, and that violence is not a part of how adults express themselves sexually. Even if your daughter replies, “duh, Dad, I *know!* Sheesh!” keep saying it anyway. Despite the appearance of being annoyed, she is listening, and it’s important for you to say. She also needs to know that rape is a crime of violence, not one of “uncontrolled passion,” and that she bears no responsibility for the violence inflicted on her.

- Daughters feel extremely uncomfortable discussing sexuality with their fathers so do not be offended if she “clams up” around you. Find a sympathetic other person (nurse, counselor, mentor, youth worker) to answer her questions. Don’t let your own awkwardness about sexual discussions with your daughter get in the way of her finding the answers she needs; it’s okay for Dads to admit, “honey, I just don’t know. Let’s call so-and-so and ask them.” Honesty will alleviate her confusion and fear. In some cases, it can help for her to use an anonymous internet message board operated by a rape trauma advocate; the key is to find a board that is *moderated* (that is, has a watchful administrator who protects the participants from harassment or inappropriate postings) so that she will be safe from “internet creeps” and still get good information.
- Don’t assume that rape is a women’s issue and leave it up to women to be your daughter’s sole supporters. If anything, it is an issue that *more so* requires your involvement in her recovery. The way you treat your wife or partner, for example, affects how your daughter views herself in relationships with men. On the other hand, if you are avoidant or embarrassed to deal with the impact of rape on your family, it communicates the idea to your daughter that you are ashamed of her, and therefore she may assume that she will be unloved and unlovable by men in general. Being silent about the issue of rape can make your daughter feel like she is guilty of something so terrible that her own dad can’t even bear to confront it. Avoiding the issue isn’t a form of sensitivity to her; it’s a form of insensitivity to her.
- The rape may compound communication problems that already exist between daughters and parents. Do not force her to disclose, but let her know you are willing to listen when she wants to talk. Healthy talks are seldom planned, and they don’t usually happen when a parent suggests them. They usually happen when daughters direct the process in private settings. Attempts to help her “forget” the rape by refusing to discuss it is like pushing a sliver deeper into the skin while pretending we can’t feel it if we can’t see it. It may also give her the impression that you are ashamed of her. Be sure to constantly remind her of how proud you are of her, and she’s not weak for being raped--she’s strong for surviving it and dealing with it!
- If your daughter was victimized by a date, she may fear that you will privately blame her for using poor judgement. Sadly, many fathers would do that, and it’s the *wrong* way to react. She may also fear that she will not be believed, that she will be accused of being dramatic, seeking attention, playing “poor me” games, or have fear that you will take matters into her own hands through revenge on the guilty person. She might conceal certain facts from you, change her account of the incident (this is very common in trauma survivors!) or behave in ways that make her hard to support. Again, it is important that you not punish her for what someone else has done. Even more important, *do not display more concern for what other people might think, than for your own daughter’s feelings*. Worrying about family reputation, or stammering about “how am I going to explain this? What will so-and-so say? As if I don’t have enough to deal with! Oh, *this* is just what our family needs right now!” can make her feel humiliated or even disrespected. Knowing that she does not have to fear your reactions will be a positive step in helping her recovery.

- It is common after a trauma for the survivor's memories to suppress, change, and recall details out of sequence. Please do not come to the conclusion that your daughter is lying if her accounts of the assault seem to vary over time—this is a normal and well-documented fact of how the mind works after trauma. Too many families become suspicious or hostile to their daughters if they perceive that her memory of the event seems to change somewhat over time.
- If she was assaulted by an acquaintance or date, assure her that she is absolutely not responsible for causing him to “lose control.” She may be especially worried if the attacker is someone she faces routinely, like a school peer. She also needs to know that her attacker is not representative of all males, and this is not “guy behavior” or “a guy problem.” Although she might rant about how “men are pigs!” remember to assure her that this behavior is not manly or masculine. Your own reactions can teach her a lot about how a *real man* acts: openness, trust, calm strength, willingness to listen, patience.
- Encourage your daughter to resume her normal lifestyle. Limiting her independence by keeping her in the house, grounding her for not being careful, or restraining her normal decisions can seem like punishment, and will impair her recovering strength. It is also important that her rights and freedoms are still balanced with her reasonable responsibilities like household chores, homework, grades, curfew, etc. These establish a routine again, and remind her that she is not “cut off” from her family system, but is still a part of the life around her. It's important that she continue her role in normal family functioning, and too many families let their daughters “drop out” of family responsibilities by telling themselves, “she's been through so much, so I should really let her do what she wants.”
- Do not isolate yourself from friends who are also aware of the rape. Neither she nor you have any reason to feel ashamed. Your true friends will be supportive and understanding, and it's okay for your daughter to see you stand up to ignorant comments or treatment by those who just “don't get it.”
- If the victim is a young child, she may express herself behaviorally rather than verbally. Be alert for changes such as loss of appetite, withdrawal, changes in sleeping patterns, nightmares, or fear of being alone. Be particularly watchful for rapid changes in weight, or the appearance of unexplained cuts and scratches on her skin. These are often symptoms of a young woman experiencing more pain than she feels she can cope with.
- If the crime is reported to authorities and the victim is a child, parental permission may be required before medical care or legal assistance can be provided. Be there to help.
- The evidence exam may also be a first-time experience and can be extremely upsetting to her unless parents and medical staff are sensitive. Insist that no part of the process take place without an advocate from a rape crisis center. An “advocate” is a trained woman whose job is to provide side-by-side support for both the survivor and her family during the medical process, unless a doctor requests that the advocate step out of the exam (a doctor has the final authority in the room). She will also provide you with brochures and information about counseling for her, or even for you.

Getting Help

We have learned that families are always significant in a woman's recovery from rape. But because this is a heavy demand on us, we too often need support. I've even conducted therapy sessions in which a mother, responding to her own daughter's honest disclosure, also revealed that they, too, had been sexually assaulted as young women—and had never told anyone until that moment either.

In Oklahoma, there are number of possible resources. The Oklahoma Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (OCADVSA.org) can direct you to the rape crisis agency in your area. These agencies offer rape survivor counseling and prevention education programs for the community at no charge. Free counseling is a rare treasure anyway, let alone free counseling from highly-skilled experts in this difficult field. Crisis agencies routinely receive calls from women wanting therapy for Rape Trauma Syndrome, even years after the events actually happened.

Many parents are reluctant to seek help because we might believe it is a sign of weakness. While it is difficult for some to be open with our emotions, we need to understand that getting help is not a symptom of weakness or an admission that we just “couldn't take it.” Rather, it is a realization that there are those with training in positions to offer useful advice, and referring to these helpers is no “weaker” on our part than choosing the needed tool from a toolbox during a home repair project. And if our daughters are depending on us to help them, then we owe it to them to put aside our own hesitation and become educated and supported ourselves.

It is also possible for males to help in other ways:

- Consider being a part-time volunteer with a crisis agency. Volunteers are rare and desperately needed. Males in particular are sought for--who better to help guide the next generation of young males than a male volunteering to meet with them and explain some of these things? So dads, don't assume that rape crisis centers are “women only” agencies.
- Raise public consciousness about rape by passing out literature, taping “hotline tear-off sheets” in bathrooms (or Laundromats, libraries, etc. Rape crisis centers will provide the handouts), and attending community forums.
- Work to bring about legal and other reforms. Write to Oklahoma representatives and District Attorneys, and don't be afraid to ask tough questions about why Oklahoma brags about its “family values” as it continues to annually cut funds for teen mental health, sexual assault crisis programs, rape prevention education, and other programs that serve victims of trauma. Support the United Way, which is the primary foundation making grants to sponsor Oklahoma rape and domestic violence crisis programs.

- Invite a speaker to your church. Most rape crisis agencies offer a speaker's bureau, and are able to present this topic in a way that combines dignified dialogue with helpful insight. Churches and synagogues are entirely appropriate settings for these discussions. Remember not to only include "the women's' group" in these forums, but youth and men also.

You play a major role in helping a loved on recover from rape. There are no miracle cures and it is not likely that you'll know everything it takes to "make it all right" again. But by being patient, supportive, and non-judgmental you will be communicating the most important message: your unconditional love. Trust that she is strong enough to do the rest on her own.

Now go forth and make a difference.