The Mental Health Impact of Rape

The National Women's Study (Kilpatrick, Edmunds, and Seymour 1992) produced dramatic confirmation of the mental health impact of rape by determining comparative rates of several mental health problems among rape victims and women who had never been victims of rape. The study ascertained whether rape victims were more likely than women who had never been crime victims to experience these devastating mental health problems.

POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

The first mental health problem examined was posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), an extremely debilitating mental health disorder occurring after a highly disturbing traumatic event, such as military combat or violent crime.

- Almost one-third (31%) of all rape victims developed PTSD sometime during their lifetimes and more than one in ten rape victims (11%) still has PTSD at the present time.

- Rape victims were 6.2 times more likely to develop PTSD than women who had never been victims of crime (31% v. 56%).

OTHER MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

- 30 percent of rape victims had experienced at least one major depressive episode in their lifetimes and 11 percent of all rape victims were experiencing a major depressive episode at the time of assessment. In contrast, only 10 percent of women never victimized by violent crime had ever had a major depressive episode and only 6% had a major depressive episode when assessed.

- Thus, rape victims were three times more likely than nonvictims of crime to have ever had a major depressive episode (30% v. 10%) and were 3.5 times more likely to be currently experiencing a major depressive episode (21% v. 6%).

- Some mental heath problems are life-threatening in nature. When asked if they ever thought seriously about committing suicide rape victims' answers reflected the following findings: 33% of the rape victims and 8% of the nonvictims of crime stated that they had seriously considered suicide.

- Thus, rape victims were 4.1 times more likely than noncrime victims to have contemplated suicide. Rape victims were also 13 times more likely than noncrime victims to have actually made a suicide attempt (13% vs 1%).

- Finally, there was substantial evidence that rape victims had higher rates of drug and alcohol consumption and a greater likelihood of having drug and alcohol-related problems than nonvictims. Compared to women who had never been crime victims, rape victims with RR-PTSD showed the following results:
• 13.4 times more likely to have two or more major alcohol problems (20.1% vs. 1.5%).

• 26 times more likely to have two or more major serious drug abuse problems (7.8% vs. 0.3%).
THE EFFECTS OF RAPE

A. The effect of rape on victims varies considerably.

1. Rape shatters a person’s idea of a just world, creating instead a vision of the world as scary, unpredictable and chaotic.

2. For someone who was unconscious during her assault and never saw her attacker’s face, any stranger on the street could be her attacker. During an acquaintance rape, someone the victim knew, probably trusted and possibly loved, committed a grave act of betrayal through the assault. She may now have difficulty trusting even her closest friends and family members.

3. No one victim goes through the exact same healing process.

4. For some victims, recovery begins soon after the attack; for others, recovery may begin years later. The after-effects of the assault are described by symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Rape Trauma Syndrome.

5. Effects may be seen when victims try to remember details of the event. Often the mind protects the victim by making some memories difficult or impossible to remember. These memories may come back slowly or never.