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Family Focus Date Rape

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Date rape is a difficult, uncomfortable topic for many reasons. It involves a violent act, usually perpetrated on a young person. The victim experiences an enormous sense of betrayal and personal self-loathing because she actually knows her assaulter and usually feels responsible for getting herself into a bad situation. Too often the victim does not report the rape to anyone. She is fearful that she will not be believed and is too ashamed to acknowledge what happened. Sadly, the victim doesn't obtain the compassion and vindication she desperately needs to deal with the rape and to eventually have some closure.

Date rape is all too prevalent on college campuses. In one study at Cornell University, twenty percent of women claimed they had sex forced on them. According to another survey, four out of five college students who were raped knew their attackers. Usually drugs, alcohol, or both are contributing factors. Some experts estimate that only about ten percent of all rapes are reported to police. Fewer still make it to court.

Unfortunately, most local therapists see victims of date rapes from our high schools. Fifteen years ago I saw an 18-year old girl who hadn't told anyone that she had been raped a year earlier. When "Caroline" was a high school junior, she was at a party where everyone got drunk. She went off into a bedroom with a boy she knew casually, just to "fool around." However, the boy forced himself on her despite her loud protestations and attempts to physically escape from him.

After this incident, Caroline became depressed and bulimic. She didn't realize all the implications of the date rape until a few years later when she heard about the subject during her college orientation. She joined a rape support group on campus and told her parents. When she came to see me for treatment Caroline was embarrassed, guilt-ridden, and depressed. Caroline had thought highly of the boy who raped her because he was an athlete and popular. She blamed herself as much as him. But being drunk and going into a bedroom with someone did not at all excuse the fact that she was raped, a criminal act. Ultimately, Caroline was able to

realize that the rape was not at all her fault. As we worked together, she was able to become angry that someone violated her in this way. Her depression lifted as she stopped turning her anger inward towards herself.

Another teenage girl I saw several years ago, "Julia," did report her date rape to her parents and the police. She stood up for herself admirably. The problem was that the perpetrator and his family and friends tried to turn the situation around to make Julia into a liar and a troublemaker. The boy's reputation and future was on the line, and his supporters closed ranks around him. Most of Julia's close friends wouldn't support her for fear of reprisal. As Julia said, it felt like an attack all over again since she was so deeply hurt by so many in her community. Her trust in people was severely damaged. She did get to see who her true friends were, but it took Julia many years to recover from this trauma.

All too often friends fail to rally behind victims of date rape. These friends are often torn between loyalty to the victim and concern about their social standing with their peers. They usually experience guilt and anxiety if they fail to support their friend in her ordeal. To a much lesser degree than the rape victim, of course, her friends may also go through a great deal of torment.

One particularly horrifying situation was the case of a 29 year-old client whom I was seeing for depression. "Shelley" and some female friends went to a bar in San Francisco one evening and met some cute guys there. They talked and flirted and then went to one of the guy's apartments to continue partying. Unbeknownst to Shelley someone drugged her by putting something into her wine. She didn't remember much after that. She later thought that she must have drunk too much and passed out. Unfortunately her friends were too inebriated to know what was happening to her.

A month later Shelley discovered that she had a case of gonorrhea. Several weeks after that, she found out that she was pregnant. Naturally, she was horrified. Shelley was Catholic and the idea of an abortion went very counter to her beliefs. She had no idea who

the man was who raped her, and no one could remember where the apartment was located.

Some people would judge Shelley harshly for her actions - drinking too much and then going to a stranger's apartment with her girlfriends. But the fact is that she was raped. She did not consent to having sex, and didn't even know anything was happening to her at the time. Shelley acted stupidly, but the person who did this to her acted criminally.

Unlike Shelley, most victims of date rape know their attacker and often have some kind of relationship with him. They can be friends, casually dating each other, or romantically involved. Women need to know how to protect themselves from the possibility of date rape. They can avoid drinking too much and make sure that they have one or more designated friends who will watch out for them. They need to be sure to keep any alcoholic beverages under their control. They need to give clear signals to males at all times, and establish their boundaries ahead of time. They must avoid putting themselves into compromising situations where there is no escape.

Males need to respond appropriately when they hear the word "no" from a date or a girlfriend, even if they think they received prior encouragement. Too often in these situations, males are inebriated and irrational. They need to realize the critical implications of their behavior.

It is important for rape victims to tell those close to them and to seek help and support. Our community has services available through the Rape Crisis Center in Concord, a 24-hour rape crisis hotline, and the Contra Costa County Crisis Center. Supportive individual therapy is also an essential part of the recovery process.

What can parents do to help prevent their children from experiencing this devastating situation? When your child reaches puberty, it is time to discuss sexual issues, including date rape. You will need to explain things on a level in accordance with your child's age and maturity. Young girls need to be taught to always say "NO" and "STOP" loudly if they are uncomfortable in any situation and to avoid letting potential embarrassment interfere. They can benefit from self-defense classes in case they need to use physical force to protect themselves.

Young boys need training in responding to girls saying "no" to them. Even if he receives a mixed signal from a girl that she may want him to, say, kiss her, if she says "no" or "stop" in the process, he needs to immediately respect her wishes.

Parents need to repeat these messages periodically until they are well-established guides for behavior. It is never too early to discuss the issues associated with date rape, but unfortunately it can sometimes be too late.

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