

Project HAVEN



Sexual Assault and Women with Disabilities

Institute for Disability Studies, The University of Southern Mississippi

What Is Sexual Assault?

Sexual assault is any unwanted sexual contact done to one person by another. Some examples are

- being forced to kiss someone;
- unwanted touching;
- being forced to touch or look at someone's private parts (genitals);
- being forced to look at sexual pictures or videos; and
- forced sex (intercourse).

It is sexual assault if one person tricks, threatens, or forces another person to do something sexual that she does not want to do. A person might try to tell a victim that there is something wrong with her because she doesn't want to have sex. The victim may be afraid of what might happen if she does not agree to unwanted sex.

Who Assaults?

Oftentimes the abuser may be

- a person who is employed as a helper, such as a caregiver, attendant or interpreter;
- a partner, husband, neighbor, or co-worker;
- a doctor or therapist or other health professional;
- someone who pretends to be a friend; or
- a family member (brother, father, uncle, grandfather, cousins, step-family members).

The abuser may be someone the victim depends on for daily needs. This may make it harder for the victim to get away or tell someone.

Any Woman Can Be Sexually Assaulted

Sexual assault is a crime. One in four women has been the victim of rape or attempted rape. Women with disabilities are at greater risk of rape or sexual assault

because the abuser often believes that the victim won't be believed if she tells. The abuser thinks that if the victim is not able to tell, she can not get away, and she does not know what is going on. Abusers may hold false beliefs about women with disabilities. They may believe that women with disabilities

- do not have sexual feelings;
- are defenseless and, therefore, easy to take advantage of and assault;
- do not feel pain;
- are a burden and deserve to be abused; or
- will not make good witnesses in court.

These false beliefs or myths can stop women with disabilities from asking for and getting the help they may need and deserve.

General Tips on Responding to Crime Victims Who Have a Disability

A lack of personal familiarity with individuals with disabilities may cause law enforcement personnel to feel professionally awkward and uncertain in their response to victims of crime with disabilities. On the other hand, a person's impairment may not be obvious, so victims should be watched carefully for signs of any disability. Sexual assault victims should be asked if they have any individualized needs because of a mental or physical impairment. In short, law enforcement personnel making the first response can promote effective communication, reduce anxieties, and better serve victims by observing these guidelines:

- Rethink attitudes about people with disabilities (the negative attitudes of others are sometimes their greatest impairment)
- Consider that a person with a substantial disability can be healthy
- Be careful not to label or define people by their

impairment. For example, referring to the victim as “a disabled woman” rather than saying the victim is “a woman with a disability” can convey the image of a person who is primarily disabled and secondarily a woman. Similarly, it is better to say “the victim has schizophrenia” or “the victim has a mental illness” rather than “the victim is a schizophrenic” and “the victim is a male with blindness” is better than “the victim is a blind man.” In other words, the person has an impairing condition, the person is not that condition.

- Victims should be asked how they wish to be characterized and how they can be communicated with most effectively. Respect and sensitivity ensures that the words used and accommodations made are appropriate, not detrimental. The presence of someone familiar to victims or a person knowledgeable about their impairment can also be

extremely important for victims and helpful during an interview. But recognize that family members, service providers, and others could be the offenders or could protect the offenders. The presence of these people, therefore, may inhibit victims from fully describing the crime for fear of retribution.

- Do not act on curiosity about the victim’s disability. Questions should be restricted to those necessary to accommodate the victim’s needs.
- Avoid expressing pity with phrases such as “suffering from” Alzheimer’s disease and “a victim of” mental illness.
- Speak directly to victims, even when they are accompanied by another person. People with disabilities are sometimes assumed to be incapable of making decisions for themselves.



This document was adapted from various materials on sexual assault. This information is not itself legal advice. For legal advice about a particular situation, contact an attorney. The Institute for Disability Studies at The University of Southern Mississippi is a public nonprofit organization that provides support, encouragement and assistance to those seeking information on violence against women with disabilities and older adults. This information is available in alternate formats upon request.

This project is supported by Grant No. 2004-EW-AX-K015, awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. The substance and findings of the work are dedicated to the public. The author and publisher are solely responsible for the accuracy of the statements and interpretations contained in this publication.

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