



# PREVENTING **SEXUAL VIOLENCE** AGAINST PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

## **Myths & Facts About Sexual Violence Against People with Disabilities**



**NCEDSV**  
Nevada Coalition to **END** Domestic and Sexual Violence

There is a lot of information available about sexual violence and the people affected by it. People with disabilities are more vulnerable to sexual assault and are surrounded by myths not only about their disability but also how sexual violence impacts them. These erroneous beliefs about sexual violence, in general, encourage damaging victim-blaming for survivors with disabilities as well as survivors without disabilities.

We hope this information will clarify some of the most common misconceptions about sexual violence against people with disabilities.

## Myth #1

### **SEXUAL ASSAULT IS AN ACT OF PASSION THAT CAN'T BE CONTROLLED**

**FACT:** Sexual assault is about power and control and is not motivated by sexual gratification.<sup>1</sup>

## Myth #2

### **IF A PARENT TEACHES A CHILD TO STAY AWAY FROM STRANGERS, THEY WON'T GET RAPED**

**FACT:** 60% of child sexual abuse cases are perpetrated by someone the child knows outside the family, and 30% are assaulted by family members.<sup>2</sup> For people with disabilities, perpetrators may also be caregivers.

## Myth #3

### **MANY VICTIMS LIE ABOUT BEING RAPED OR GIVE FALSE REPORTS**

**FACT:** Only 2-8% of rapes are falsely reported, the same percentage as for other felonies.<sup>4</sup> It is difficult for any survivor to tell someone how they have been hurt sexually. It is important to understand, listen, and believe them. Look for non-verbal signs that may indicate sexual assault, such as body posture and abrupt reaction to daily activities, emotional changes that may involve apathy, withdrawal from activities, an unusual calmness, drop in academic performance or facial responses that may be unusual for that individual.

## Myth #4

### **SEXUAL ASSAULTS MOST OFTEN OCCUR IN PUBLIC OR OUTDOORS**

**FACT:** 55% of rape or sexual assault victimizations occur at or near the victim's home, and 12% occur at or near the home of a friend, relative, or acquaintance.<sup>3</sup>

## Myth #5

**VICTIMS WHO EXPERIENCE SEXUAL VIOLENCE MUST HAVE DONE SOMETHING TO CAUSE IT TO HAPPEN BY WEARING REVEALING CLOTHING, BEHAVING PROVOCATIVELY, BINGE DRINKING OR TAKING DRUGS**

**FACT:** Sexual violence is NEVER the survivor's fault. The perpetrator selects the victim – the victim's behavior or clothing choices do not mean that they are consenting to sexual activity.<sup>5</sup>

## Myth #6

**A PERSON WHO HAS REALLY BEEN SEXUALLY ASSAULTED WILL BE HYSTERICAL**

**FACT:** Victims of sexual violence exhibit a spectrum of responses to the assault that can include: calm, hysteria, withdrawal, anger, apathy, denial, dissociation, and shock. Reactions to the assault and length of time needed to process through the experience vary with each person. There is no "typical way" to react to being sexually assaulted. Assumptions about a way a victim "should act" may be detrimental to the victim because each victim copes with the trauma of the assault in different ways that can also vary over time.<sup>6</sup>

## Myth #7

### **ALL SEXUAL ASSAULT VICTIMS WILL REPORT THE CRIME IMMEDIATELY TO THE POLICE.**

**FACT:** There are many reasons why a sexual assault victim may not report the assault to the police. It is not easy to talk about being sexually assaulted. The experience of re-telling what happened may cause the person to relive the trauma. Other reasons for not immediately reporting the assault or not reporting it at all include fear of retaliation by the offender, fear of not being believed, fear of being blamed for the assault, fear of being "revictimized" if the case goes through the criminal justice system, belief that the offender will not be held accountable, wanting to forget the assault ever happened, not recognizing that what happened was sexual assault, shame, and/or shock. Because a person did not immediately report an assault or chooses not to report it at all, does not mean that the assault did not happen. Victims can report a sexual assault to criminal justice authorities at any time, whether it be immediately after the assault or within weeks, months, or even years after the assault.<sup>7</sup>

## Myth #8

### **BECAUSE A PERSON HAS A DISABILITY, THEY CAN NOT BE A CREDIBLE WITNESS**

**FACT:** With the right support and accommodations, a person with a disability can tell what happened to them in court.

## Myth #9

### GETTING HELP IS EXPENSIVE FOR SURVIVORS OF ASSAULT

FACT: Services such as counseling and advocacy are offered for free or at a low cost by sexual assault service providers.<sup>8</sup>

## Myth #10

### THERE IS NOTHING WE CAN DO TO PREVENT SEXUAL VIOLENCE

FACT: There are many ways to help prevent sexual violence including promoting social norms that protect against violence, intervening as a bystander to protect someone who may be at risk, teaching healthy, safe dating and intimate relationship skills to adolescents, promoting healthy sexuality, creating protective, safer environments and supporting victims/survivors to lessen harm.<sup>9, 10</sup>

# Sources

- <sup>1</sup> Groth, A. Burgess, W., & Holmstrom, L. Rape: Power, anger, and sexuality. American Journal of Psychiatry. 134(11), 1239-43. [Pubmed.gov](#)
- <sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Justice: Facts and Statistics
- <sup>3</sup> Planty, M., Langton, L., Krebs, C., Berzofsky, M., & Smiley-McDonald, H. Female Victims of Sexual Violence, 1994-2010, Bureau of Justice Statistics
- <sup>4</sup> Lonsway, K., Archambault, J., Lisak, D. (2009) False Reports: Moving Beyond the Issue to Successfully Investigate and Prosecute NonStranger Sexual Assault. The Voice, 3(1).
- <sup>5</sup> The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: The Truth About Sexual Abuse
- <sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women: Myths and Facts of Sexual Violence
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> RAINN: National Sexual Assault Online Hotline <https://hotline.rainn.org> and Find a Local Service Provider <https://centers.rainn.org>
- <sup>9</sup> RAINN: Your Role in Preventing Sexual Assault. Bystander Intervention: CARE (Create a distraction, Ask directly, Refer to an authority, and Enlist others)  
<https://www.rainn.org/safety-prevention>
- <sup>10</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Sexual Violence Prevention Strategies  
<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/prevention.html>

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