

Countering Self-Blame

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SELF BLAME

If you are a survivor of any kind of sexual abuse then the chances are you have at some point struggled with the issue of self blame. Often survivors will say that while they would never blame another survivor for what had happened to them, they still feel that they are to blame for being abused. Reading or hearing about the experiences of other survivors it is easy to see that they were in no way to blame for the abuse that happened to them. Yet somehow when we look at our own situations we believe that it is "different."

Why Self Blame?

There are many reasons that we might have for blaming ourselves. These include:

RAPE MYTHS

Myths about rape are rife in society. The following quote from *Recovering from Rape* explains some of the reasons for this:

Myths about rape have survived in our culture so tenaciously for so long because they have a number of social functions. Rape myths allow people to feel safe by letting them believe that rape rarely happens, and when it does, it is because the woman secretly wanted to be raped. The myths enable us to maintain our belief that we live in a just world. They allow us to believe that we can prevent future rapes. They keep women unequal to men, living under their control and need of their protection from harm, and they maintain the Adam-and-Eve tradition of our culture, in which man is believed to be the innocent victim of the evil temptress - women.

(Ledray, L. *Recovering from Rape*, London, Henry Holt & Company, 1994, p.13).

There are many myths about rape that may cause a survivor to blame themselves for what happened, the one of the most common being that rape is always committed by a stranger. Stranger rape is in fact the least common type of rape committed with the most common being rape by a partner or ex-partner. Take a look at your reasons for self-blame – they may well be connected to the rape myths that you have been taught over the years.

SECONDARY WOUNDING

If you reached out for support and were told by those around you that what happened was your fault it is very hard not to internalise these messages. Aphrodite Matsakins in her book 'I can't get over it – a handbook for trauma survivors' (1996) calls this secondary wounding and it serves only reinforce the rape myths that blame survivors for rape.

LIMITATIONS OF THE LAW

The laws that define rape vary greatly from country to country and are generally very limited in their outlook. For example many places still do not even recognise rape in marriage as a crime. It is extremely difficult to name your experience of rape when the law is not on your side. Just because the law is limited where you live does not make you responsible for what happened to you. The law is at fault here not you.

ADMITTING WE HAD NO POWER

This is a scary thing to do and it may feel easier to take responsibility for what happened than to admit that in that moment we had no power at the time to stop it.

BELIEVING THAT WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR STOPPING RAPE

This is a huge myth but one that is widely held by society. The majority of the time the emphasis on rape prevention is on women to behave differently - to dress differently, drink differently etc.

COUNTERING SELF-BLAME

CHECK THE DEFINITIONS OF RAPE AND CONSENT

If you did not consent to what happened verbally, clearly and without coercion then this is rape or sexual assault. Remember that:

Consent must be freely given without coercion or deception.

Consent cannot be given when a person is underage, drunk, drugged or asleep. A person must have the freedom to make a choice

Consent cannot be assumed - silence is not consent - no answer does not mean yes. Consent means making an active decision to say yes, an assumption of consent is not enough.

Submission or compliance is not consent - giving into verbal/physical pressure or coercion is not the same as consenting freely to a sexual act.

A person is entitled to withdraw their consent at any stage of a sexual act. If someone wants to stop and the other person does not stop it is rape.

Consenting to one type of sexual intimacy does not mean consent to any type of sexual intimacy. Just because a person has agreed to something does not mean they have agreed to everything.

Consent is a verbal process - if someone is not sure if someone is consenting or not they should ask. If a person can not get an answer they should stop.

Giving consent is active not passive, it means freely choosing to say yes.

DO NOT BE LIMITED BY THE LAW

The law has a long way to go before it is reflective of people's experiences. For example rape in marriage only became a crime in the UK just over ten years ago. This doesn't mean that before that time rape in marriage did not exist. Just because the law where you live doesn't recognise what happened to doesn't mean that it didn't happen or that it wasn't

rape/assault/abuse.

TALK TO OTHER SURVIVORS

Talk to other survivors either in a real life support group or at an on-line message board such as Pandora's Aquarium. Discussing what happened to you with others will allow you to see similarities in your experiences and feelings. Knowing that you are not alone can also be very validating.

CALL A CRISIS LINE

Crisis line counsellors are trained to tackle a variety of different situations. They will be able to help you talk about your doubts and feelings of guilt and move towards naming what happened to you.

REMEMBER THAT EVERYTHING IS EASY IN RETROSPECT

It is easy to look back and see all the things that you could have or should have done differently. However you only have all the information now – you did not have it then. At that time you did not know what was ahead and were therefore not in a position to make those decisions. You responded the best you could at the time with the knowledge that you had in that moment.

IMAGINE IT HAPPENED TO SOMEONE ELSE

If your sister, friend or daughter came to you and told you your story how would you respond to them? Would you blame them for what happened? No. You deserve the same compassion and understanding as everyone else.

Naming what happened to you and moving away from self-blame is a difficult process but you can get there in time. You are not responsible for the actions of another person – the person who chose to hurt you is the only one responsible. Remember, if you are struggling with doubts - you can't make feelings up and you do not feel the way you do for no reason. Work through the list above and be kind to yourself. Someone hurt you and you deserve to heal.

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