

The response to a disclosure of abuse can have a profound impact on the healing journey of the survivor.<sup>380</sup> With around fifteen to thirty percent of women experiencing a sexual assault within their lifetime,<sup>381</sup> it is important for church leaders and others in helping positions to understand the effect that they can have on the emotional and spiritual health of those who trust them enough to come and confide in them regarding a sexual assault or rape.

Research shows that most survivors disclose to find emotional support, tangible assistance, or seek justice.<sup>382</sup> Upon disclosing, what they receive in a response may be totally different than what they were seeking. Negative responses to disclosures are often referred to as “secondary victimization” or the “second rape.”<sup>383</sup> Roughly one third to two thirds of survivors experience one or more negative responses.<sup>384</sup>

Another problem with negative reactions to disclosures of sexual assault is that the responses have the effect of silencing the survivor. The response tends to silence in one of three ways - creates questioning by the victim of the benefit or effectiveness of future disclosure; self-blaming, and uncertainty in the survivor’s mind as to whether the survivor was really raped.<sup>385</sup>

Research has shown that disclosures in general may have a positive effect on mental health.<sup>386</sup> However, the reaction received by the survivor upon disclosure has an effect

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<sup>380</sup> Sarah, Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, (2012), Kindle.

<sup>381</sup> *Id.*, Chapter 1.

<sup>382</sup>C. Ahrens., R. Campbell, K. Ternier-Thames, S. Wasco, and T. Sefl., “Deciding Whom to Tell: Expectations and Outcomes of Sexual Assault Survivors’ First Disclosures,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 31 (2007): 38–49.

<sup>383</sup> Rebecca Campbell and Sheela Raja, “Secondary Victimization of Rape Victims: Insights From Mental Health Professionals Who Treat Survivors of Violence,” *Violence and Victims*, 14, no. 3 (1999): 261-75.

<sup>384</sup> Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault*, Introduction.

<sup>385</sup>C. Ahrens, “Being Silenced: The Impact of Negative Social Reactions on the Disclosure of Rape,” *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 38 no. 3/4 (2006): 263-274.

<sup>386</sup> C. E. Ahrens, J. Stansell, and A. Jennings, “To Tell or Not to Tell: The Impact of Disclosure on Sexual Assault Survivors’ Recovery,” *Violence and Victims* 25, (2010): 640.