



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT DISCLOSURE AND REPORTING

To whom, what, and why do victims disclose?

- College women rarely report rape to the police. Rates of reporting range from near 0% for sexual coercion and date rape¹ to about 13% for forced sexual assault.²
 - Minority women are less likely to report than White women.^{3,4}
- Approximately 59% of victims who disclose, talk to their family and/or friends,⁵ and wait to disclose their experience.⁶
- When experiences don't match common beliefs about what rape is, students are unlikely to report,^{7,8} although negative physical and mental health consequences of the experience still occur.⁹
 - Students are especially unlikely to label their unwanted sexual experience as rape when they were attacked by people they know and/or in alcohol-related situations.^{10,11,12}
 - Students will not report their experiences if they do not label what happened as rape or an other form of sexual assault.
- Most rape survivors who disclose a sexual assault do *not* do so for the purposes of seeking immediate intervention and assistance from the legal, medical, or mental health systems.¹³
- The “choice” to disclose, if in fact it is a choice, is typically made in hopes of receiving emotional support.^{14,15}

What happens when victims disclose?

- Goals of the criminal justice and medical systems, as well as university disciplinary systems, are different from what survivors need, and thus often result in negative effects for survivors.¹⁶
- Formal sources like criminal justice/legal, medical, and clergy tend to be rated most negatively by survivors.¹⁷
- Regaining control and decreasing trauma symptoms is essential to survivors' health and well-being,¹⁸ as well as mobilizing adaptive coping.^{19,20}
- Victims need to be believed, validated, and supported in order to enhance disclosure, adaptive coping, and control over their recovery.²¹

Harms associated with reporting

- Victims fear that reporting rape will be humiliating, worry that it may result in their being ostracized, and retaliated against.^{22,23}
- Victims fear that the investigation would be confusing, invasive, re-traumatizing, and futile.²⁴
- Victims who have negative disclosure and help-seeking experiences (i.e., those who experience secondary victimization behaviors) report that these encounters leave them feeling depressed, anxious,

blamed, violated, and reluctant to seek further help, ^{25,26} as well as engage in increased social withdrawal, increased self-blame, and decreased sexual assertiveness.²⁷

- 90% of victims who have post-assault contact with formal systems (e.g., police, school officials, etc.) experience at least one highly distressing secondary victimization behavior.^{28,29}
- When assaults are reported to authorities against victims' wishes, it is very psychologically distressing and actually decreases their likelihood of continued engagement with the legal system.^{30,31,32}
 - Being forced to report and engage with formal legal proceedings results in young women being deeply upset and ultimately disengaged because of lack of choice.³³
- Poor listening skills have negative outcomes for the discloser.³⁴
- Controlling and infantilizing reactions undermine victims' perceptions of control over their own recovery and are related to increased PTSD symptoms.^{35, 36}
- An adversarial process results in victim traumatization and disappointment, which are related to the system's non-responsiveness to victim's justice needs, invalidation, and disempowerment
- Justice for victims is lessened in the criminal justice system due to a number of prejudicial extra-legal factors (such as beliefs about sexual assault and stereotypes about "legitimate" victims) in police decision making.³⁷
 - Adversarial responses traumatize victims and result in a low number of cases where action is taken.
- Higher education institutional responses have the potential to re- traumatize victims³⁸
 - Institutional betrayal results from an environment where likelihood of victimization is high, ability to report is difficult, and reactions are negative.
 - Increased legalization of the institutional response to reports in light of federal guidance, shifting the priority to investigations and the disciplinary process may also contribute to increased likelihood of negative institutional responses.
 - Experiences of institutional betrayal related to sexual assault victimization are associated with increased levels of anxiety, trauma-specific sexual symptoms, dissociation, and problematic sexual functioning.³⁹

Solutions: Comprehensive approaches to sexual assault involving collaboration across many different systems

- SANE/SART models help survivors in dealing with effects of rape, as well as delivering prevention education and programs, advocacy/treatment, and justice.⁴⁰
- Alternatives to the traditional retributive justice model that doesn't serve victims' needs and often re-victimizes them⁴¹
- Greater emphasis on prevention and sexual education to balance current focus on adjudication and discipline
- Civil remedies such as restorative justice⁴²
- Strengthening Title IX protections
- Integrating procedural and restorative justice elements into student conduct processes

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