

The importance of therapy after sexual assault

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This year's Golden Globes will adopt a more serious tone as many celebrity women take a stand against sexual harassment and sexual assault by wearing black attire. This and other recent movements against sexual assault are helping to shed light on a difficult and little-discussed topic and may help victims on their healing journey, according to a Baylor College of Medicine expert.

"It is very common that people don't speak up about [sexual assault](#) and harassment, especially if there is a power differential and they fear that they won't be believed," said Dr. Karen Lawson, a clinical psychologist and assistant professor in the Menninger Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Baylor. "Historically, there also has been a belief that men have a right to act in certain ways and that women need to be quiet and not speak up on their own behalf. That's changing, but that is still a scenario that is very common."

Lawson added that decades of sexual perpetration research has shown that perpetrators will say things or do things to make the victim stay quiet. They use manipulative tactics and comments to attempt to place blame on a person being victimized in order to keep them quiet and to keep them from reporting or retaliating.

However, with the rise of movements such as #MeToo, more and more people feel that it is safer to come forward with their experiences and now have the opportunity to speak up, Lawson said.

"These movements are ways to give a voice to individuals, men and women, who may have been victimized in some way but haven't dared talk about it," she said. "We've seen some very large names come forward with their stories, which helps other victims realize that they are not alone. Sexual victimization crosses all socioeconomic levels, cultures, races and genders."

For victims of unwanted sexual encounters, the healing process can be a journey, said Lawson, but the necessary first step is to recognize that the encounter happened, and it may be part of why a person is experiencing feelings of unrest, distress or depression.

"Once one recognizes these feelings, seeking professional help is typically a very healthy avenue. Part of what therapists do is listen and maintain a nonjudgmental position. It provides a healthy and safe venue to talk about the event, how it has impacted the person and to explore any other symptoms that might be there," she said.

If someone opens up to family members or friends about their experience, it is important for the listener to be supportive and nonjudgmental, Lawson said. You want to leave the decision-making to the person affected and not force them in any particular direction. It is important to remain available and open to what they might need.

"In general we are all finding that this behavior has gone on a lot more frequently than anyone realized. Once an opening occurs such as the #MeToo movement, it has been astonishing to realize the number of people impacted. It appears that many people affected by sexual assault are finally feeling more able to speak up," Lawson said.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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