



Intimate Partner Sexual Abuse

Introduction

Adults and children are most at risk of sexual abuse by someone they know, either intimately or casually, not by a stranger in a dark alley. Women in particular are at greatest risk of both sexual and physical assault by their intimate partners (boyfriends or husbands). The law of New York State recognizes the rape of a person by his/her spouse as a crime, but many people still think that a husband has a “right” to sexual relations with his wife, so they don’t report sexual abuse if it happens as part of marriage. Intimate partner violence of all kinds is under-reported, and sexual abuse in particular - one study estimates that only 16% of all sexual assaults are reported. The harm of violence from an acquaintance or intimate partner is exacerbated if sexual abuse has also occurred;; victims who have experienced both forms of abuse report higher rates of post traumatic stress disorder, major depression, and substance abuse. Reports suggest that women who do report sexual assault are less likely to be re-victimized, so it is particularly important that anyone providing supportive services to domestic violence victims carefully and respectfully screen for sexual abuse in order to provide comprehensive support.

The Combined Trauma of Domestic Violence and Sexual Abuse

The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that one of every six women has been raped at some time, and in a single year, more than 300,000 women and almost 93,000 men are estimated to have been raped.¹ Female teens were most likely to be sexually assaulted by intimate partners and acquaintances, while adult women were at greatest risk from their intimate partners. In comparison, male victims of all ages were most at risk from acquaintances.² Sexual assault is often part of a broader pattern of intimate partner violence. A recent national study found that 2/3 of women who had been physically assaulted by their intimate partner had also been sexually assaulted by that partner.³ Women who have suffered sexual abuse in addition to physical partner violence are at greater risk for unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, substance abuse, and suicide,⁴ As with domestic violence, sexual abuse affects the entire household – the children of sexually abused mothers also have an increased risk of depression.

¹ Extent, Nature, and Consequences of Rape Victimization: Findings from the National Violence against Women Survey, Patricia Tjaden and Nancy Thoennes, January 2006, NIJ.

² For all groups, rapes by strangers were a small percentage of overall sexual assaults (only 16.7 % of female victims and 22.8 % of male victims were raped by a stranger). Ibid.

³ *Sexual Assault Among Intimates: Frequency, Consequence, and Treatments*, NIJ 2005 (NCJ 211678)

⁴ Immigrant and refugee were found to have a particularly heightened risk of suffering from post traumatic stress disorder and to have fewer social supports.

Discussing Sexual Abuse with Domestic Violence Victims

Sexual abuse is often the last type of abuse a victim may disclose to an advocate, even though it may have been the most traumatic. If your client was sexually assaulted, you should think about her physical health as well as her emotional health. It's the victim's decision whether or not to undergo a medical exam, but you can discuss how important a medical exam could be for her health and well-being. The victim can choose to go to a Sexual Assault Examiner (SAE) Program, a hospital emergency department or to his/her own provider. In any case, an exam should be completed as soon after the assault as possible – if it is more than 96 hours after the assault, evidence collection and pregnancy prevention opportunities will be limited. To find a rape crisis program in your community call 1-800-522-5006 (Growing Up Healthy hotline - all calls are free and confidential).

Concrete Steps for Addressing Sexual Abuse with Clients

Steps you can take to help domestic violence clients who are also victims of sexual abuse:

- Ensure that all staff receive training on the health and safety consequences of intimate partner sexual assault and on assessing all clients for sexual assault;
- Consider routinely informing your clients about how common sexual assault is among domestic violence victims, to let them know that they are not alone and that you will be supportive, should they disclose;
- Be informed about the process of a sexual assault medical examination so that you can explain to your client what to expect; and
- Have information on local sexual assault examiner programs and rape crisis counseling ready and available for your clients.

Additional Resources

- NYS Domestic and Sexual Violence Hotline 1-800-942-6906; TTY: 1-800-818-0656
- NYS Spanish-Language Hotline 1-800-942-6908; TTY: 1-800-780-7660
- NYS Department of Health <http://www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/safe/>
- NYS Coalition Against Sexual Assault www.nyscasa.org
- The National Alliance to End Sexual Violence www.naesv.org
- National Sexual Assault Resource Center www.nsvrc.org