



Sue Ann Says: Sexual assault can occur in intimate relationships

A male stranger in a dark alley forces a woman to submit to sexual acts. We call it sexual assault or rape. But what if the woman is dating the man? Or is married to him?

“This is the most under-recognized form of sexual assault,” Christine Maghrak told me. Herself a survivor of domestic abuse, Christine is a clinical nurse specialist with St. Joseph’s Hospital in Marshfield and often works with survivors of sexual assault. She also trains parish nurses who work with our Foundation’s programs to help women in abusive relationships. Sexual assault by a spouse, significant other or a date is called “intimate partner sexual abuse.”

Understanding sexual assault

Sexual assault is an act of violence using sexual contact as the weapon. It encompasses any instance of being forced, pressured or manipulated to participate in any unwanted sexual activity.

Most people think that sexual assault occurs between strangers. In fact, about nine out of 10 victims know the person who assaulted them. However, statistics are based on what is reported, limiting our understanding about the true scope of the problem. Christine told me that the abusive partner may also victimize the woman experiencing domestic violence with sexual assault. Heterosexual physical and sexual violence among adult intimate partners is typically male against female.

Most victims of sexual assault do not report the crime or even seek help. This is especially true of women who are assaulted by an intimate partner. These women usually don’t realize that the assault is a crime. They feel depressed, isolated, shamed, guilty, fearful of their partner and afraid to leave the relationship.

Cultural attitudes toward female sexuality are part of the problem, Christine said. “The traditional values of performing ‘wifely duties’ is prevalent. This is consistent with the outdated notions that a wife is a piece of property and the ‘owner’ can do what he wants with his property. As a result, women in an intimate relationship may feel pressured to have sex even though they want to say no.”

Like all forms of abuse, intimate partner sexual abuse is usually part of an overall pattern of verbal, emotional and physical tactics the perpetrator uses to maintain power and control over the partner. This could include pressure to engage in sexual activity or to engage in sexual acts with which she feels uncomfortable, threats such as, “I’ll get sex somewhere else if I don’t get it from you,” and guilt trips like, “I’m so attracted to you that I can’t help myself.”

“Every woman has the right to say no to a sexual encounter. Wives are not obligated to have sex with their husband,” Christine emphasized. “It’s no different from the stranger in the alley. If an intimate partner forces unwanted sexual activity, that is a crime.”

When a woman is sexually assaulted by an intimate partner, her mental and physical health are compromised. Her self-respect and personal dignity are eroded. Children are impacted too. Not unexpectedly, the incidence of depression and behavior problems is higher among children who are exposed to abuse against their mother.

It is important that victims of intimate partner sexual assault receive the same compassion and care as other survivors of sexual assault. In fact, when the perpetrator is an intimate partner, safety concerns are paramount.

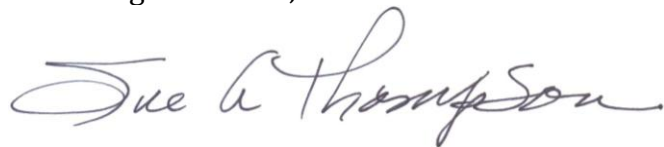
What we can do

If you have been sexually assaulted by an intimate partner, get help.

- Find someone safe to confide in such as a trusted family member, friend, physician, ER nurse or pastor. The Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault Web site provides a county-by-county list of medical and counseling providers, shelters, legal advice and other resources. Go to www.wcsa.org. You can also obtain round-the-clock help through the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-SAFE and the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800-656-4673.
- Work with a counselor or trusted friend to create a safety plan for yourself.

What can the rest of us do? April is sexual assault awareness month. Let's use this time to educate ourselves about how we can help end violence and protect families. You'll find a wealth of articles and resources on our Web site at www.wwhf.org and at the Coalition's site at www.wcsa.org. Let's offer our support to women we suspect might be involved in a sexually abusive intimate relationship. Sexual abuse continues because of our silence and unwillingness to address it. Let's speak out. Confront behaviors and attitudes that lead to sexual violence. Advocate for justice, awareness and prevention, and greater access to services. And let's vow not to stop when the month is over. Let's join forces to make this a safer world for each other and for our families. Because it all begins with a healthy woman.

Yours in good health,



Sue Ann Thompson
Founder & president
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The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF presents women's health education and outreach programs, funds women's health research, provides scholarships for women in academic medicine, and publishes resource materials. Your donations help WWHF reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more about WWHF, visit www.wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.