

Reflections from a Sexual Violence Prevention Educator

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As I approach the fifth April of my career in the Sexual Violence Prevention and Education Program I can't help but reflect back on how much more important this month has become to me. Now April is not just a month of enjoying the beautiful spring weather; hiking, smelling the flowers, and enjoying BBQ's. April has become a month filled with activism, hard work and awareness building. It's the peak of the work that we have done over the past year (giving presentations, recruiting students, holding awareness events, creating and distributing social marketing, creating a presence and breaking the silence that surrounds sexual violence in any way we can) and a build up to programs like our yearly Take Back the Night event.

It's a month that can feel, if I'm not careful, quite overwhelming and actually quite alarming—especially when I see the shocked look on people's faces and they ask, "Is there a need for a Sexual Assault Awareness Month?" Some individuals are more tuned into the issues, but are misinformed and think that sexual violence only occurs between strangers. This is what we would believe if our knowledge of sexual violence came only from what we saw on the news. And of course, some of the most intense experiences I've had are with people who DO know and who are educated and/or who have first hand with sexual violence victimization because it's touched their lives and the lives of their friends and families.

As health educators we know the feeling of taking a deep breath and weighing the decision of responding to a question with a quick answer or engaging in a longer, more informative, thought-provoking discussion. From my experience I usually tend to lean towards the latter and feel that I've gotten pretty good at gauging the questions and know how to present the realities of sexual violence in our society in a way that will resonate with the individual and stimulate some critical thought. Perhaps, (I'm always hoping) I am also recruiting another volunteer for our program!

I've learned to tell the misinformed, "Actually, acquaintance rape occurs more frequently than stranger rape—from 84-95% of the time." And I know how to share the staggering statistics about sexual assault* in a way that will hopefully shed some light on the realities of this immense problem we all face. In a tactful way, I let them know, "Yes, there is definitely a need for a month devoted to raising awareness and ending sexual violence."

* From the SVPEP website: "In 2005 there were approximately 150.4 women/girls and 146 million men/boys (296.4 million total) in the resident population of the United States. According to the 1998 National Violence Against Women Survey the lifetime prevalence of rape among women is 17.6% and among men is 3.0% (using a definition of rape that includes forced vaginal, oral, and anal intercourse.) So, $150.4 \times 0.176 = 26.5$ million women and $146 \times 0.03 = 4.4$ million men, or **30.9 million survivors total. That means that 10.4% ($30.9 / 296.4 = 0.104$) of the total US population are survivors of rape.**"

These are common questions and conversations we have all year long, but in April, because it is a month devoted to increasing awareness of sexual violence, we have even more opportunities to engage in dialogue, do media campaigns, hold events and break the silence. While this can be overwhelming at times because we want our best efforts put forth and because we feel that every month should be “Sexual Violence Awareness Month,” it’s nice to realize that in April concentrated efforts are being put forth across the world to have an impact and reduce the impact of sexual violence.

This year on April 16, like the four years before, I will be enjoying an Arizona spring night filled with activism, educational displays, and speakers. Feeling mightily empowered, I will be hiking with a crowd down Mill Avenue, chanting “People Unite, Take Back the Night!!!” I have faith that we *are* making a difference: one conversation at a time, and one Take Back the Night at a time.