

April is National Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month. It's the one month set aside each year to raise public awareness about sexual assault and educate communities and individuals on how to prevent sexual assault. You might have heard these statistics before, but they are worth repeating.

- 6.3 million (4.2 million women and 2.1 million men) or 33.2% of adult Texans have experienced some form of sexual assault in their lifetime.*
- 413,000 (2.3% women and 2% men) or 2.2% of adult Texans experienced sexual assault within a year prior to this survey.*
- Women (2 in 5) are twice as likely to be sexually assaulted as men (1 in 5) in their lifetimes.*

We are literally surrounded by individuals who have been sexually assaulted. If you don't think you know someone who has been raped, think again. It's not that the people you know are not victimized, they just aren't telling you. Can you see five women from where you are? Two of them have been raped. Can you see five men from where you are? One of them has been raped. That's the way statistics work.

So who are the victims of rape? (also known as survivors)

- Your mom whose Uncle molested her when she was a girl.
- Your neighbor who was assaulted in the military.
- Your high school friend who had 'sex' with the teacher.
- Your boss who was raped in college.
- Your waiter/waitress who was raped by their co-worker.
- Your co-worker whose spouse raped them.

It's impossible to tell if someone has been raped by looking at them. That may seem counterintuitive. Wouldn't something as horrifying as sexual assault show itself in some way? The truth is that being a sexual assault victim usually comes with intense feelings of embarrassment, confusion and self-blame. That trifecta of feelings is like a padlock on a rape victim's story.

Think about Kristen who snuck out of her parent's house to hang out with some friends, including a boy she had once dated. She fell asleep at her friend's parents house and woke up to her ex-boyfriend on top of her. She told him to stop, but she was also scared, she froze. Kristen experienced 'tonic immobility' or the freeze response which is a common response when the parts of our brain that respond to intense fear take over.

Now Kristen questions herself. Did he heard her say, 'stop?' She doesn't understand why she didn't try to fight back. She fears what her parents will say and do. She feels strangely calm, numb. We think that when someone is raped they will cry or be hysterical. The truth is that people respond to trauma in all sorts of way. They may be tearful, calm, withdrawn, hysterical, angry, or almost any other set of emotions.

In her confusion, Kristen pulls herself together and sneaks back into her house. The embarrassment of telling her parents, combined with the fear of being blamed keeps her quiet. She says she doesn't feel well and spends the day in bed. It's easier to be silent, and quietly nurse your wounds, then to tell.

There are thousands of stories like Kristen's. Each one different, but all with similarities. Survivors of sexual assault are all around us. When we go to school, to work or eating dinner with our family. Use this month to learn about sexual violence and when a survivor is brave enough to say something, remember how much strength it takes to open that padlock.

* Busch-Armendariz, N.B., Olaya-Rodriguez, D., Kammer-Kerwick, M., Wachter, K. & Sulley C. (2015). *Health and well-being: Texas statewide sexual assault prevalence*. Austin, TX: Institute on Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault, The University of Texas at Austin. Retrieved from: <http://rapecrisis.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/TX-SA-Prevalence-Study-Final-Report-4-2015.pdf>