Disclosing Sexual Victimization

By Mitru Ciarlante, B.S.

There’s no tellin’

I HAVE TOLD and all my worst fears have been realized as others have done telling of their own.

You sure have told me alright.

You have told me I am crazy.
You have told me I am oversensitive.
You have told me it wasn’t so bad.
You have told me my rape story turns you on.
You have told me that I chose my pain.
You have told me that you never would have tolerated such abuse.
You’ve told me that my story is too intense, overwhelming.

Yeah, I guess you told me!

Many times and in many ways people told me not to tell. Each time you told me not to tell, you have also told my 4 year-old, my 7 year-old, my 9 year-old, and my 15 year-old selves not to tell—justifying all those decisions I made to keep my silence...

~ Anonymous adult survivor of child sexual abuse

Disclosing sexual abuse is often a process, not a single event.

Disclosure as a Process

For many young victims of sexual abuse, victimization would be better understood as a chronic condition or collection of experiences rather than as one traumatic event, and a similar statement could be made about “telling.” Disclosure of sexual abuse is often a process, not a single event. Youth who are coping with sexual violence sometimes act in ways that seem inconsistent with adult expectations of victims; however, their behaviors could be attempts at telling and may be better understood when the pressures placed on victims are revealed.

The disclosure process may involve the victim revealing bits of information, not always in chronological order, and not always to the same individual. Youth may test adult responses by seeking support for something they perceive as less risky or vulnerable, presenting hypothetical scenarios mixed with actual incidents of abuse, or by disclosing only a part of their victimization to determine if the listener may be trusted to handle disclosures that are more serious. By the time the full incident is revealed, the teen may be facing reactions of confusion, disbelief, and lack of support from adults. This, in turn can cause victims to retract elements of the disclosure or to try to deny the whole revelation (Summit, 1983). Youth who wait long periods of time before telling are often mistrusted and questioned. Some youth have to repeat the disclosure many times and be questioned by multiple authorities such as police, child protective services, health care providers, and prosecutors.

Factors Affecting Disclosure

A number of factors impact a youth’s decision to disclose sexual victimization including the victim’s age, gender, relationship to the perpetrator, and their cultural or religious affiliations. For the most part, these factors contribute to the youth’s fear about negative consequences which might result from telling. This fear seems to be the most difficult obstacle to telling about abuse (Terry et al., 2004).

Age: Older youth are less likely to disclose sexual victimization than younger youth because they have the cognitive abilities to anticipate and avoid unsupportive consequences.

Gender: Males are less likely to disclose than females. However, gender is not as significant as some other factors, such as the victim-perpetrator relationship.
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Victim-Perpetrator Relationship: More than 90% of the time, children and teens know the people who sexually assault them (Finkelhor et al., 2005). When the perpetrator is a relative or an acquaintance, victims are more likely to feel responsible for the assault and delay disclosing. In this dynamic, the abuse occurs when the victim and perpetrator are alone and the perpetrator encourages the victim to maintain secrecy. After the victim obeys, he or she feels some responsibility for the abuse and then delays disclosure.

Culture and Religion: In many cultural and religious groups living in the U.S., additional cultural imperatives exist about how to handle what are seen as the personal issues of sexual and domestic violence. Some of these attitudes stem from deep-rooted cultural mores, others from a general distrust of legal or professional intervention, preferring for these matters to be handled by the family or community with no outside involvement. Additionally, there is varied capacity amongst professionals to respond with culturally specific understanding.

Creating an Environment Which Communicates That Sexual Violence is Wrong

In order to restore young victims’ trust in adults, adults need to communicate that sexual violence is wrong, not the victim’s fault, and that there are people committed to stopping abuse and helping victims. These messages need to reach all youth in an effort to shape attitudes and build rapport before a young person experiences or witnesses sexual victimization. Strategies for creating such an environment include rejecting a “just world” outlook, rejecting the normalization of sexual violence, eliminating attitudes that minimize sexual abuse, and facilitating open discussions.

Reject a “Just World” Outlook

Victims and survivors of abuse may question the fairness of a world where others can hurt innocent people intentionally and where wide-scale victimization is seemingly allowed to continue unchallenged. Mary Gilfus (1999), a researcher who is herself a survivor of child sexual abuse, calls on others to join survivors in renouncing a “just world hypothesis” that promotes a perception that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get, and instead adopt a survivor-centered world-view grounded in the realities of what is known about victimization. Adopting a survivor-centered world view rejects normalization of abuse and resists denying the existence of race-, class-, and gender-based violence. Thus, adult acknowledgement that childhood is not the happiest time for every child and a demonstrated commitment to helping victims may encourage more youth to perceive more adults as being prepared to cope with disclosures of sexual violence.

Reject the Normalization of Sexual Violence

Normalization occurs when exposure to harmful material becomes common and people begin to perceive it as normal, becoming desensitized to its inappropriateness. There are many examples of media that normalize sexual violence through images that combine violence and sex in movie ads and music videos, or that sexualizes children and teens in advertising. This type of desensitization delays disclosure for some teen victims and survivors of abuse when they feel devastated by sexual violence but have no external validation to help them identify their experience as an offense about which they have any rights or recourse, because the experience has been normalized. Another example of normalization of sexual harm is when adult and teen perpetrators of sexual violence behave or talk inappropriately to victims in the presence of adults who do not get involved. High school students who are sexually harassed and assaulted at school in the presence of faculty may feel there is nothing to “tell” because a significant adult already “knows” and the adult’s failure to intervene just adds to the victims’ hopelessness and subsequent repression of feelings or desensitization to the abuse.

Efforts to break through attitudes of normalization and motivate others to intervene when witnessing or suspecting abuse are sometimes called “bystander education.” A bystander is somebody near an activity but not involved in it. It is a misnomer to call adults “bystanders” when they witness or suspect abuse of youth, because their presence in the company of children and youth obligates them to be involved. (Countering normalization requires attentive re-framing of how we even think and talk about the sexual victimization of youth.) Parents, grandparents, teachers, and other adults have a responsibility to help protect children from harm. In many states, any adult is legally mandated to report suspected sexual abuse of children to child protection authorities. Advocacy groups like Darkness to Light (www.darkness2light.org) and the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape’s Vision of Hope campaign (theirhope.org) call for increased adult responsibility for ending child sexual abuse and protecting youth.

Eliminate Attitudes that Minimize Sexual Violence

Attitudes related to normalization may also be a factor when adults do not react responsibly to the sexual abuse of children and teens. Adult responses sometimes promote minimizing the seriousness of violations and teach youth that sexual victimization is customary. When adults witness abuse or suspect victimization of children or teens and do not intercede to protect them, it confirms the sense that victims must cope with sexual violation alone, and contributes to delayed disclosures. Youth report that adults sometimes advise them not to take sexually exploitive behavior seriously; or adults may normalize it by telling girls and young women that it “happens to everyone” and it’s best to “put it behind” them.

Facilitate Open Discussions about Victimization

Discussions about literature, biography, art, and movies that explore social issues—including sexual violence—provide adults with practical ways to express and teach empathy for people going through difficulties. It also communicates that these topics are worthy of time and attention. Follow-up conversations with teens may include talking about ways people cope with traumatic events, and the portrayal of survivors as courageous and resilient. Such conversations can encourage victimized youth to believe that they also have options for getting support.

Working with Youth

Creating an environment in which sexual violence is not accepted and where youth feel safer in disclosing is very important. It is also important to develop methods for being accessible to youth who might disclose. These can include inquiring about victimization
experiences in general, staying receptive and open to youth who don’t disclose, and providing non-pressuring messages and accurate information.

Inquire About Additional Abuse When Working With Any Victim
In a study to examine the larger spectrum of violence, crime, and victimization that youth experience, Finkelhor and colleagues (2005) surveyed youth ages 2 to 17 years old. Only 29% of those youth reported no direct or indirect victimization in the 12-month period covered by the survey. Youth who experienced any type of victimization had a 69% chance of experiencing another episode during a single year, with an average of three victimizations per youth. Regarding sexual violence specifically, 1 in 12 children experienced a sexual victimization in the 12-month period, of these 97% suffered additional victimizations, especially assault (82%) and indirect victimization (84%). They were also the ones most likely to experience child maltreatment (43%) and property victimization (70%).

Since victimization of a diverse variety occurs frequently in the lives of children and teens, screening and counseling need to be open-ended enough to allow for unexpected and multiple answers. The need to inquire about additional victimization experiences is particularly great among children and teens who have already been identified as experiencing one form of victimization. Asking about only certain types of violence, such as child abuse alone, may result in a failure to reach youth who are sexually victimized. The identified problem, whether bullying, harassment, or dating violence, often occupies our full attention in supporting young victims; however, when talking with teens about a particular episode of witnessing or experiencing violence, ask specifically whether anyone else has hurt them. Many young people may not feel comfortable disclosing sexual abuse at the first opportunity. Adults who would help may tell a young person, “Talking about abuse can be difficult. When you are ready, we’re here to listen.”

Stay Receptive Even When Youth Don’t Disclose
Even teens who have received supportive messages will sometimes decide that the best, perhaps safest, option for them is to keep their victimization secret. Youth who are victimized by people they (and their families) know and trust may be reluctant to make themselves vulnerable to additional people by confiding abuse. These decisions are made more complicated when sexual victimization occurs in the context of managing other challenges and conflicts in their lives, including other forms of abuse.

Adults who suspect a child or teen is suffering, but cannot get enough details to help the youth directly, may feel pressured themselves. We may experience reactions similar to victims’: feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, and powerless—so it’s also important for adult allies to get support and to remember that a pressured environment does not facilitate disclosure or healing. Remaining open, nonjudgmental, and generally validating the worth and value of these teens may build their resilience for surviving the unnamed risks they manage.

Provide Non-Pressuring Messages
Showing sensitivity, the willingness to ask direct questions, and offering teens more information and written materials about different forms of sexual abuse helps build youth’s confidence in adult helpers. Ask teens if it would be safe to take literature home (such as books and brochures about sexual violence). Non-pressuring messages of care let teens know that adults may understand the complexity of issues youth struggle with and are able to offer information, options, and support.

Reporting Sexual Violence
Sexual assault remains the most underreported violent crime to any authority for both teens and adults (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 1999). The shock, shame, and stigma attached to being a victim of crime make it difficult even for adults to report victimization. Victims of sexual abuse face secondary trauma during the crisis of the disclosure process and teens face many additional obstacles to reporting to authorities: lack of understanding that what they experienced was a crime; fear that no one will believe them; fear of being blamed or punished; feelings of guilt, shame, and self-blame; fear of retaliation; mistrust of adults; belief that nothing will be done; lack of knowledge about available services; lack of access to services; and perceived and real limits of confidentiality (Whitman, 2006).

We often question why youth do not turn to adults for help after sexual victimization, but many child sexual violence survivors say that an adult did know about the abuse and took no action. For some teens, fear of being disbelieved and blamed by parents is the most significant factor weighed in the process of reporting sexual victimization (Lawson & Chaffin, 1992) and recanting disclosures to authorities. True recantations are rare, but Bradley and Wood (1996) found that half of young victims who “took back” reports of sexual victimization did so under pressure from a caregiver.

To understand underreporting of teen sexual violence to authorities, then, we need to explore the beliefs and actions of adult intermediaries between teen victims and reporting
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Authorities. Adults may need more information about the urgency of sexual violence against children and teens, how to respond to youth disclosures of sexual victimization, and how to make a report to police and child protective services. Young people need sources of information about their rights when they are victims of crime, including the right to “keep telling” until they get the safety and support they need.

Conclusion

We assume that if we make it safer for young people to tell the truth about their lives, more of them will tell us how they have been hurt. Some youth are prompted to disclose abuse when they receive prevention and outreach messages, when they have restorative experiences with adults and are hopeful they’ve met someone who can help them, and when they believe that there really is protection available to them and they feel more empowered to protect themselves.

When teens do disclose sexual victimization, their trust and autonomy need to be honored with responses telling them that they are believed, that it was not their fault, and with assurances that adults will work with them to get follow-up support and protection. Sexual assault counselor/advocates at rape crisis centers, child protective service workers, and police are some of the allied professionals who can respond to teens in the crisis of the disclosure process with safety planning, civil and criminal legal options, and referrals for immediate medical and emotional care.

References


Mitru Ciarlante, B.S., is Director of the Teen Victim Initiative at the National Center for Victims of Crime in Washington, D.C. She started the Children’s Advocacy program at Women’s Resources of Monroe County, Pennsylvania in 1986; is the founder of the Children’s Advocates’ Task Force of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence; runs a consulting business, Advocacy, Consultation, and Training for Change; and serves as a facilitator of Rallying Youth Organizers Together Against Rape (RYOT), the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape’s youth activist board. Copyright © 2007, Integrated Research Services, Inc.
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