THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SURVIVORS RECEIVING A SEXUAL ASSAULT DISCLOSURE FROM A FRIEND

RESEARCH TEAM
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RATIONAL
• Sexual assault (SA) is a pervasive problem on college campuses, with about 1 in 5 U.S. college women experiencing SA.
• Although studies show that most female U.S. college women experiencing SA.
• Participants
• Interviews conducted via Zoom or phone
• Instrument & Procedure
• Analysis: Consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill, 2012)
• (a) identification of domains (broad areas used to group interview data), (b) identification of core ideas (descriptive & concise summaries capturing essence of participants’ narratives), (c) cross analysis (construction of categories that describe common themes emerging across interviews), and (d) auditing of findings
• Instrument & Procedure: Semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom or phone
• Participants: 18 female survivors of SA while in college who subsequently received disclosure of SA from a friend
• Age: M = 22
  • Race: White = 13; Biracial = 2; Black = 1; Asian = 1; Hispanic = 1
  • Sexual orientation: Heterosexual = 13; Bisexual = 3; Pansexual = 2
  • Representative of geographically diverse U.S. colleges

METHOD

Conclusions
• Survivors made considerable efforts to emotionally support their friend, validate their friend’s feelings, shift the blame away from their friend and onto the perpetrator, and let their friend take control of the conversation and any actions that followed.
• Overall, survivors perceived their responses to be helpful to their friend, though most identified at least one aspect of their responses they regret.
• Participants leveraged their personal experience of SA (e.g., what helped them cope or what they wanted to hear from others) to best support their friend.
• Receiving a disclosure puts SA survivors at risk of distress and re-experiencing negative emotions or memories from their SA.
• Participants said their friendship grew closer after the disclosure and they felt less alone.
• A friend’s disclosure led some participants to reframe their thoughts about their SA in a more adaptive way and to take steps to cope with their own SA, including talking about it or seeking therapy.
• Most participants sought assistance from others in order to better support their friend and/or to help them cope with the emotional impact of receiving the disclosure.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS
• Survivors of SA may be uniquely equipped to empathize with and successfully support a friend who experiences a SA due to their shared experience.
• Though receiving a disclosure of SA from a friend can be re-traumatizing for survivors, pathways to recovery can also grow out of the experience of sharing this negative experience with a friend.
• Counselors working with survivors of SA should be knowledgeable about potential areas of growth and vulnerability resulting from their clients hearing a friend’s SA disclosure. They should be trained in how to support survivors who become distressed as a result of receiving a disclosure. Survivors might consult counselors on how to help their friend while also seeking support themselves to cope with the disclosure’s impact on them.

MAIN FINDINGS

Perception of Response to Friend’s Disclosure
• Helpful
  • “I felt like I responded in a good way… I felt like my response was something that she needed.”

Overall Impact of Friend’s Disclosure
• Reminded Participant of Own SA
  • “You see how they’re feeling and it reminds you of everything and you feel it — you feel theirs like you felt yours… And seeing that, it hurts knowing that they’re going through what you went through. And it brings back all your memories.”

• Wish They Could Have Done More or Responded Differently
  • “I thought I was doing the right thing by giving her all these resources, but I probably should’ve waited for her to share what she wanted to do and then given her appropriate resources at that point instead.”

Response to Friend’s Disclosure
• Emotional Support & Validation of Feelings
  • “I remember just trying to be there for her and comfort her, I was giving her lots of hugs and just trying to help her through it.”

• Shifting the Blame
  • “I said to her it’s not her fault. Because we both harbored these feelings of guilt.”

• Kind of reinforced that it was an assault like, ‘you didn’t consent to it. It was not okay that that person did that to you.’

• Prompted Participant to Cope with Own SA
  • “Having watched her go to therapy, talk to her mom, all this stuff… It kind of made more sense for me. It just seemed a little less daunting to do all the things I needed to do in order to get over it.”

• Prompted Participant to Reflect on Broader Issue of SA
  • “It also made me realize just how often this happens. And how terrible our current system is for reporting these [assaults].”

• Gave Friend Control
  • “I told her that she didn’t have to tell me anything that she didn’t want to tell me.”

• “I think the most helpful thing that I gave her was the autonomy to choose who she reports to and when. If she would want to take it higher.”

Emotional Reaction to Friend’s Disclosure
• Angry
  • “I was mad more than anything that it had happened… It made me mad that someone would do that to my friend.”

• Sad/Upset
  • “It just made me upset to know that she had been through something that was really scary and obviously was very upsetting to her. And that made me sad because obviously I don’t want her to be going through that.”

• Shocked/Confused
  • “I was definitely a little caught off guard.”

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