Module 7: Effects of Sexual Assault on Males

Purpose

The purpose of this module is to examine common myths of male sexual assault; discuss some basic statistics; examine how male biology, emotions, and socialization affect male response to sexual assault; and discuss how victim service providers can provide support to male victims of sexual assault.

Lessons

1. Myth or Fact?
2. Gender Socialization
3. Assisting Male Survivors of Sexual Assault

Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- Distinguish fact from myth regarding male sexual assault.
- Discuss gender socialization.
- Describe the effects of sexual assault on males.
- Discuss how to assist males who have been victims of sexual assault.

Participant Worksheet

- Worksheet 7.1, Themes and Beliefs Related to Male Sexual Assault

1. Myth or Fact?

The activity explores some of the myths about male sexual assault.

2. Gender Socialization

Because female sexual assault is more commonly reported than male sexual assault, you may never work with a male victim. If you do, however, you need to understand how and why males have some reactions that are very different from those of females.

Gender socialization is the process of learning the social expectations and attitudes associated with one's sex. Gender socialization can shape emotional impacts and how males and females experience, understand, and respond to them. The socialization of gender begins as soon as a baby is born and continues for the rest of his or her life. Gender socialization can differ based on culture and household beliefs.

As infants, males are more emotionally reactive and expressive than females. They are more easily startled, excited, frustrated, and distressed. Compared to female infants, they also cry sooner and more often.

By the age of 6 or 7, most of the important lessons in male socialization have been learned. By middle school, boys are less aware, less expressive, and less empathic toward others and themselves. They have been pervasively and deeply conditioned to respond in these ways (Zilbergeld 1992).

Boys learn expected gender roles, including how to suppress, hide, deny, and feel ashamed of vulnerable emotions from parents, peers, teachers and coaches, the media, and role models. For example, researchers have found that parents—without even realizing they are doing it—talk less about emotional experiences in their conversations with boys than they do with girls.

Most young males have probably heard, more than once, "Don't act like a girl," "Act like a man!" and "Man up!" Males, particularly during childhood, suffer negative consequences if they do things that don't conform to masculine gender stereotypes. Females are supposed to be more feeling, more expressive, and more people oriented, which are certainly positive human qualities.

Homophobia, in this sense a fear of being perceived as gay, is said to be perhaps the greatest pressure boys face while growing up and is considered the ultimate weapon in reinforcing rigid sex-role conformity (Friedman 1989).

Rigid gender and sex-role stereotypes make it harder for males to establish meaningful and intimate relationships with other men and women. They also set up boys and girls for male-female relationships based on male superiority, preventing equality and true intimacy (Neisen 1990).

Being so pervasively and deeply conditioned to suppress experiences and expressions of emotional vulnerability not only limits males' capacities for emotional maturity and intimacy, but also makes it harder for them to acknowledge, seek help, and heal from the impacts of sexual assault.

Victim advocates who understand these realities can be much more empathic toward males who have been sexually assaulted. They will have more appreciation of how sexual victimization can affect males differently from their female victims.

They can be more accepting of males' tendencies to suppress and deny emotional and other impacts, and more accepting of the ways males may be emotionally disconnected and "difficult to engage" or work with.

With this knowledge, victim advocates will be better able to provide opportunities for males to reflect upon—and start freeing themselves from—the ways that masculine gender socialization has shaped their responses to being sexually assaulted and their capacities to heal and seek justice.

It's important to understand that gender is a moral dimension of identity. Morality isn't just about what we do, but *who we are.* Morality is about good ways to be a father or a mother, a friend, a victim advocate, a boy or girl, a man or woman.

Even if we don't reflect on it or put it into words, we can't help but constantly evaluate ourselves in terms of how close or far we are from our ideal visions of how we should be. We often can't help but feel that we're moving toward or away from our images of how we should be.

These evaluations—whether automatic and outside of awareness, or consciously thought about—have significant emotional effects on us. They can lead to happiness or sadness, pride or shame, hope or despair.

Thus, all of the messages and conditioning that boys and men receive about how boys and "real men" should be, about what qualities and behaviors make boys and men admirable or respectable *as boys and men*, focus on the good ways of being male. These are moral messages.

As victim advocates, it can be very helpful to keep this in mind. Doing so can reduce frustration with and judgments toward males who have trouble thinking and talking about what happened, how it has affected them, and what is involved in healing.

Male identity—at least as boys and men are conditioned to understand and embody it as a *moral* aspect of identity—involves particular kinds of thoughts, experiences, and behaviors.

Key thoughts about masculinity that inform conventional male identity include beliefs about masculinity, self, and relationships. "I have to be a real man," "real men never cry," "real men never look weak," "a real man never lets a woman push him around," and "a real man never lets anyone get away with disrespecting him."

Core experiences that make up the conventional masculine identity include having less awareness and empathy toward vulnerable feelings like sadness and shame, both within oneself and others.

They also include experiencing fear and vulnerability of any kind as bad and unsafe, while in comparison anger is experienced as good and safe. Feelings of anger are often experienced as powerful, protective, and central to what it means to be male.

Finally, the male identity is based on behaving in certain stereotypical ways. Being dominant and aggressive toward others, both male and female, is seen as very masculine. Indeed, the conventional masculine identity requires men to actively suppress the experience and expression of vulnerable emotions, and many conventionally male behaviors—including becoming angry and aggressive toward anyone who disrespects or attempts to dominate them, laughing and joking when one is actually experiencing significant emotional or physical pain—are largely about just that: suppressing the experience and expression of vulnerability.

Tragically, many aspects of this conventional masculine identity make men more likely to commit physical and sexual violence against others, especially girls and women. At the same time, taking on this masculine identity impairs and impedes boys' and men's abilities to recover from being sexually assaulted.

Social and cultural conditioning of how males relate to their emotions are so strong in our society that they are hard to overcome. Simply having different thoughts and beliefs, including feminist ones, is not enough to overcome that conditioning. Essentially, such conditioning rewires the brain and deeply ingrains habits for relating to emotions, especially vulnerable ones.

Overcoming that conditioning takes lots of effort and discipline, not only about what one thinks, but about how one habitually relates to emotions. We are all susceptible to cultural norms and social mores.

For males, this conditioning results in less emotional awareness, expressiveness, and empathy toward vulnerable emotions. It makes them likely to fear, hide, deny, and feel shame and contempt for feelings such as sadness, helplessness, and fear.

It's very difficult to overcome—though it's certainly possible with the right supports and disciplined efforts.

Sexual assault totally contradicts male identity. The victim no longer feels strong or in control—let alone invincible. He may feel "weak," like he was a coward to "let it happen," and ashamed that he was unable to defend himself.

In other words, his identification with the traits of his male identity, ingrained in him since birth, can be shattered. The victim does not know how to deal with the overwhelming vulnerable emotions evoked by the assault because he has always been told it's not OK for a male to be vulnerable, and he hasn't been taught constructive and effective ways of experiencing and dealing with such vulnerability.

All of this is a result of social conditioning, the expectation that he "be a man," and how these have deeply shaped his thinking, experience, behavior, and perception of manhood (Lisak 1994).

3. Assisting Male Survivors of Sexual Assault

Social conditioning has a great deal to do with why males don't seek help. Females often don't seek help either, but for males, it's "unmanly" to be victimized, or even need help—let alone ask for it.

Men may find it difficult to discuss the victimization for fear of being judged as weak or vulnerable, and "not a real man." Again, they have not been socialized to share vulnerable feelings, so it's very difficult to seek assistance or to know what to say even when they try.

Since men can have an erection and may even ejaculate, men may become confused about that reaction. Many men believe if they have an erection, it meant they wanted it or enjoyed it (Fuchs 2004). This is another reason why men may not report the assault or not want to discuss this with police or the advocate.

In an article published in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, Dr. David Lisak (1994) reports on interviews he conducted with males who had experienced sexual abuse or assault.

Some of the themes and beliefs expressed by the men he interviewed included lack of public awareness and acceptance of male victims and the theme of the unmanliness of being a victim, needing and seeking help, and talking about and sharing feelings.

Men who have been sexually assaulted often have common questions or comments that relate to three themes:

- Legitimacy—the inability of a victim to acknowledge that he was sexually assaulted and that the crime had affected him, or the inability to see men as victims.
- Masculinity—the difficulty reconciling the fact that "real men" do not acknowledge and certainly do not express their own pain, vulnerability, or feelings of helplessness.
- Homosexuality—a victim's confusion about his sexuality or sexual orientation, or fear of homosexuality.

The activity addresses themes and beliefs related to male sexual assault.

For all the reasons we've discussed, men who are sexually assaulted are highly unlikely to report their victimization or to seek medical or mental health services. Because reporting is infrequent, services for male survivors of sexual assault have not been as prevalent as those for women.

There are few resources specifically designed for sexually assaulted men. The ones that do exist often fail to address homophobia and sexism, or they fail to challenge stereotypical notions of the male gender role that perpetuate shame and feelings of inadequacy and guilt.

Furthermore, services rarely recognize the specific needs of gay or transgender individuals who have been sexually assaulted (Munro 2000). It is not surprising, then, that male sexual assault may be severely underreported (Tewksbury 2007).

Generating awareness of male sexual assault among advocates, victim service providers, and counselors is the first step toward developing reliable and useful services for male sexual assault victims. Support services need to be available that are knowledgeable and understanding of the specific needs of male victims, whether they are straight, gay, or transgender.

Understanding Victim Behaviors

Because an assault so totally contradicts what males are supposed to experience and how they're supposed to be, normal masculine gender identity may no longer be an option for some victims.

One way for victim service providers to understand how sexual assault affects males is in terms of a choice that is forced upon victims after the assault. Men who survive sexual assault may not put much reflection into this choice, but they do end up choosing by the ways they think and behave after sexual assault. The choices often take three paths:

Option A: Hypermasculinity. One choice is to become hypermasculine, to attempt to prove to oneself and everyone else that he not only is a "real man" but supermasculine. Insecurity and fear drive this choice, as well as the constant internal pressure to live up to this extreme version of masculinity.

Many men on this path are not aware of having made such a choice, in part because it would be too frightening to admit, even to themselves, that they feel a need to overcome the impacts of the sexual victimization they experienced.

Tragically, males who make this choice and head down this path are often at increased risk to victimize others—emotionally, physically, and/or sexually. Some who have been on this path sometimes tire of its hardships or are helped to see the harm it is causing themselves and others.

Option B: Nonmasculinity. Other men who have been sexually assaulted make another choice: simply to give up on being what society has defined as "real men," and resign themselves to a nonmasculine identity. This can be accompanied by feelings of failure, defeat, depression, and demoralization.

It literally is a demoralization for these men, because they have been, as many male victims of sexual assault have said, "robbed" of their masculinity and the moral foundation it had contributed to.

Option C: Healthy masculinity. Some men make yet another choice: to question and challenge masculine gender norms and work to create an alternative masculine identity that is more positive and healthy than the stereotypical version. Simply reporting the crime and working with a victim advocate can be examples of such resistance and challenge, and you can acknowledge the strength and courage it takes for him to do so.

This choice is usually very consciously made, at least at some point along the way, although it may take him a while to arrive at it.

A victim also may choose this option if he is revictimized, or if someone he loves has been assaulted, which can bring an opportunity for openness to assistance from mental health professionals and victim advocates.

Providing Assistance

If you are working with a man who has already made one of these choices, it will determine how you relate to him. As a victim service provider, you may be able to help him reflect on whether and how he has made such choices, maybe without realizing he has done so; or whether he feels the need to make such choices now.

For men who have chosen the hypermasculine or nonmasculine options, a victim service provider can acknowledge how the sexual assault has forced them to make choices about their masculine identity and behavior, choices they may have made with little or no conscious deliberation.

The victim service provider can let them know that it's possible to develop an identity that includes human qualities conventionally ascribed only to males or females. Other men who've been sexually assaulted have done just that, and become stronger and more complete human beings.

Victim advocates also can tell victims that other males have had similar reactions, at least at first, and that it is totally normal and understandable. We discuss the same with women: it is a normal response to an abnormal situation.

For men who choose the healthy masculinity option, and who are ready to hear this and are receptive, confirm that it "totally makes sense" that he would have these questions and concerns given how he, like all boys and men, has always gotten the messages that "real men" can't be sexually victimized, that sexual contact with males either means you're gay or it happened because you're gay, and other messages.

Acknowledge his courage for facing what he has been through and seeking help, in spite of social conditioning that makes it difficult to do so.

Recognize that he has reservoirs of strength to work through the process and overcome what has happened.

Depending on how the victim responds to your comments, or if he offers to engage in reflecting on how masculine gender socialization has shaped his understanding of what happened, you might help him sort out what actually makes sense, as opposed to what he's been taught all his life.

At some point in such a conversation, if he feels safe having it, you might point out that his questions and concerns are based on myths about males and sexual assault, and offer factual information that contradicts those myths.

It's important that you help him sort these things out for himself, and as much as possible arrive at these realizations on his own, with your support, rather than simply telling him what's myth and what's fact. As you would with anyone, take your cues from the victim with whom you are working.

You might also discuss the following topics with male victims, if they seem to be open to the discussion and it is appropriate to the situation.

Negative reactions: Be aware that others may have negative reactions to the crime. For example, male victims of female perpetrators may minimize the seriousness of their feelings about their assault due to a belief that they were supposed to "enjoy" it. Gay and bisexual victims of male perpetrators may receive particularly blaming or homophobic reactions. Negative reactions from others serve to reinforce the victim's own negative attributions about the assault, and also serve as secondary victimization (Williams 1984).

Sexual aspects: Many men focus on the sexual aspect of the assault and not the totality. They may overlook the fact that they were coerced, had an unequal relationship with the perpetrator, were overwhelmed in a gang attack, or may have been emotionally abused. Helping them understand all aspects of the assault helps to reduce guilt and self-blame.

Effects on relationships: Many men do not consider how the crime may have affected their relationships. They may have viewed coping strategies as weaknesses rather than protective measures. Reminding the victim that the assault affects others—their partners, their families—helps to reduce tendencies to minimize the assault.

Sometimes, reactions from friends, families, and partners can be very negative (Walker et al. 2005). Disbelief and the partner's own grief may interfere with the support the victim needs.

Social conditioning: Help the victim understand that the messages they received at home and from society about being male can affect how they feel about the assault. You can help the victim examine how these messages left them vulnerable to feeling ashamed and viewing the crime as negatively affecting their masculinity.

Permission to feel and to have needs: Many men have never let themselves cry or feel bad about the assault. Also, if a man's emotional needs were rebuffed as a child, he may feel that his needs are not important, and that other men are not supportive.

Men need to have opportunities to receive support from other men and to affirm their male identity. Encouraging and supporting men in expressing their feelings can be valuable, especially if the victim chooses to go to group therapy with other male survivors.

Sexuality: Men who have been sexually assaulted need to explore their beliefs and problems with sexuality as it relates to the assault. Ambivalence and confusion may be an important part of the healing process for both gay and straight men. Be open about homosexuality, bisexuality, and straight sexuality.

In short, you can give victims support, encouragement, and hope.

Regardless of the path a male survivor chooses after an assault, he may display emotional responses that will negatively affect his ability to heal.

As we've discussed, a male survivor's reaction to sexual assault may be very different from a female's. Men suffer distress and depression as women do, but a male survivor of sexual assault may be more likely to attempt to self-medicate with alcohol and drugs, show more anger and hostility to others (including support systems), withdraw from social contacts, display some form of posttraumatic stress disorder, or demonstrate confusion and sexual anxiety or dysfunction.

Do not hesitate to refer a male survivor to counseling or therapy if you feel it is necessary.

If you believe the victim should receive therapy, you can recommend individual or group approaches. Some therapists believe that individual therapy may be best suited to the initial stages of treatment, and that group therapy is the most useful approach for healing and change. Males may become isolated after they are sexually assaulted, and most have a profound need to connect with other men and to explore how they have been affected.

As an advocate or victim service provider, you should be prepared to recognize these emotions and offer the appropriate assistance or referrals.

Additional Considerations

However well-intentioned or helpful to some men, identity labels can be harmful. Words like "victim" and "survivor" can feel wrong and scare people away, especially males who've been sexually assaulted.

Taking on the identity of "sexual assault victim," "sexual assault survivor," or "male survivor" can be limiting. It can create and solidify images of oneself as largely defined by, and/or forever damaged by, the experience.

Men who have had these experiences should be supported in finding their own language to describe what happened and understand its implications for their identity. Those of us attempting to help them can avoid identity labels and use "person-first" language. For example, we can refer to a sexual assault victim as "a person who's had an experience," or similar language.

Some males will feel safer with a female advocate than a male. This depends on factors such as whether the assault was perpetrated by a male or a female, and relationships with male and female parents.

In addition, gender socialization may condition males to seek support and comfort from females more than males because females are seen as being more nurturing, and emotional intimacy with a male advocate may trigger homophobic fears.

Conventional masculine values often are obstacles to males seeking help and benefiting from the help available to them. They may believe that being sexually abused or assaulted means they were cowards and they were weak. They may believe that seeking help is an act of cowardice and weakness because they haven't been able to "handle it themselves" like a "real man" would.

Victim advocates and mental health service providers can skillfully leverage and harness those same values to support boys and men. You can help a male who has been sexually victimized reconceptualize his experiences, especially of seeking help and pursuing healing and recovery, as totally consistent with masculine values and his identity as a male.

Also, make sure your facility is welcoming to men. Have materials and information on assault that are designed exclusively for men. Ensure that all advocates understand the differences in working with male and female victims of sexual assault.

Module 7
Effects of Sexual Assault on Males

Learning Objectives

- Distinguish fact from myth regarding male sexual assault.
- Discuss gender socialization.
- Describe the effects of sexual assault on males.
- Discuss how to assist males who have been victims of sexual assault.

Activity

What Do You Know About Male Sexual Assault?

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- Read the slide.
- Decide if the statement is a myth or a fact.
- Raise your hand if you think the statement is a myth.

Myth or Fact?

If a man becomes sexually aroused during assault, he wants or enjoys it.

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The Facts

A man may have an erection during or after a sexual assault; however, arousal does not equate with desire.

An erection is a physiological reaction.

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Myth or Fact

Sexual assault is less harmful to males than to females.

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The Facts

Sexual assault harms males and females in ways that are similar and different, but equally harmful.

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Myth or Fact?

If a female sexually assaults a male, he was “lucky.” If he doesn’t feel that way, there’s something wrong with him.

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The Facts

Girls and women can and do sexually assault both boys and men.

Whether it is a male sexually assaulting a male, or a female sexually assaulting a male, it is sexual assault and can produce traumatic emotions.

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Myth or Facts

Most men who sexually assault men are gay.

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The Facts

Boys and men can be sexually assaulted by straight, gay, or bisexual men. The majority of those who do are straight/heterosexual.

Sexual assault is not related to the sexual orientation of the abusive person.

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Myth or Facts

Males assaulted by other males must have attracted the assault because they are gay or look gay—or they become gay as a result.

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The Facts

Whether a male is gay, straight, or bisexual, his sexual orientation is neither the cause nor the result of the sexual assault.

If we focus on the violence of sexual assault rather than the sexual aspects of the interaction, it is easier to understand that sexual assault has nothing to do with a male's sexual orientation.

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Gender Socialization

- The process of learning the social expectations and attitudes associated with one's sex.
- Can shape emotional impacts and how males and females respond.
- Begins as soon as a baby is born and continues throughout his or her life.

Male Biology and Emotions

As infants, males are more emotionally reactive and expressive than females:

- Startle more easily.
- Excite more quickly.
- Less frustration tolerance.
- Distressed more quickly.
- Cry sooner and more often.

Gender Socialization of Vulnerable Emotions

- By age 6 or 7, important lessons in male socialization have been learned.
- By middle school, boys are less aware, less expressive, less empathic—toward others and themselves.

(Zilbergeld 1992)

Where Gender Socialization Comes From

Males and females are conditioned by different experiences and behaviors:

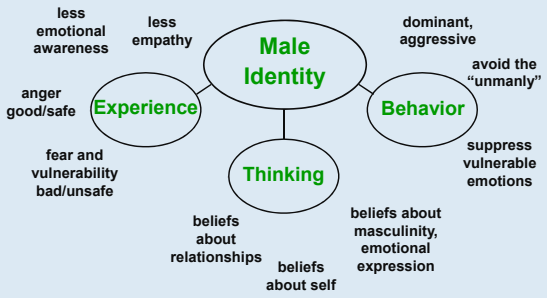
- How parents respond to their emotions.
- Responses from peers, games they play.
- Responses from teachers, coaches.
- Media messages and role models.

Criticized for "Nonmasculine" Behavior

Moral Values and Gender Identity

- Moral values: Good ways to be who you are.
- We can't help but evaluate ourselves:
  - "How close or far am I from how I should be?"
  - "Am I moving toward or away from my ideal self?
- Gender is moral, fundamental to identity.

Male Identity: Emotions and Values

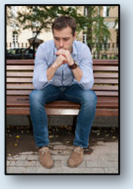


Conditioning and Male Identity

- Thoughts and beliefs are important, but not the core.
- Conditioning goes deeper than what males think or choose.
- It wires and rewires the brain.
- Less emotional awareness, expressiveness, and empathy = patterns of brain functioning.

Sexual Assault Totally Contradicts Male Identity

- No longer feels strong or in control.
- Identification with the traits of his male identity, ingrained since birth, can be shattered.
- Does not know how to deal with the overwhelming vulnerable emotions.



Why Males Don't Report Sexual Assault

- Social conditioning.
- Judgment as weak or "not a real man."
- Confusion about physiological reaction.
- Lack of public awareness.
- Needing and seeking help.
- Talking about and sharing feelings.

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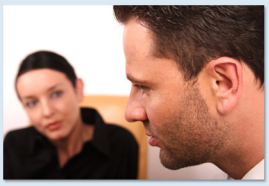
Three Themes

Men who have been sexually assaulted often have common questions or comments that relate to three themes:

- Legitimacy.
- Masculinity.
- Homosexuality.



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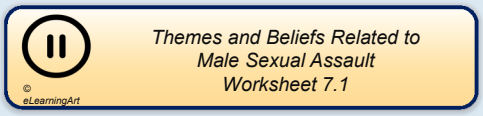
Activity

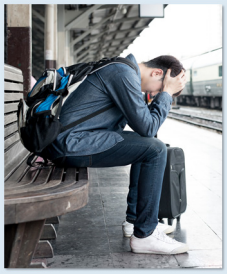


Themes and Beliefs Related to Male Sexual Assault Worksheet 7.1

- Work individually to write at least one response for each statement.
- Report out to the large group.

Infrequency of Reporting

- Reporting is less prevalent for males than for females.
- Infrequency of reporting means fewer resources for men.



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Infrequency of Reporting

Existing resources often:

- Do not address homophobia and sexism.
- Fail to challenge stereotypical notions of male gender roles.
- Rarely recognize the specific needs of gay or transgender victims.

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Forced Choice

- **Option A: Hypermasculine:**
  - A "real" man. Insecurity and fear drive this choice.
- **Option B: Nonmasculine:**
  - Robbed of a masculine identity. Characterized by feelings of failure, defeat, depression, and demoralization.
- **Option C: Healthy masculinity:**
  - Challenge masculine norms, create own identity that is more positive and healthy than the stereotype.

Providing Assistance

Option A: Hypermasculinity
Option B: Nonmasculinity

- Acknowledge how the sexual assault has forced him to make choices, which may not be made consciously.
- Explain that other males have had similar reactions.
- Let him know he can develop a more positive, healthier identity.
- Explain that other male survivors of sexual assault have done that.

Providing Assistance

Option C: Healthy Masculinity

- Answer any questions and confirm his concerns are based on gender socialization.
- Acknowledge his courage for facing what he has been through and seeking help.
- Recognize that he has reservoirs of strength to work through the process.

Providing Assistance

- Help him engage in reflection and sort out what makes sense vs. what he has been taught.
- Point out that most questions and concerns are based on myths about males and sexual assault.
- Offer factual information.
- Let the victim sort this information out for himself.
- Take your cues from the victim.

Topics To Discuss With Male Survivors

- Negative reactions from others.
- Totality of the assault, not just the sexual aspects.
- Effects on relationships.
- Social conditioning.
- Permission to feel and to have needs.
- Sexuality issues.

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Negative Emotions

- Distress and depression.
- Self-medication.
- Anger and hostility.
- Withdrawal from social contacts.
- Some form of posttraumatic stress disorder.
- Confusion.
- Sexual anxiety or dysfunction.

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Referrals

- Recommend therapy if you think it would be beneficial.
- Individual therapy is sometimes best suited for initial treatment.
- Group therapy is often best for healing and change.

Caution: Identity Labels can be Harmful

- Identity labels can be limiting.
- Men who have had these experiences should be supported in finding their own language.
- Avoid identity labels, and use "person-first" language; for example, "a person who's had an experience."

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Male vs. Female Advocates

- Some males will feel safer with a female advocate than a male.
- Gender socialization may condition males to seek support and comfort from females.
- Conventional masculine values are often obstacles to males seeking help.

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Male vs. Female Advocates

Make sure your facility and staff:

- Welcome males.
- Have information on sexual assault specific to men.
- Understand the differences between male and female sexual assault.

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Review of Learning Objectives

- Distinguish fact from myth regarding male sexual assault.
- Discuss gender socialization.
- Describe the effects of sexual assault on males.
- Discuss how to assist males who have been victims of sexual assault.

End of Module 7

Questions? Comments?

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