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Sexual Assault and Survivors with Disabilities

FACT: People with disabilities are twice as likely as the general population to experience rape and sexual assault.

(2007 Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report on Crime Against People with Disabilities)

In fact, it is estimated that as many as 40% of women with disabilities experience sexual assault or physical violence in their lifetimes (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, Canada) and that more than 90% of all people with developmental disabilities will experience sexual assault (Schwartz & Valenti-Hein, 1995). Survivors with disabilities are also more likely to experience a longer duration of sexual abuse, and are more likely to experience sexual violence from someone they know – one study estimates that for survivors with disabilities, 33% of abusers are acquaintances, 33% are family members, and 25% are other caregivers or service providers. Sexual violence is especially common among people with disabilities because of the fact that they are often placed in positions in which able-bodied people have power over them, whether this is physical or institutional power. This power imbalance may both cause perpetrators to target people with disabilities, and may make it more difficult for people with disabilities people to access and receive services after an assault.

Survivors with disabilities face many of the same barriers to seeking help that able-bodied survivors do, but because society still has a tendency to devalue and dehumanize those with disabilities and to suppress their voices, there are also a wide and important range of issues that are unique to the experiences of survivors with disabilities. Some examples are listed below, but SAPAC recognizes that each individual's experience is singular. A survivor with disabilities may not face all of these barriers, and may also face barriers not listed here

Common Scenarios

- Those who perpetrate sexual violence against people with disabilities often socialize their victims to believe that the abuse is normal and acceptable. Victims may grow up not understanding the difference between appropriate and inappropriate sexual behavior, and may not have experienced healthy and consensual intimate partner relationships. Furthermore, a survivor may be confused by the violence if it is perpetrated by a caregiver or family member who may also do nice, appropriate things for the survivor.
- Survivors with disabilities may be physically and/or socially isolated and may face limited access to outside communications and interactions, a lack of a support network, and/or lack of accessible transportation. This may make seeking and accessing help and resources difficult or impossible for survivors with disabilities.
- People with disabilities who require caregivers are at a higher risk of experiencing sexual assault – a reliance on others for assistance may increase vulnerability to sexual violence. Because the perpetrators of abuse towards people with disabilities are often caregivers, a survivor may fear being punished by their caregiver for speaking out. A survivor may also fear a loss of services if they report the caregiver, or may fear that a new caregiver might do something even worse.
- People with disabilities are often patronized, and are therefore often not taken seriously if they report a sexual assault. Additionally, a survivor may fear disbelief and may therefore choose not to report the assault at all.
- Because people with disabilities are often stereotyped as not being sexual, a survivor may have difficulty having his/her report taken seriously.
- A survivor with a disability that creates communication challenges may have difficulty reporting sexual assault or abuse. Lack of access to an interpreter or assistive technology, difficulty articulating thoughts, or having a limited vocabulary may all contribute to an inability to disclose.
- A survivor with disabilities may have counselors who have not been trained in the issues specific to survivors with disabilities, or who may not be comfortable or prepared for a client with disabilities. Some survivors may also face counseling buildings that are not accessible to survivors with some physical disabilities.

All survivors deserve compassionate and competent care. SAPAC will make every effort to accommodate survivors with disabilities.



Power and Control Wheel, from Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence

(https://sapac.umich.edu/files/sapac/field/image/PC_Wheel_Disabilities_Page_1.jpg)