

# *When Men Are Raped*

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## **Introduction**

The rape of adult males has been so largely neglected and collectively denied that its invisibility has given rise to the notion that it just does not occur in our society. While some acknowledgement of male rape in prisons and jails has emerged in recent years, most people do not consider the sexual violation of adult males to be within the realm of possibility in non-institutional communities. When men are raped, they are usually assaulted by other men. Although it is possible for women to rape men, this crime has been documented and researched to an even lesser extent than same-sex rape.

The vast majority of male rapes are never reported, and although men constitute 5 to 10 percent of all victims who were raped as adults, they tend to report their assaults to authorities even less than women who have been raped (Scarce 1997). One study involving more than 3,000 adults in the Los Angeles area found that 7% of males in their sample had been raped in their adult lives (Sorenson et al. 1987). In one study on college students, researchers found that 16% of male respondents had been forced to have sex at some point in their adult lives (Struckman and Johnson 1992). Very little research has been conducted on the rape of men, and service providers like rape crisis centers and hospitals often lack the in-depth knowledge and skill to adequately assist male survivors of sexual violence. Survivors often struggle alone, dealing with their trauma in isolation. More often than not, they are silenced by the fear that loved ones and service providers will fail to support them in their time of crisis.

This booklet is designed to provide some basic facts about men raping men in the hopes that it will help the reader better understand this form of sexual assault. If you or someone close to you has been raped, the information contained in this booklet might empower you to cope with the trauma. If you are a service provider, this information could better prepare you for your interaction with men who have been raped.

## **Reporting Rape**

On average, somewhere between 5-10% of rapes reported to service providers like rape crisis centers and police departments are male-on-male sexual assaults. However, approximately 90- 95% of men who are raped do not report it (Forman 1982). In a study on male rape survivors he had counseled, one therapist found an unusually high incidence of denial and repression after the assault (Myers 1989). The stigma of apparent weakness in having been raped often prevents a survivor from coming forward. In addition, many male survivors find it difficult to identify their experience



as rape because they have been taught to believe that men cannot be victims of sexual assault (Garnets, Herek, and Levy 1993). Some men will treat sexual assault as just another physical assault and fail to seek further emotional support or psychological assistance once the initial physical injuries heal. Other researchers have noted that a fear of having their sexual identity questioned often prevents male survivors from coming forward to share their experiences with others (Burgess and Groth 1980).

Gay men who have been raped, already stigmatized by societal stereotypes of “sexual deviance,” often attempt to make sense of their rape experiences by rationalizing the assault and blaming themselves. In one study of male survivors, a gay man stated, “these things happen all the time in gay life . . . that’s what you get for taking chances . . . I should have known better” (Myers 1989). Gay men are more likely to rationalize their assault as a bad sexual experience, especially if they have been raped by an acquaintance. In addition to this self-blame, fear of hostility and moral judgment from law enforcement, medical providers, and counselors also impede gay men’s ability to seek assistance from traditional support systems.

Finally, describing his rape can be highly distressing to the survivor, for this entails reliving the nightmare again (Groth and Burgess 1980). Submitting to hospital exams and police interrogations can be a form of second violation to a person’s body and privacy. Rape survivors will feel more comfortable reporting their experience and seeking help if they view service providers as responsive to their needs. In fact, agencies that are viewed as supportive to male rape survivors often see a large number of them on a regular basis. One study reported that male survivors constituted fully 22.7% of rapes reported to agencies that have well developed services for male-on-male rape survivors (Hillman et al. 1991).

## **The Assault**

There is no clear indication as to whether the majority of men are raped by acquaintances or strangers. Some studies demonstrate that gay men and men of color are at a higher risk for sexual victimization, probably due to sexual assault that occurs as part of a hate crime, meaning these men became the target of violence because of their race or perceived sexual orientation. Studies on perpetrators of male-on-male rape found that they tended to identify as heterosexual, were 26 years old on average, and were all involved in consensual sexual relationships with others at the time (Groth and Burgess 1980). Many of the rapists stated that the gender of the victim was inconsequential to them. Thus, rape for these men is an act of violence and control. Nearly half of them had tried to get their victims to ejaculate, their explanation being that they had wanted the victim to enjoy himself. These men buy into the notion that their victims enjoy being raped, and probably that they asked for it. In addition, they know that a man who has ejaculated will be discouraged from reporting his experience as non-consensual. These same researchers also found that the primary motivations of these perpetrators was to a) conquer and control, b) act out feelings of revenge, c) resolve conflict with their own sexuality and, d) gain status among fellow men for being an aggressor.

## The Aftermath

Men who are raped usually struggle with some severe psychological after-effects of the assault. Confusion regarding their sexual orientation is a common result. One survivor says, "I really wonder about my sexuality—gay, straight, bi, I still don't know. I went through a period when I became very promiscuous, both with men and women" (Scarce 1997).

Some men may become very homophobic, blaming gay men for subjecting them to a rape experience. Survivors may feel humiliated and angry at being forced to participate in such a sexual act and start blaming the "gay lifestyle" for what they had to go through. It is important to know, however, that most men who rape other men identify as heterosexual and are involved in consensual sexual relationships with women at the time they rape. It is not a need for sex with other men that drives them to rape. For them, rape is an act of violence and control, not of sexual gratification.

Because our society expects men to be physically strong and capable of defending themselves, many male rape survivors suffer a severe blow to their manhood, having been taught to believe that men should not be weak enough to be forced into a sexually submissive situation. Fred Pelka, a rape survivor writes, "To see rape as a women's issue is a form of male privilege most men would prefer not to surrender" (Pelka 1992). In reality, anyone, man or woman, can be raped. Very often, men will rape other men as a means of humiliation and degradation by intentionally feminizing them, including the use of verbally abusive language that is derogatory to women.

Gay men who have been raped by an acquaintance might be silenced for fear of having their sexual identity revealed to others. They might not be prepared to answer questions such as "Are you gay?" and "What were you doing with him in the first place?" Repressing the rape experience is sometimes accompanied by a retreat into the closet and attempts by these men to distance themselves from their gay identities. Other gay men report becoming totally asexual, retreating from sexuality as a means of coping with the confusion over their seeming lack of ability to figure out when acquaintances pose a danger of sexual assault. Since many men have erections or ejaculate during their rape as a response to extreme pain or fear, they might feel guilty of even attempting to describe their experience as rape, fearing others will believe they enjoyed the assault. For other gay men, accusing acquaintances of being rapists is akin to airing the gay community's dirty laundry to the broader public, so they choose to hide their experiences. Myers (1989) reports that a gay psychiatrist who sees numerous rape survivors a month labels acquaintance rape in the gay world as "our dirty secret." When one is a member of a stigmatized community, there is a hesitancy to shed light on any problem that would fuel the stigma and justify prejudice in the minds of others.

Many survivors display signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, reporting episodes of panic attacks, insomnia, nightmares, physical pain, loss of appetite, flashbacks of the rape, and more. Survivors have talked about being scared of looking at men's crotches, being alone or in relationships with men, and being startled easily because they are hyper-alert (Myers 1989). In his book *Male on Male Rape*, Michael Scarce describes the situation of one survivor who sought encounters with other men that replicated his own past sexual victimization. He could not recall such episodes afterwards and only knew about them because of pain and blood in the rectal area when he regained his senses. "I ask myself why I do that and I'm not sure," he said. "I really feel like it's the only thing I'm good for, that I deserve it" (Scarce 1997).

In the days and weeks after a rape, thoughts and emotions associated with the assault can be all-consuming, but most survivors find that gradually a sense of normalcy returns. It should also be noted that once a person survives rape, he or she will be a rape survivor for life. Although the most intense feelings that result from the assault will recede, it is common for rape survivors to experience difficulties near the anniversary of their assaults or in circumstances that trigger memories of the experience. Some rape survivors find that it helps to confide in a friend, family member, or counselor for support in dealing with their feelings of trauma.

### **If You Are A Service Provider . . .**

Male survivors of rape will experience a similar range and intensity of trauma as women survivors. For example, both male and female survivors will often suffer from Rape Trauma Syndrome (a form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) after they are assaulted. Thus when dealing with men, you should accord them the same respect, empathy and understanding as you would women. There are, however, important differences between male and female survivors and it would be damaging to treat men the same as women in every respect. Some of these differences include:

- ✘ Male survivors tend to question their sexual orientation more often than women who have been raped. Sometimes men will ejaculate or experience an erection during their assaults, as an involuntary response to physical sensation, intense fear, or pain. This may lead a survivor to question whether or not he somehow wanted to be assaulted or perhaps believe he is gay.
- ✘ In a confusion between rape and sex, many men will become homophobic after their assault, falsely equating same-sex rape with homosexuality.
- ✘ Unlike women, most men are never taught to live with the fear of their own vulnerabilities to sexual assault. When they are raped, therefore, they may experience a heightened degree of pure shock and surprise, finding it more difficult to understand what they have gone through.
- ✘ Some men will feel part of their masculinity has been stripped away, that they have been feminized, or are somehow less manly because they have been sexually violated.
- ✘ Male rape tends to involve higher rates of weapon use, physical injury, and multiple assailants as compared to the rape of women.
- ✘ It is imperative to understand that men do not have widespread access to resources like self-help books and support groups as do women survivors of rape. Given the extreme stigma surrounding adult male rape, a survivor usually deals with his issues in total isolation. You may well be the first person he has talked with and might be the only source of information, support and understanding for him.
- ✘ Rape is defined on a state-by-state basis. In some states, the rape of men is not defined by law under the same terminology or degree of offense as the rape of women.

The following is a list of behavioral cues that can aid a service provider in their attempt to be supportive of a male rape survivor:

## Do

- ✘ **Do** believe a man who reports his rape experience. Remember that he has overcome many obstacles to be able to speak about what has happened.
- ✘ **Do** tell him that by relating his story he has taken the first, and perhaps most significant, step toward dealing with the trauma.
- ✘ **Do** tell him that the rape was not his fault.
- ✘ **Do** tell him that he is not alone, that approximately one in fourteen men is a rape survivor.
- ✘ **Do** make sure that you educate yourself about the state laws pertaining to rape of men. Many states have gender non-specific rape laws, meaning that adult male rape is defined as equivalent to the rape of women. Other states may not legally recognize oral or anal penetration as being rape, but instead they categorize it as some other form of sex crime. You will need to be able to inform survivors of their legal rights as victims of sexual assault.
- ✘ **Do** make sure that you administer the proper tests and collect all pertinent evidence when a man reports being raped, if you are a medical provider. Hospitals should provide appropriate clothing (beyond surgical scrubs) for the survivor to wear home in the event he has to give up his clothes as forensic evidence after medical treatment.
- ✘ **Do** make sure that you have a listing of resources such as counselors who specialize in male sexual victimization, men's service organizations, a crisis hotline that is receptive to male callers, etc. in your community or nearby to which you can refer survivors. Have brochures and handouts prepared to provide to male survivors and their support persons as needed.
- ✘ **Do** publicize and make known your ability and willingness to deal with adult male survivors of rape. Male survivors will only report their experience if they believe you will be compassionate and understanding.

## Do not

- ✘ **Do not** express discomfort with issues and conversations related to sexuality. Remember: this might be one of the foremost areas of confusion for the survivor. If he senses your reluctance to address this issue, he will probably not bring it up.
- ✘ **Do not** panic if he is suicidal. This is a common aftermath of adult male rape. He will be best calmed by a conversation where he is able to express what he is feeling. Point out to him that he is alive and has survived the assault. Make him aware of the fact that he is not alone and that there are other male survivors out there. He needs to know that it is possible to recover from the trauma.
- ✘ **Do not** tell anyone else about his story. Protecting his anonymity or confidentiality is vital.
- ✘ **Do not** make him feel that his experience is any less traumatic because he is a man. Given society's stereotypes of "manliness" he will already be questioning whether "real men" can actually be raped. He needs to hear that his assault experience is ample cause to seek help.
- ✘ **Do not** accuse him of being homophobic if he indicates his fear or hatred of gay males. However, at an appropriate time, inform him that most men who rape men self-identify as heterosexual and rape to control, humiliate, and degrade their victims, not for sexual pleasure.

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