

Communication Efforts of Trained Personnel Towards Individuals  
that Experience Sexual Assault

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## **Abstract**

In recent years' conversations surrounding sexual assault have been pushed through society and mainstream media in order to expose and shed light on the growing issue. Due to an increase in spoken disclosure of sexual assaults, trained professionals in response-related fields must find adequate ways in which they communicate with survivors. It is known that these "people of power" have different specific ways in which they are taught to interact in sexual assault disclosure cases; however not all methods are survivor friendly and lack putting the survivor's needs first. Lack of understanding often pushes survivors from sharing their stories or seeking help. My research explores the direct needs of survivors and their hesitations in seeking professional help. I conducted a public survey that invited participants to share their experiences surrounding sexual assault, along with many interviews that were analyzed from both parties' (survivor and professionals) perspectives. Healing and coping look different for different people along with their hesitations. More often than not, survivors do not pursue greater help because they are questioned, dismissed, invalidated, and unheard. The change in communication with survivors would benefit from shifting its approach to a more empathetic and listening culture, giving survivors their power, strength, control, and voice.

## **Research Question and Hypothesis**

Research question: How can receivers of sexual assault disclosures be better equipped to provide beneficial responses to survivors?

Hypothesis: Since significant numbers of sexual assault survivors report feeling uncomfortable disclosing their stories, it is clear that there are more and less beneficial ways to proceed with responder interactions. This study aims to identify the characteristics of beneficial language based primarily on reports of survivors in surveys and interviews.

## **Introduction:**

I am a sexual assault survivor. For over five years I have suffered watching the media and society chip away and try to disprove every angle of a sexual assault survivor. I have fear what people might think of me or say to me if I told them what had happened to me. Years of my own fear, guilt, and suffering have led to this need for understanding. Not only did I want to look into stories similar to mine but I wanted to find what survivors like me needed for their healing process. I was too scared to tell my story for years and I had so many reasons why I was fearful but I also could not ever understand why I felt shame and guilt when trying to tell my story. Initially, that is where my research idea was sparked however after committing to wanting to explore and investigate this topic I was asked to conduct an interview with the mother of a local sexual assault survivor to expose the issue further, continue the conversation, and announce a protest through my QUTV platform. Grateful for the opportunity, I dove even further into my intended research topic.

I knew my story and I knew my friend's stories but I needed to know and explore other stories. That is when I decided it would be most beneficial for me to create and send out a survey where participants had to opportunity to use their voices and tell their stories anonymously. When I sent the surveys out I got an overwhelming amount of positive responses and feedback. Survivors were reaching out and telling me how thankful they were to finally get to tell their story or do their part in changing the narrative or some even let me know how therapeutic and healing taking the survey was for them. Despite the mentally exhausting and emotionally draining side effects of truly deep diving into this topic the survivor completely made every part of the process worth it. Then there was a woman whose story absolutely stuck with me.

“I was 25 years old when I was raped by a family friend.

He was drunk and called me to pick him up. It was common for me to be called to drive friends home when they had been drinking. However, he was so drunk he didn't even know he went out that night. Not long after I found out I was pregnant with his baby. I was not in the position to provide or take care of another child as I already had a four-year-old at home whose father was nowhere to be found and wanted nothing to do with us. I also couldn't imagine having to look at a child that was a product of rape and was half of my rapist for the rest of my life. I could never carry a child full term and then birth them just to give them away so I decided I had to get an abortion. It was the only choice I could make.

I was so depressed. So sad. So scared. I had the abortion.

My rapist reached out to me and said that if I did end up having an abortion he would never speak or associate with me ever again. But it was too late. It didn't matter, I had already killed the strings he unwillingly attached to me.

I was in bed constantly, practically 24 hours a day. Day and night, it didn't matter that's where I stayed. The only thing I got out of bed for was to feed my son or take him to school. I was stuck.

It wasn't until sometime later that my mother came to me and forced me to find help to get through the trauma.

No matter how much help I get I am still permanently scarred from the acts. What happened to me can never be reversed. What he did to me he can't take back.

Still to this day I grieve the loss of the child whose heartbeat I heard and the activity I saw on the ultrasound to the silence and the empty image after watching it sucked out of me.

I often wonder if it was a boy or a girl. What would our lives be like now if I had kept it?

It's a true secret of mine that I have maybe told three people. I'm not sure if any of this will help you, Mattie but it's the 1st time I have ever put it all into words so I guess thank you for that as it might help me "heal" in some way. I apologize for it being so long and for telling you so much. I hope God can forgive me and still loves me. I have never been so helpless, lost, and scared in my entire life. I'm just so sorry."

From the moment I read this woman's survey response, I knew that I had chosen the right topic. I want to make a difference and I want to make a change any way I can and it is my time to do my part in my story and help others through theirs. Society is in need of improvement and education when it comes to traumatic situations because that is where it starts. Now is that time. I am standing for the women who cannot yet stand for themselves. I am choosing to create another ripple in society where I know I can.

## Internal Review Board Form

### Quincy University Form for Proposed Research Project

(for all Schools and Divisions except Nursing)

**1. If your project involves research of any of the following types, it is exempt from review by the IRB, with the exceptions noted in boldface. Please note that you must complete this form even if your research falls within the exempt category guidelines.**

(a) Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as (i) research on regular and special education instructional strategies, or (ii) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

(b) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior, **unless information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; or (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.**

(c) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior that is not exempt under paragraph (b) of this section, if: (i) the human subjects are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office; or (ii) federal statute(s) require(s) without exception that the confidentiality of the personally identifiable information will be maintained throughout the research and thereafter.

(d) Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

(e) Research and demonstration projects which are conducted by or subject to the approval of department or agency heads, and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine: (i) Public benefit or service programs; (ii) procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs; (iii) possible changes in or alternatives to those programs or procedures; or (iv) possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or services under those programs.

(f) Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives are consumed, or (ii) if a food is consumed that contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for use found to be safe, or agricultural chemical or environmental



contaminant at or below the level found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

**2. If your project involves any of the following, it is subject to expedited review:**

- a) collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
- b) research on individual or group characteristics or behavior or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies **in which information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; or in which any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.**

To begin the expedited review process, submit a brief description of your project, along with your signature on this form to the IRB chair. The brief description of your project should include the type of participants, the personnel administering the project, the information to be gathered and the means of collecting data, the location of the project, and its duration. Also, include a statement about how you will preserve the anonymity of participants and their responses as well as the process by which you will obtain informed consent. Begin your research after receiving approval from the IRB.

**3. If your type of project is not listed in #1 and #2, does it involve any of the following human subjects or categories?**

minors (17 years or younger)

persons with cognitive or developmental disabilities

pregnant women and fetuses

prisoners

any individual not capable of giving informed consent

any suggestion of coerced participation

deception which could be harmful to participants

federal funding

possibility of publication

If you answered **no** to all of the above questions, submit a brief description of your project (see guidelines in #2 above), along with your signature on this form to the IRB to begin the expedited review process. Begin your research after receiving approval from the IRB. **For research involving animals, see policies in the “Animal Treatment Guidelines” section.**

If you answered **yes** to any of the above questions, submit this form to the IRB along with an additional explanation of why these human subjects or categories are included, what benefit you expect that your project will bring to the research of the scientific community, and how you can answer any ethical concerns that might be raised about it. Your project will undergo a full review by the IRB, and you must await its approval before beginning your research.

*The IRB, at its discretion, retains the right to require continuing review when warranted by the nature of the research and/or inclusion of vulnerable subject populations.*

Student signature

Date submitted

Mattison Norris

4/27/2022

IRB chairperson signature (granting approval)

Date approved

**Description of Project:**

My research explores the direct needs of survivors and their hesitations in seeking professional help because of the increase in spoken disclosure of sexual assaults. Despite society's consistency to rebrand the meaning behind victim blaming, it is crucial that trained professionals in response-related fields find adequate ways in which they communicate with survivors.

**Type of Participants:**

All genders and all ages

**Personnel Administering the Project:**

Quincy University Communication Department

**Information to be Gathered:**

Elements of communication that are utilized to effectively create a safe and welcoming environment for sexual assault survivors to seek greater help in expressing their stories. Survivor recommendations for improving approaches to responding to survivors' disclosure of trauma.

**The Means of Collecting Data:**

Collect data through surveys, observations, and interviews

**Location of the Project:**

Quincy University campus

**Duration:**

Approximately four months (1 Semester)

**Consent of information in the survey:**

I will preserve the anonymity of participants and their responses as well as the process by which I will obtain informed consent by keeping all documents and gathered data confidential and only using it for the purpose of this research project along with the presentation of the Academic Symposium. For the Academic Symposium, I have also produced and directed a documentary that will consist of all consented individuals or anonymous stories. When participating in my survey the disclosure statement does include that if they choose to fill it out they are consenting to me using their story directly. The option of putting their name and their face to their story is completely dependent on the depth of information provided. If I intend to collate personal details and reuse them, I must inform the respondents and provide the option to opt-out. I will follow the data protection principles including that information is used fairly and lawfully, kept accurate, safe and secure, kept for no longer than absolutely necessary, etc.

## Lit Review

### Defining Terms:

Through conversation and research, it is very clear that there is a large societal lack of definitional understanding of multiple negative sexual terms. Society's ignorance of this deafening issue encourages and fuels the fires of the negative culture surrounding sexual assault incidences, helping cultivate an environment of victim-blaming, questioning, and judging. Oftentimes individuals that are forced to experience these traumatic experiences often find it extremely difficult to resume their normal day-to-day life. It is also seen that the majority of the time further mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, eating disorders, and even suicidal ideations are seen as a result of the assault. To decrease the prevalence of sexual assault, it is necessary to understand how sexual assault itself is socially defined, composed, and implicated. These images and ideas of what sexual assault is or is not may lead to the continued connotation of the term and essence surrounding sexual assault (Baldwin-White & Bazemore, 2020).

Sexual Assault, of any classification, is a life-altering event and a form of psychological distress for many individuals that have experienced it firsthand. According to, The United States Department of Justice, sexual assault consists of any non-consensual sexual act including when the victim lacks the ability to consent (Sexual Assault, 2020). RAINN, the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization, expands that term's definition by mentioning specific examples such as fondling (unwanted sexual touching), forced to perform unwanted sexual acts, along with attempted penetration, and rape. This expansion is noted in order to make individuals

aware of the fact that sexual assault does not purely mean rape. Rape is a form of sexual assault however not all sexual assault is rape (RAINN, 2022).

Sexual harassment and sexual assault both fall under the umbrella term of sexual assault. Sexual abuse sees a more aggressive approach than just sexual assault. Sexual abuse is sexual assault with added force and threats. This form of assault is seen more often in relationships and between individuals that know each other (American Psychological Association & Encyclopedia of Psychology, 2022). Similar to other forms of sexual assault, sexual harassment consists of unwanted sexual advances and requests for sexual advances; verbal and physical sexual attention. Sexual harassment, at large, involves the use of explicit or implicit sexual overtones. Not always directed specifically at a single individual, sexual harassment also encompasses inappropriate remarks toward gender groups (RAINN, 2022).

The remaining terms in need of a definition are survivor and victim. Socially seen as interchangeable, survivor and victim are words used to describe the individual on whom the advanced assault has been inflicted. The expression, victim, is typically associated with a negative aura surrounding an event that trauma was inflicted on a person within a crime. Many individuals that have been sexually assaulted do not connect to the word victim, rather they utilize the term survivor. Survivor, a preferred term by many individuals that have experienced sexual assault, is used to bring a positive expression to a negative circumstance. The title of survivor pushes ideals of strength, power, and control for individuals who were stripped of that. Through this article, the term “survivor” will be implemented in most cases rather than “victim” to connote courage and perseverance by those who have a history of sexual assault (Hennrick & Byrd, 2019).

## **Recognition of the Problem:**

This research and survivor study is a deep dive into the world of sexual assault communication: the exploration and examination of both professional and survivor perspectives. Large portions of the research conducted are surrounding the practices of professionals and their mandatory (or non-mandatory) education on how to interact with sexual assault disclosures. This includes verbal and nonverbal reactions, the kinds of questions asked, and the control of the conversation. It is important to recognize the different approaches and required information each profession demands. “The initial communication outreach could truly make or break the survivors' process. Invalidation kills a survivor's voice. Victim blaming buries their story,” sexual assault survivor and Violence Prevention Specialist, JJ Magliocco said. There are extreme conflicting goals for opposite trained communicators, along with sexual assault first responders or in other words friends and family.

A police officer is going to pursue more hard evidence-based information and encourage invasive procedures such as rape kits. Police officers oftentimes, unintentionally re-traumatize and make the circumstance much worse for the recently assaulted individual both by invasive procedures and through intense questioning that forces them to relive their experience. Collecting evidence quickly turns into, “what were you wearing”, “have you been drinking”, “where were you at”, and “how late was it”. While police are just doing the job they were taught to do, society has created a negative culture around sexual assault, and these same questions openly indicate victim blaming, questioning the truth of a victim's experience, and disbelief in their stories. While this is the taught practice for police officers, it does, historically speaking, steer victims away from seeking police assistance.



The other side of the spectrum within the interaction with a survivor is professionals like counselors. Counselors are trained with the intent to listen and let the affected individual control their truth (Hennrick & Byrd, 2019). In instances where the survivor seeks greater help in healing, it is the counselor's job to make sure that their needs are met, they are now in a safe environment, and they are comforted. However, in prior generations, an extreme stigma was placed on the idea of seeking guidance and professional help. Society's unrealistic expectations and its ideals on taboo conversations surrounding sexual assault. Misconceptions and stereotypes created by society have completely built a culture of self-doubt, hidden voices, and broken survivors unwilling to examine their trauma because it's invalidated by society. The main culprit of this culture was not counselors however they did play an extremely large role in the denial of survivor stories. Statistically speaking the majority of sexual assault victims are women and the perpetrators are men. Alongside the predator and prey, counselors of past generations were generally middle to older-aged men. Minimal understanding and comfort were provided for the assaulted in these instances.

According to Sarah E. Ullman in her book *Talking About Sexual Assault: Society's Response to Survivors*, "rape" is a term with a meaning that is constantly changing in society. In her ecological examinations of conversations surrounding rape and sexual assault within society, Ullman finds that society heavily relies on "real rape" stereotypes and rape myths rather than listening to the disclosure. The research showed that the culture surrounding sexual assault will also freely judge and deem sexual assault disclosures as "legitimate or not". Ullman consequently explores these discrepancies within society either finding a validated survivor on the other side or a blamed, stigmatized, defeated victim who has been persuaded to not speak out about their experience because they are not "legit" enough.

In 2012, Megan R. Greenson and Rebecca Campbell conducted a study to exploit the poor relationships legal, medical, and mental health/advocacy systems hold with sexual assault survivors. The idea that professionals and systems created negative habits of interaction rather than beneficial ones alarmed many people including survivors. When relationships between systems and trained professionals are poor, opportunities to improve interactions and communication are missed. With no trust and minimal attention to survivors' needs, chances of improvement continue to be lost at the expense of the survivor. Greenson and Campbell's article, *Sexual Assault Response Teams (SARTs): An Empirical Review of Their Effectiveness and Challenges to Successful Implementation*, responds to the negative inadequate communication tactics throughout trained professionals by creating sexual assault response teams (SARTs). In an attempt to better disclosure interactions, sexual assault response teams were formed. "SARTs are community-level interventions that seek to build positive relationships and increase collaboration among sexual assault responders. SARTs hope to improve both the community response to sexual assault victims and the processing of sexual assault cases through the criminal justice system" (Greenson & Campbell, 2012). This new approach encouraged healthy interactions and freedom for survivors to tell their stories their way.

## **Research Methods**

### **Survey:**

There are many positives to why surveys are an effective form of research. Surveys can be created and conducted in a small period of time allowing researchers to collect large amounts of data quickly. When conducting surveys, it also allows participants to freely engage in all or

selected areas. Keeping an open survey encourages engagement and allows participants to feel in control and understood because they are able to provide where they please, emphasizing to the survey operator their main focuses. The survey that I chose to conduct focused on the survivors' feelings and their want to be heard. From the survey, I would be able to grasp the overall assessment of survivors' fears in seeking greater help and their apprehensions overall in telling someone their story.

For the purpose of this paper, acknowledging my approach to the distributed survey is a crucial point in my research considering I did not push my survey onto any individual; all participants answered for themselves on their own time. For the rawest responses, I decided to keep every part of my survey process open and optional. Keeping a completely voluntary survey provided my research with the most productive outreach. The survey was not sent to specific individuals, rather it was posted on my Facebook with the intent of not being biased in who I had participate in it. The survey was created with the purpose of allowing contributors to take control of their responses and their depth of content. The survey generated a total of 65 responses; 61 females and 4 males. Furthermore, the survey data shows that the age range was wide, consisting of participants ages 16 all the way to 70.

Prior to participating in the survey, every individual witnessed a disclaimer note and a trigger warning. In most cases, a disclaimer stating that every part of the survey is optional is sufficient, however, due to the extreme sensitivity within my survey, I felt it necessary to also label it as triggering to warn survivors of the possible offsetting topics brought up throughout the duration of the survey. The trigger warning also provided a clear picture of the following questions and the survey's intended research encouraging willing survivors to speak up.

The survey was one of the most, if not the most, significant pieces of my research. The survey allowed individuals to anonymously speak their truth without repercussions. Due to this approach, I was able to collect open and honest responses from participants that would have never participated if they had to put a name to their trauma. The survey starts out with several “pick a or b” kinds of questions, but as participants worked their way down it was clear that it was a survey that consisted of a majority of open-ended questions. When creating the survey, I slowly began to realize that I would be doing myself a disservice by limiting answers. The “fill in the blank” questions allowed survivors to say what they wished rather than limiting them to a yes or no. A simple yes or no would have discouraged the survey participant to share their thoughts and opinions that go past yes or no.

In regards to quotes from survey participants used throughout this paper, I will not be including their names unless given permission through them voluntarily providing me with this information. Some participants chose to claim their story with their name and face attached however others chose to remain anonymous and I will be respecting that. Through the disclosure and trigger warning, I gave peace to survivors in knowing that their story and their information were safe with me and no unwanted details of their story would be told. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the identities of all 65 individuals that participated in the survey and the 25 individual interviews will remain anonymous in this specific article unless specifically noted to use their names with their quotes and information.

### **Interviews:**

An option for collecting more personal evidence is conducting interviews. The idea behind interviews is to allow participants to comfortably open up while diving into considerable

depth on a predetermined topic and several specific questions. The interviewer and interviewee work directly together unlike in questionnaires or surveys; a greater sense of commitment to the participant's answers is made known through this form of information gathering.

I conducted four similar but different versions of the interviews; in person, on camera, over email, and over the phone. While there were three different layouts to the separate forms of interviews, I still generally approached them all the same just providing a space to have dialogue and conversation. I wanted to eliminate fear and any personal struggle they would encounter (PTSD, anxiety, etc.) providing a comfortable safe space for every survivor. With an overflowing amount of survey respondents, I was fortunate enough to reach a broad spectrum of individuals near and far. Some of the interviews were limited to an over-the-phone meeting due to their distance from Quincy. Then I also performed on-camera interviews for visual content along with recorded in-person interviews that too were portrayed to be more conversational so as to not intimidate survivors. I would like to add that for all in-person interviews a crisis counselor was on standby if the survivor wished or needed.

The verbal interviews were designed to be 100% survivor-based; their stories, their feelings, their suggestions, their voice, and whatever they wanted to say. In most instances, I found myself hardly saying anything. It was made very clear through all of the interviews that these survivors had more to say than I could ever use but it was also clear that they were never really able to say what they wanted or even needed to. Just listening to what each survivor had to offer me and my research provided me with so many beneficial suggestions and ideas on how we can further our positive communication with survivors.

Prior to interviewing survivors, I investigated the ways trained professionals were already treating and communicating with sexual assault disclosures. I conducted in-person and over-the-phone interviews with individuals in fields like counseling, security, police, etc. These interviews were done to create a clear picture of what their interactions would consist of from their perspective. Knowing there would be a difference in tactics I observed and noted each individually to analyze separately. These interviews did involve more questioning and investigating than the survivor interviews did but both trained personnel and survivors were given the reins to share the exact information they wished.

After speaking with a police officer, a counselor, the head of security at Quincy University, and a violence prevention specialist it was clear that every different profession had a different way of approaching a disclosure. It was evident that while these individuals were in fact trained for interactions with sexual assault survivors, few were survivor-focused. The interview most essential for my intended research turned out to be an interview I conducted with Quanada's Violence Prevention Specialist, JJ Magliocco. This interview ended up being most survivor-friendly compared to the others as it provided more helpful information rather than harmful tactics.

**Counselor/Prevention specialists notes:**

- Our primary concern is comfort, making sure needs are met and they are safe, letting them be in control of their choices, then figuring out the best ways to help them further.
- In our model, our survivors are our models. They are the leaders always.

- Historically speaking survivors are not believed. Talking with a survivor often turns into questioning someone's motive. It starts putting blame on the victim when outsiders start asking if they were drinking, what they are wearing, or who they were with.
  
- This sort of conduct falls heavily on the police, unfortunately. They are truly just doing the job they were taught to do. Their job is to solve a crime and in this case, get a predator off of the streets before another victim turns up. But it's the questioning part that gives them the bad wrap because they have to ask the questions of; what happened, where did it take place, who was involved, can we take what you wore for DNA testing, and when was it? All of the questions directly force survivors to relive their trauma. It's hard cause no it isn't a great process but I don't know how to make it better for anyone because it's necessary in order to kick start an investigation.
  
- There is no rape gene, we do what we are taught. Sexual assault is not hereditary.
  
- Sexual assault is taking someone's power and control away. Our counseling gives them their power, their control, and their strength back.

At the conclusion of our interview discussing communication tactics used when interacting with survivors we furthered our deliberation into what takes place before the assault. Magliocco specializes in the prevention tactics of subjects such as sexual assault and public speaking; traveling to surrounding schools providing equitable education to the youth in hopes of creating the dialogue surrounding the tough conversations.

## **Secondary data research/analysis:**

The rabbit hole of research: sexual assault and sexual assault communication. For this portion of the research, I used both the Brenner Library for books and articles. The Brenner Library online also provided several different mediums in which to further explore my topic. I mainly used the tabs for JSTOR, Article Research, and Brenner Library Log. I did not stop here however, Google Scholar also provided me with many valuable literary pieces. This paper includes over 10 articles of secondary research found from the above-listed outlets. Sexual assault communication is an extremely broad topic that brought on thousands of research materials, it was my job to sift through them to find the best both old and new. Communication is an ongoing process of improvement so I was able to find recent articles.

Past research has just generally examined the issue of sexual assault and the communication broadly. No article directly questions what survivors need rather than what responders need to obtain. When it comes to my research, it is not about the responder rather I am on the hunt for what the needs are of the survivor. Humanity has become very selfish and is constantly searching for their own benefits within other's information. We as a race have also become too accustomed to being problem solvers. In many cases, problem-solving is highly important and even encouraged and praised and I believe that is one of the reasons we are constantly trying to problem solve. In cases such as sexual assault, however, it is not another person's job to fix the survivor.

## **Results:**

When reviewing my results, a single thought was consistent and that was the need for finding and providing a 'First Responders Tool Kit', containing characteristics of beneficial



responses to sexual assault survivors. The main desire for my research is to help society and trained personnel to interact better with sexual assault disclosure so my survey and interviews were results and understanding focused. My survey was conducted on Google Forms which charted the data and created the graphs on its own after every new completed survey. The first data section collected was simple and showed me the age and gender of each individual participant. The survey was heavily female-dominated with a total of 61 females and four males. While the majority of participants were female it was a completely voluntary survey and all participants came across the survey through a single post rather than being sent the link. The ages varied drastically with the youngest individual being charted at 16 and the oldest individuals being plotted at 70. Almost every age between 19 and 70 was represented.

Collecting the general information was essential to examining the deeper content. Next in the survey came simple questions about sexual assault such as “Have you ever been sexually assaulted?” In this specific question, three answer options were provided; “yes”, “no”, and “I have not but I personally know someone who has been”. “I have not but I personally know someone who has been” just means that that individual person has not personally been sexually assaulted however they are extremely close and know someone personally who has been affected by the crime. As pictured below the results of this question swayed toward the “yes” category more so than the “no”. Data revealed that a great number of individuals had experienced sexual assault. An even greater number of sexually assaulted individuals is formed when combining the “yes” to the “I have not but I personally know someone who has been”. Two men responded “yes”, two men responded “I have not but I personally know someone who has been”, 12 women had said “no”, eight women said “I have not but I personally know someone who has been”, and 46 women said “yes” they had been sexually assaulted in their life.

Following the cold cut “yes” or “no” survey questions were primarily open-ended responses. Finding the source of hesitation in individuals seeking greater help was the largest obstacle for my research. The majority of surveyed individuals indicated they only talked to friends and maybe eventually family members, over 25 individuals stated they would never tell a soul. In anticipation that this would be the result, the connected question was “If you did not tell anyone please explain why”. This is where the meat of the research began to come together.

**Survivor responses as to why they will never tell their story:**

- “So many times women are not believed or it isn’t a big deal. I think this is so deeply rooted in our society and culture that as young women we don’t know what to do, what to say or how to say it. Who do you tell? Who will believe you and how much of it is your fault,” 45-year-old female.
- “The number of women dismissed by these so-called trained professionals is far too high for me to ever be willing to be treated that way after something so traumatizing,” 51-year-old female.
- “It was humiliating and I couldn’t believe that had happened to me. How could I tell my parents that the daughter they raised perfectly and trained to be aware of these things was a victim of exactly what they were trying to educate and protect her from? How could I ever let them know that and feel guilty cause we all know parents would,” 22-year-old female.
- “I was scared that I had done something wrong,” 26-year-old female.

These are just a few of the many responses to the survey question received. Many of the other responses consisted of concepts revolving around doubt and nonbelief, society's disapproval and blame, shame and guilt, reactions and repercussions. Story disclosure has been discouraged from the top levels of trained professionals to the bottom of norms within society.

Getting past the stepping stones was the direct research hypothesis involved questions. Creating a minimal relationship through the simple but detailed and semi-personal questions helped provide comfort and understanding to the survivor. The relationship between the survey I created and the participants really depended on me giving participants the opportunity to say exactly what they wanted but also collecting the data I needed for my research. Prior to getting their in-depth answer I asked participants for a direct "yes" or "no" response to "Do you think professionals/people of power have been trained well for conversations surrounding sexual assault?" needless to say the large majority did not believe communicational sexual assault trained personnel were prepared enough.

The results concluded as such; 18 yes to 46 no. To no surprise, the vast majority of individuals that clicked "yes" were individuals who have never experienced sexual assault. The "no" respondents had an opportunity directly after answering this question to provide a greater reason as to why they were not comfortable with the training of councilors, police officers, professors, security, and even family members.

**Responses as to why individuals do not feel comfortable with trained professionals:**

- "People always say you should come forward, but when you do, everyone turns their back on you. She was literally getting threatened and harassed, and if she would have moved forward with the charges, it would have only been a matter of time before they

carried out their threats. At that point, is it even worth fighting it, especially if so many people are against you,” 20-year-old female.

- “I was let down. Too many people knew and no one ever did anything to help me.”

- “It was extremely traumatic when I decided to tell someone. I told my friends and they laughed at me and told me they didn’t believe me... if that was their response I can only imagine a counselor's response,” 21-year-old female.

- “I feel comfortable talking to those who have experienced it but if it were me, truthfully, it would be difficult due to the intimate and personal nature of the issue. Thus, the importance of having an established relationship with someone you can trust. My impression is that most people just want it to go away and do not appreciate the importance of thorough investigation and ongoing monitoring/counseling etc.,” 37-year-old female.

- “No one is easy to talk to when it comes to this topic - especially if it happens to you when you’re of age. Because when you’re old enough to understand what happened (how wrong it was) You feel so guilty for “letting” it happen. No matter how tough or badass you think you are - it takes SO MUCH to fight for yourself in those situations - even more so in the moment,” 24-year-old female.

- “I definitely would never go to the police due to all the probing that would happen. Like you just experienced trauma in the area that they are wanting to look at and have you expose them and have you re-live situations - too much. No wonder the #MeToo movement took so much time; everyone’s had time to process and heal.....there are way

too many questions too and not enough just counseling. It already takes so long to understand and comprehend what you've gone through," 45-year-old female.

The overwhelming interpretation of my personal research ultimately leads to the idea that while these individuals experience, on paper, the same thing, all of their situations and stories are different and each survivor needs something different than the next. All stories and survivors are unique and require a different approach to their healing process. While the deeper exploration of an individual's healing process requires a greater commitment to specific needs, there are several similarities that first responders can use when interacting with the disclosure. The "first responders tool kit" comes directly from a compiled and condensed amount of research sourcing directly back to the survivors themselves.

**First responders tool kit:**

- Understand that if you are not a survivor yourself you will never understand the process they are going through or the feelings they are having. They built up a lot of courage to be vulnerable enough to share their story with you.
  
- Always believe what they are telling you. Let them know through words of validation and through facial expressions/body language
  
- Lead with empathy
  
- Validate them

- Just listen... let them control their story and how in-depth they go
- Never ask a victim-blaming question... no judgment is to shame the survivor
- Mention seeking greater help: Support groups (surround them with people who can understand and have been through similar situations), or counseling with a sexual assault trained individual that whom they can build trust.

After collecting 65 total survey responses and individually speaking with around 25 survivors interview style, one thing became very clear to me; there are thousands and thousands of sexual assault stories out there that not a single person has ever heard because survivors are told by societal norms that they are not worthy of a voice in their own story because there is no story.

The interview and survey responses were consistent across the board with similar keywords for different questions. To summarize survivor responses; "People need to understand that victim-blaming is a huge factor in someone's PTSD. Anyone that goes against or questions the victim's story rather than supporting them caters to the PTSD that the victim is going to experience and it is participating in the trauma the victim is going through in trying to heal. That is not part of love or understanding and it is definitely not helpful. That is not showing kindness or caring for someone. And somebody that really cares about someone will wait for consent or will understand that no means no," survivor Megan Miles said. It is clear that survivors do not feel properly taken care of by officials or society. It is crucial we show up for survivors and stop

supporting the predator whether or not it's intentional. Learning proper communication when it comes to these intimate disclosures is a valuable tool for any individual to hold on to.

To some extent, I feel as though previous basic knowledge of the subject should immediately indicate a few obvious facts and feelings within the research such as sexual assault survivors are fearful of coming forward with their stories. To clarify, this does not mean that survivors should be frightened or feel shame; rather it is clear that this social issue has forced survivors into a “fight or flight” sort of notion. Coming into this research it was clear that there would be some correlation between how survivors react and how society reacts.

Since significant numbers of sexual assault survivors report feeling uncomfortable disclosing their stories, it is clear that there are more and less beneficial ways to proceed with responder interactions. There is no correct way to talk to every survivor. Every story and every individual is different. There are surface-level ways of interacting with survivors that every person can be equipped with such as validating the survivor, listening, building a safe relationship where they trust you with this information, and leading with empathy. Letting the survivor take control of their story helps give them back the reins, and it allows them to share as much or as little information with you as they'd like. Survivors deserve to have a voice in their story so it is a responder's job to listen to that voice.

Not only did it take an entire 5 years of holding back my own stories but it also took an entire semester of intense research, surveys, and interviews to understand that it is not just an educational/teaching issue of learned tactics of councilors and other people of power. This is a social issue stemming back as far as society goes. The way the world treats women and the way cultures train women versus men, and just the overall interactions and reactions of trauma

disclosure. In participating in this specific topic I found that at the conclusion of my research this is more of a cultural and societal issue rather than just a trained personnel issue.

If I were to continue my research I would like to look at the communication differences between the predator and prey. Do we treat the assaulted the same as we treat the assaulter? I would have liked more opportunities to further this specific area of research because throughout multiple sources within my lit review I discovered comments here and there about responding to the accused and how we should approach them. It was quite interesting and somewhat frustrating at the same time so it would have been interesting to dive even deeper down this certain path. In the same way, victims are invalidated and blamed, the perpetrator is backed, encouraged, and “innocent until proven guilty”. When conducting my survey and examining my articles I realized that conversations around the predator also looked a lot different. I learned so much more than just my research question and hypothesis; the content went way beyond my study.

Another direction of sexual assault studies that I would like to understand and research further is what is taught in the begging. Growing up I remember that I was always told how to and how not to dress, to walk with my keys between my fingers and pepper spray in hand, and I was sent off to self-defense classes. I never really questioned it much until my brother started growing up and he was not taught the same. Society constantly wants to focus on and change the affected rather than expose and dispose of the actions of the predator. Too often we force women into boxes in what they have to wear and how they have to act so they are not rapped implying that the way they dress deserves rape. Society is far more developed to continue this path, rather humanity needs to start focusing on creating gentlemen, and that no simply means no.



The final interest in the different approaches available for this topic would be exploring the impact of power and popularity of a known individual and how it affects how society treats them versus a normal predator. Discovering the fact that only 2-10% of disclosures are false allegations really sparked my interest and made me question why we see so many individuals in the media direct their attention to a potential false allegation rather than exposing the truth. Many times this happens to celebrities and even people that hold power within society. I would like to further explore the idea that yes, our heroes can still be flawed and they are sometimes in the wrong no matter how in love we, as a society, are with them.

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## **Appendix:**

Trigger Warning & Disclaimer: This is an extremely sensitive topic. Sexual assault is a heavy topic. Please note that any and all information provided will be held confidentially and privately.

This survey is also optional, and you may stop at any time. The more information that you provide the greater the survey data will end up. I fully understand just how sensitive this topic is but truly I want to help create a more accommodating atmosphere around the communication surrounding sexual assault along with figuring out how we can improve the universal communications and reactions to victims.

**Are you male or female?**

Options: Male or Female

**How old are you?**

Fill in the blank

**Have you ever been sexually assaulted?**

Options: yes, no, or no however I personally know someone who has been

**How old were you when the incident occurred?**

Fill in the blank

**Did you tell anyone?**

Options: yes, no, other (fill in the blank)

**Who did you contact or talk to? (Friends, teachers, therapists, parents, etc). If no one please see the next question.**

Fill in the blank

**If you did not talk to anyone, please explain why?**

Fill in the blank

**Do you feel as though professionals/people of power are easy to access or approach with this topic?**

Fill in the blank

**Do you think professionals/people of power have been trained well for conversations surrounding sexual assault?**

Fill in the blank

**Whether or not you have experienced sexual assault, do you feel comfortable talking to professionals or people of power about this situation? Why or why not?**

Fill in the blank

**What was your experience interacting and communicating with officials/professionals/people of power after the event?**

Fill in the blank

**If you would be comfortable talking to me about this experience, please leave me your name and a way of contacting you.**

Fill in the blank

**Questions and Comments**

Fill in the blank