Health, Recovery & the impact of Social Support after Sexual Assault

A Norwegian Perspective

Lisa Arntzen

Break the Silence, Prague, 22.10.19
• What are the potential health consequences of sexual assault?
• What role does social support play in the healing process?
• How to recover from the trauma of sexual assault?
Sexual assault in Norway

- It is estimated that 9.4% of women and 1.1% of men are victims of rape, and 1 in 3 women and 1 in 10 men will experience some form of sexual abuse during their lifetime.

- Nearly half of the women (49%) who report being raped experienced the assault before the age of 18.

- Only 11% of rape victims seek medical help immediately after the assault.

- Nearly one third (29%) never tell anyone about the assault.

*Thøresen & Hjemdal (2014)*
Mental health consequences

- Victims of violence and rape report a poorer state of mental health compared to non-victims.

- There is a clear link between the amount of violence categories victims were exposed to and level of mental health problems.

- Victims report higher levels of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and post traumatic stress reactions.

_Thoresen & Hjemdal (2014)_
Studies show

Approximately half of rape victims meet the criteria for post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression six months after the assault

Tiihonen, 2015
Physical health problems

- Physical injuries
- Headache
- Nausea
- Back and neck pains
- Pelvic pains
- Digestion problems
- Sexually transmittable diseases

Stein et al. 2004; Garcia-Moreno et al. 2013
Potential long term consequences

- Depression and anxiety
- PTSD
- Substance abuse
- Self harm
- Suicidal thoughts
- Eating disorders
- Drop out of school or absence from work
- Isolation and trust issues
- Violent or aggressive behavior
- Increased risk of revictimization

*Dyregov, 2008; Resnick et.al.*
*2012*
Prior research on health consequences

- Studies following victims over time have had a low response rate and high drop-out.
- Although we know much about potential health consequences, we still know little about the occurrence of conditions other than PTSD.
- Little knowledge about whether help services actually meet the victims needs.

*Campbell, Sprauge & Sullivan (2011)*
Help services and systems in Norway

- Friends & Family
- Therapy
- Local doctor
- Crisis Center
- Support Center for Rape Victims
- Sexual Assault Center (ER/Hospital)
- Police
- Dismissal
- Court
- Lawyer
- State Compensation
- Restorative Justice
Social support

• Social support is one of the key factors in retrieving good health after sexual assault (Brewin, Andrews og Valentine, 2000)

• Victims receive mixed reactions from their social network (Ullmann et.al.2010)

• Lack of support can lead to isolation (Aakvaag og Strøm, 2019)

• Lack of support can create barriers to seeking professional help or reporting to police (Aakvaag og Strøm, 2019; Østby og Stefansen, 2017)

• Receiving negative reactions can be more harmful than not receiving any support at all (Campbell, Ahrens, Sefi, Wasco og Barnes, 2001)
In a recent study

Rape victims said:
1) They did not receive sufficient information about how and where to get help
2) That professional caregivers lacked knowledge about rape trauma reactions and effective therapeutic interventions
3) That their social network (friends and family) did not get any advice on how to support the victim

Arntzen (2019)
Therapeutic interventions

• Previous studies indicate that cognitive behavioral interventions, exposure interventions and eye movement desensitization (EMDR) are effective at improving mental health.

• BUT statistical tests of comparative effectiveness did not demonstrate that one intervention was significantly more effective than another.

• ”All treatment is better than no treatment”?

• More research is needed

Parcesepe et.al. 2015
Improvement? Factors in therapy

- 40% OUTSIDE THERAPY
- 30% RELATION
- 15% HOPE
- 15% METHOD

Lambert, 1992
How can helpers increase health prognosis?

• Create safe environments to increase chances that victims expose their experiences
• Let them know we believe and support them
• Educate ourselves on common reactions and latest research on therapeutic interventions
• Develop institutions so that they meet victims needs for help and support
• Increase public knowledge about help services
• Offer support and advice to the victims social network
Thank you for listening!

Lisa Arntzen
Social worker and family therapist
Norwegian Center for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies
Oslo

Email: l.u.arntzen@knvts.no


Resources


