

Preventing Sexual Re-victimization: Tailoring Prevention for Previously Victimized Women

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Ending violence against women and dismantling the societal conditions that support it is a primary aim of sexual violence prevention work. Until sexual violence is drastically reduced, however, we also need to continue to help girls and women develop self-protection skills that can be used in the face of an assault threat. Research suggests that the single most consistent risk factor for sexual victimization for women is a previous sexual assault. Women who have experienced sexual abuse are at 1.5 to 2.5 times greater risk for rape than women who have not been victimized.¹ At the same time, many prevention approaches that may be helpful for women generally have been shown to be ineffective for previously victimized women.²

Enhancing prevention for women who have already experienced a sexual assault requires understanding more about the unique dynamics that can increase these women's vulnerability. Research on re-victimization indicates that greater levels of traumatic impact from an early assault may increase a young person's vulnerability to re-assault. Specifically, girls or women who were victimized at younger ages, who experienced particularly severe assaults and/or who experienced other kinds of non-sexual trauma may be more vulnerable to later victimization. These factors may increase psychological and emotional distress following an assault, and make it more difficult for a woman to employ self-protective strategies in the future. Researchers Brian Marx and Karen Calhoun³, authors of a prevention program specifically for survivors of sexual assault, suggest that active post-traumatic stress symptoms and strong feelings of powerlessness (low self-efficacy) are two of the most formidable barriers to self-protection in the face of a sexual threat.

Contrary to what we might think, research also suggests that previously victimized women do not necessarily have a harder time noticing cues that someone might pose a threat. Women who have experienced a sexual assault appear to pick up on red flags as quickly and feel as uncomfortable as women who have not experienced previous sexual abuse. The difference may be that previously assaulted women have a harder time *acting* on those danger cues, and may take longer to make use of available self-protection strategies.⁴ This suggests that more practice and skill-building around the specific behaviors associated with leaving a dangerous situation may be helpful for women with earlier victimizations.

Additionally, sexual assault survivors are affected by the same social pressures that all women face; to be polite, to avoid making a scene and to form relationships with men. Indeed, many of the situations in which sexual assaults commonly occur are settings that women enter hoping to socialize, to make friends and perhaps make a romantic contact. For many young women, forming intimate relationships is a central and current developmental task. These dynamics can make it difficult to respond immediately and assertively when red flags for sexual assault begin to emerge, particularly if they come from someone in whom a woman has a friendly or romantic interest. In general, prevention efforts for all women may need to take better account of the complex mix of goals, hopes and social dynamics present for a woman as she considers how to respond to a threatening situation. Research from the University of Washington suggests that some previously victimized women may have even higher expectations for relationships or romantic connections than other women, placing them at a greater disadvantage in responding to a possible threat.⁵

Taken together, these findings suggest some concrete strategies for enhancing our prevention work with survivors:

- When possible, it may be important to provide prevention education for groups consisting solely of sexual assault survivors. This may be best done in small groups, where women can support and learn from each other. Prevention work also may be best done after women have had the opportunity to access therapeutic resources or have had time to heal. Prevention work should always start with the stated assumption that women never invite assault.
- Previously victimized women may benefit from more practice using self-protective strategies. Viewing or participating in role plays in which they have the opportunity to respond early and assertively to potential threat may increase women's ability to employ these tools later. Research suggests that responding assertively and even physically to a sexually coercive situation is often the most effective avoidance strategy.⁶
- In an intervention designed by researchers specifically for survivors of sexual assault, women are asked to consider their own personal risk factors for sexual victimization.⁷ In addition to reviewing common sexual assault red flags and risks, women are asked to think about their own lives and identify the risks that may be most relevant to them. Women can then role play how they might respond if one of these factors emerges.
- Women are often as good or better at thinking about how to help keep a friend safe as they are about considering their own safety. Prevention work with friendship groups, or using a "what would you advise your friend" scenario may help women generate strategies that can also apply to themselves.

Acknowledging the full range of hopes, goals and thoughts that can be present in the midst of a threatening situation may be important for all women. Role plays can help women practice ways to respond to situations in which they struggle with competing goals such as safety and romantic interest in the source of threat. Additionally, practice may help women generate strategies for anticipating and managing powerful thoughts and feelings that can make it difficult to act self-protectively. Simply telling women to get away from potential threat may not address the very real and complex pressures and emotions present for someone at the time of an assault.

Sexual assault is never the fault of the victim and exploring how to enhance prevention work for previously victimized women in no way implies that women who have experienced a sexual assault somehow cause future victimizations to occur. Evidence exists, however, that previously victimized women may need more support in utilizing self-protective strategies. To effectively reduce vulnerability for all women, tailored approaches to sexual violence prevention for previously victimized women are important.

¹ Arata, C.M. (2002) Child sexual abuse and sexual revictimization. *Clinical Psychology, Research and Practice* 9 (2) 135-164.

² Gidycz, C., Coble, C., Latham, L., & Layman, M. (1993). Sexual assault experience in adulthood and prior victimization experiences. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 17, 151-168.

³ Personal communication, September, 2003.

⁴ Arata, 2002.

⁵ Personal communication, Paula Nurius, University of Washington School of Social Work.

⁶ Ullman, S.E. (2002) Rape avoidance: Self-protection strategies for women. In Paul Schewe, Ed., *Preventing Violence in Relationships*. Washington, DC: APA.

⁷ Marx, B.P., Calhoun, K.S., Wilson, A.E., Meyerson, L.A. (2001) Sexual revictimization prevention: An outcome evaluation. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 69 (1) 25-32.