

**The Unspoken Trauma:  
The Stories of Unaddressed Sexual Assault and Rape in Campus Communities**  
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Rape Abuse Incest National Network (RAINN) is one of the nations leading sources of statistics and information regarding sexual assault and rape. The organization has continued to update its statistics throughout the years to reflect the changing challenges and concerns regarding acts of sexual assault and rape within our nation. At the beginning of my thesis research on victim-blaming of acquaintance rapes in 2017, RAINN reported that an American has an attempted or completed sexual assault every 93 seconds. At the time of writing this article, that statistic has changed to every 73 seconds an attempted or completed sexual assault happens (Rape Abuse Incest National Network, 2020b). The drastic change in the frequency of these assaults is alarming for me because it also makes me aware of how many stories are not reported or how many of these survivors do not share their stories.

**Real Life College Experiences**

I have attended two drastically different post-secondary institutes in the state of Florida since 2013. As a student, I have personally observed how the culture in campus communities does not address the seriousness of stories shared about sexual assaults and rapes on their campuses.

One of the most alarming stories about the mistreatment of a survivor of rape on a college campus was published in 2016 by a survivor from my alma mater. In this story, a survivor was forced to re-live their trauma as their rapist is found not guilty by the school, despite the rapist fully confessing to committing the crime (RLCUSTER97, 2016). The survivor says they did not want to file criminal charges because they wanted to see the best in people, including giving their rapist the chance to make the right decision of withdrawing themselves from the school, so the survivor would not have to be responsible for the criminal charge on their permanent record. Despite the continuous reassurance during the initial investigation that the school would handle the matter appropriately, the school found the rapist not guilty with no penalties, which included the ability for the rapist to continue participating in one of the college's sports teams (RLCUSTER97, 2016).

The survivor was continuously traumatized after the school failed to acknowledge the experience of the survivor. The survivor believed the school would listen to their story and provide them with that sense of safety that the school promoted so many times during their freshman orientation. Instead, the school had neglected to hold the rapist accountable on the count that the school operated on a "more likely than not" decision-making system. The survivor was forced to watch as their rapist bragged to reported witnesses of the rape during the trial, victim-blaming (including bad mouthing and asking why they were putting the rapist through this), and reading the rapist words on social media saying that the survivor wanted to have sex and they did not force the survivor at all (RLCUSTER97, 2016).

Now, looking at a much larger university than the previous story, the stories of survivors of sexual assault and rape self-blame including a mistrust in reporting their attacks to proper authorities were quite numerous. One of the most recent mediatized cases featured a survivor who was sexually assaulted within one of the school's academic buildings (Bland, 2017). The survivor was forcibly held down in the stairwells as the attacker attempted to assault them. The survivor was able to escape but was threatened by the rapist during their escape (Bland, 2017). In this case, both the school police department and city police were forced to close the case before an arrest could be made because of futile results from DNA and photo lineups (Bland, 2017). This case was

only one of three major cases reported to occur on the campus between August 2016 and August 2017. The most recent one was from August of 2017 when a survivor was sexually assaulted after using the wrong ride-sharing vehicle (Montoya, 2017).

### **The Roles of Social Workers**

These are only a few of the hundreds of stories that members in campus communities must be heard. There is no counting how many stories are out there as four out of five female students between the ages of 18 and 24 do not report their assaults (Rape Abuse Incest National Network, 2014a). Meaning that only 20% of all female student survivors report their assault to law enforcement (Rape Abuse Incest National Network, 2014). These statistics continue to lower when you consider other characteristics of all possible survivors such as if the survivor was male, an transgendered, or non-binary instead of a female; if the survivor identifies within the LGBTQ+ community and was sexually assaulted by a same-sex partner; if the survivor is an individual of color like African American, Native American, or Hispanic; or if the survivor admits to consuming alcohol before the assault and does not remember much from that night. Our communities, our culture, has established a sense of blame on survivors of sexual assault and rape that prevents the trauma within those individuals to be properly addressed.

How do these statistics, these stories, influence our work as social workers? Trauma is a commonly addressed concern amongst hundreds of clients in both public and private practices. As demonstrated through research with children who are reportedly abused as children, trauma can be the underlining cause of most of the challenges clients face today (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.). Since statistics of sexual assault and rape demonstrate that male college-aged students are 78% more likely and female college-aged students are only 20% less likely to be a victim of sexual assault and/or rape (Rape Abuse Incest National Network, 2014b), how do we address the possibility that a client, who is an adult or elder, may have been sexually assaulted and/or raped when they were younger on their college campuses and could be an underlining cause or related concern to current traumas and challenges, however many years later?

As a graduate student entering my clinical year, I have researched proper techniques to better prepare myself for when the moment comes where I am approached by a fellow student, a client, or even someone you love about their sexual assault and/or rape. RAINN, as previously mentioned, is the leading resource for all things to better assist and advocate for survivors of sexual assault and/or rape. Through their recommendation, if someone shares the story of their sexual assault and/or rape, is to utilize what RAINN called the TALK method (Rape Abuse Incest National Network, 2020a).

### **TALK Method**

Firstly, you want to thank your client or the individual who shares their story to tell you. You can accomplish this by using phrases like, "I'm glad you told me, and I believe you" or "Thank you for trusting me, and I'm sorry that happened to you" (Rape Abuse Incest National Network, 2020a).

Next, follow up with asking your client or the individual how you can help them. This can be done by using phrases like "You did not do anything wrong, so, how can I support you" or "Are you considering making a report, and if so, would you like me to go with you?" Although the latter one is more appropriate for more recent sexual assaults and/or rapes, it could be beneficial to know if your client or the individual had made a report previously. Knowing the reporting history of the client's or individual's experiences can help you gauge how they were treated by third parties in assessing the amount of re-traumatization of the assault. When asking how you want to help, it is also important to not take the focus off of the client or individual sharing the story by saying what

you would do in their situation or what you've seen other survivors do (Rape Abuse Incest National Network, 2020a).

Thirdly, you want to listen to what the client or individual is saying without judgment. You can do this by offering supportive reassurance, reminding them it is not their fault, and acknowledging their pain (Rape Abuse Incest National Network, 2020a).

Lastly, you want to keep supporting your client or the individual that comes to you with your story, which can include frequent check-ins on their emotions, practicing empathy, or letting them know you are thinking about them often (Rape Abuse Incest National Network, 2020a).

### **Call to Action**

As you read through the guidelines that RAINN suggests for talking to a survivor of sexual assault and/or rape, the similarities between the treatment of clients trained during our social work education and internships are very similar. While this is true, it can be difficult to remember the importance of these behaviors and actions when in the heat of the session or conversation, and the experiences are brought up unexpectedly. It can be uncomfortable, alarming, and nerve-racking when a client, or even someone you are close with, starts sharing intimate details about a traumatic experience such as sexual assault and/or rape. This can be especially true for some student social workers or social workers in trauma practice for the first time. As social workers, we strive to improve the challenges and quality of life of the clients that we are fortunate to come across. Sometimes we are unaware of those underlining causes of their challenges and traumas that could be rooted in the unfortunate reality of culture weaved into our campus communities and even our larger community in the form of victim-blaming, bullying, and no strong support for survivors of sexual assault and/or rape.

If you have a client or an individual who is a survivor of sexual assault and/or rape who may need additional resources, RAINN offers a free, confidential, and available 24/7 hotline and online chat for survivors and their loved ones through 800-656-HOPE or on their website at <https://www.rainn.org/>. As social workers, we are the avenues to provide the voices for those with stories to share, the guides to a full recovery, and the start to an end of a culture of blame.

### **Resources**

Bland, T. (2017, August 2). FGCU: Sex assault victim does not want to pursue criminal case.

*The News-Press*. <https://www.news-press.com/story/news/2017/08/02/fgcu-sex-assault-victim-does-not-want-pursue-criminal-case/532032001/>

Montoya, M. (2017, August 26). Student reports sexual assault at fgcu. *The News-Press*.

<https://www.news-press.com/story/news/crime/2017/08/26/student-reports-sexual-assault-fgcu/605159001/>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network, The (n.d.). *Effects*. <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/complex-trauma/effects>

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RLCUSTER97, (2016, October 4). *Flagler "legacy"*.

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