

## **Creating a Space for Male Survivors**

*By Eric Stiles, Rural Resource Specialist, National Sexual Violence Resource Center*

It's common knowledge to those in our field that being an advocate for female survivors of sexual violence can be completely different from being an advocate for males. My first case in direct service was with a young boy, which I wasn't necessarily prepared for. But I began to learn as I went, and as I continued working with that young boy I began to get more male clients. I tried to research best practices on working with male clients, but came up short. I quickly realized that there is considerably more research on sexual violence perpetrated against women in the realm of sexual violence advocating and direct service- and this must change. We need to change how we do research, and include increased research on men. We also need to share what works and what doesn't with others in the field. I hope some of the tips and tricks I'm sharing will help you in your future work with member programs.

## **Strategies for working with young male survivors**

As anyone who has been an advocate before knows, you have to think outside of the box; this could not be truer than when working with a young men. Sitting in your office and talking might not be comfortable for young teens. An alternative could be going for a walk during the session. Sometimes getting up and moving around may put him at ease. Beyond just having a conversation with the client, consider using creative and artistic mediums a means of expressing themselves- such as journaling, story-telling, or visual art. When working with young male survivors, it is also important to remember that they may not share their personal experiences at first. In my experiences, it is not uncommon for a session with a teenage male to be only 10% about their experience, and the rest about a game, sport, or friend. These young men were just not ready to talk extensively about their experiences-and that is understandable. They just weren't ready yet. Give them time.

## **Meet them where they're at**

With so many barriers facing a woman and her decision to receive sexual violence services, it is easy to imagine how difficult it must be for a man as well. If a center is called "Rape Crisis Center and Battered Women's Shelter," would a 19-year-old male think that you had any services for him? He's not a battered woman, he doesn't need shelter, he may not be sure what exactly happened to him, and he wouldn't really describe himself as being in crisis, he simply wants to talk to someone. Recognizing this, sitting in an office and waiting for these men to come to you for services is not the most effective way of reaching these survivors. The only way you are going to reach a large portion of those men in need of services is if you get yourself out into the community. Get in touch with the local Alcohol Anonymous groups, veterans center, mental health facilities, and local churches. Some of the best connections I made when I

was doing direct services were with churches. The more interactions you have with people in the community, the better chance you have reaching survivors who may need your services.

### **Strategies for working with adult survivors of child sexual assault**

If a number of years have passed between the time of the assault or abuse and when you meet with a survivor, there are sure to be coping methods they've learned to use to deal with their trauma. I've learned that progress may seem slower with adult males specifically, as there is extra baggage they have brought with them such as relationship problems, substance abuse, or criminal activity problems. It may mean working through these other issues before he can start to heal from the trauma of the assault. So in addition to being his advocate, I had to learn how to help him with his addictions, mental health problems, relationships, or anger issues. We know root cause of all of these issues may very well be the childhood sexual assault he experienced; these expressions are just the coping strategies he adopted to deal with the trauma.

### **Language**

Females and males use considerably different vocabulary to discuss their experience of sexual assault. For a large portion of society, the word "rape" is not associated with men. As a result, many male clients had a difficult time describing their assault as rape, because the word just didn't fit with what happened to them. We must work to expand our vocabulary and be inclusive of all words. For example, a client wouldn't say "I was raped," but instead say "He touched me," or "He made me touch him." Some clients may want to use swear words or slang to describe their experiences, which at first was jarring. But I had to accept that and recognize that those swear words may be the only way the survivor knew how to discuss his experience with me.

### **So what can coalitions do to better serve male survivors?**

Coalitions must make a concentrated effort to stop referring to everything as "female" or "woman". That binary system must be taken out of play when you're doing training and seek out trainers that do that as well. Coalitions need to have open and frank conversations with their member centers about the barriers they may face in reaching male survivors.

- Do the names of member programs reflect all the services offered and all the survivors served?
- Do the brochures available feature pictures of women, men, and children?
- Are member center advocates prepared and willing to serve male clients?
- Is adequate training provided to member centers about working with male survivors?

### **Re-thinking Prevention**

Talking about rape culture is an integral part of prevention work, but rape culture and rape myths are created within the norms of heterosexuality. Talking about violence against men is not a large part of prevention work, so the only time men are present in prevention work is if

they are being painted as offenders or allies in the prevention of violence against women. Very few curricula discuss prevention of perpetration against men and boys.

It's no secret that male victims are vastly underserved, and we all know that sexual assault services were not designed for men. Speaking as a male survivor who was turned away from services, I cannot stress enough how important it is that we continue to push forward and make room for male survivors in our movement. We have a responsibility to make sure that every survivor of sexual violence is welcomed and receives the services he or she deserves.