

THANK YOU FOR CHOOSING COMPASSIONATE CARE

Sexual assault is a difficult and uncomfortable topic. Choosing to understand sexual assault by educating yourself as a medical practitioner takes courage and leads the way to creating a safer world with reduced victimization where justice prevails.

This document is a guide to help you understand how to have a conversation about the realities of sexual assault with your patients. Please be aware that understanding this issue requires a mindset of compassion. It can also take a mental toll on you. Take care of your mind and health with kindness toward yourself so you can offer that same compassion to your patients.

AN UNCOMFORTABLE REALITY

There's no formula for predicting who is capable of sexual assault. Sometimes the offender is unknown to the victim, but most often sexual assault is inflicted by someone who is familiar to and trusted by the victim.

Though an offender can be anyone—rich or poor, any skin tone, any religion, any gender identity, and any sexual orientation—they often share key characteristics.

Offenders possess an underlying sense of entitlement. They believe they should be able to have what they want, even at the expense of others. They use power, control, and manipulation to take advantage of a person who is vulnerable in some way.

SEXUAL ASSAULT CAN HAVE LONG-TERM HEALTH EFFECTS ON VICTIMS, INCLUDING PTSD, RISK OF PREGNANCY OR SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS, INCREASED LIKELIHOOD OF DRUG USE, CONTEMPLATED OR ATTEMPTED SUICIDE, AMONG OTHERS.¹

HARMFUL RIPPLE EFFECTS

Sexual assault is a crime perpetrated by offenders who are motivated by their own entitlement, often inflicting serious trauma on the victim. Left untreated, trauma unconsciously produces countless, unpredictable negative effects in a victim's life.

Anyone can be a victim of sexual assault. You might have experienced the consequence of someone else's trauma without even realizing it, because trauma not only affects the victims of these crimes, it affects their parents, siblings, classmates, and many others. The brain and body react to traumatic events in unpredictable

ways ranging from fear, fight, flight, or freezing. Trauma often manifests in symptoms such as substance abuse, withdrawal, depression, and anger, among others. There is no universal response to trauma, so its effects can be misinterpreted.

Even though the harmful ripple effects of sexual assault reverberate everywhere, the good news is that people like you can fight against them by creating your own ripple effects of awareness, compassion, and understanding. As a medical provider, you are uniquely positioned to be a safe place for these positive ripples to begin.

HOW TO TALK ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT

EDUCATE YOURSELF

In Kansas, it is a crime to have intercourse with someone who does not consent or who is incapable of giving consent. Arm yourself with information to be able to speak confidently. Understand that the reality of sexual assault is pervasive. For example, if you see 20 patients in a day, statistics suggests that four of them have experienced some form of sexual assault. Though this is difficult and the problem won't be solved overnight, you have the power to start incremental shifts in thinking. Look for opportunities to communicate that sexual assault is caused by the offender and is not the fault of the victim.

Example: "Unfortunately many of my patients have experienced sexual assault, and one of the

most important things to remember is that it's never the victim's fault. I've come to understand that sexual assault can happen regardless of the victim's behavior. My perspective has shifted to putting the responsibility on the offender's choices."

USE PROVIDED OPPORTUNITIES

Look for chances to make connections with your patients in private. We know that most offenders are trusted by or related to the victim, and they may also be with them at the appointment. Ask them how they're feeling. Use required screening questions to discern if the patient may be in need of additional services. Ask questions using eye contact and get on the level of the patient to show that you truly care about the answers to the questions. The patient is assessing you to see if you're a safe

person to disclose to, so do everything you can to show that you are. If you have any concern or suspicion of abuse, you may need to get creative in getting the patient alone to ask about these sensitive topics, such as when you are taking them to the restroom or accompanying them to a test/procedure. Be aware of the resources in your area so you can make referrals as needed.

Example: "You hesitated when I asked if you feel safe in your home. Is there anything additional you would like to share with me?"

ADVOCATE FOR YOUR PATIENTS

Gently educate your patients about their rights and resources. Seek to treat the whole person, including their mental and emotional well-being. If you suspect a child is suffering from sexual

abuse, call the appropriate child abuse hotline or 911 for immediate response. If a patient comes to your facility seeking treatment for assault, make every effort to provide treatment and connect them with the right resources. Make contacts within the medical community so you can provide referrals, and know your statutory obligations regarding sexual assault exams and mandatory reporting.

Make a referral: "There is a 24-hour confidential hotline on this flier. They would be a good resource to talk to and help you get through this tough situation."

IF YOUR PATIENT DISCLOSES TO YOU

DO

- Do provide support, compassion, and assistance. Show your support by saying, “I’m sorry this happened to you.” Look for ways to help restore dignity, trust, and justice in their life. Listen to them with patience and empathy when they share their experience with you, and let them speak without interruption. Affirm that they do not deserve the suffering they’re experiencing.
- Do validate that sexual assault is a crime and encourage the victim that crimes should be reported to the police.
- If the assault was recent, do refer the victim to medical treatment from a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE). If the victim does not have access to SANE resources nearby, and if seeking those resources at a distance will deter them from following through with the collection of forensic evidence, emergency rooms statewide are equipped with Sexual Assault Evidence Collection Kits and instructions for timely collection.
- Do remember that the best way to offer support is by helping the victim feel emotionally, mentally, and physically safe. The specifics of that will vary from person to person, so follow the victim’s lead to help them find safety in all ways.
- Do begin to empower the victim to regain confidence and trust in themselves by letting them make choices about how to meet their needs and receive services. Allow them to choose their next steps and resources.
- Do expect complexity. Trauma impacts individuals differently, which means there’s no standard list of reactions a victim may experience in response to the to the assault. Rational thought is impaired, so their reaction may not make sense to you.
- Do be aware that offenders are often charming, successful, and powerful in some way. They may even be well known and cared about by the victim. Understand that this factor can lead to fear and confusion about making a report or pressing charges.
- Do recognize the need for self-care. Remain aware of the impact of this work on you and don’t let that negatively affect your ability to help the victim. Seek support from colleagues and people you trust.

DON'T

IF YOUR PATIENT DISCLOSES TO YOU

- Don't place blame upon the victim. Don't ask questions or use statements that imply the assault was their fault. Don't ask "why did you...?" or "why didn't you...?" Don't use statements such as "you should have..." or "you shouldn't have..." Most likely they are already blaming themselves and further blame only compounds their trauma.
- Don't minimize the assault by ignoring the disclosure or failing to refer the victim to services. You do not need specialized training to make a referral and arm the victim with resources.
- Don't assume that you can't help if you haven't received extensive training. The ability to act with genuine kindness and empathy is the only qualification you need to make a difference to someone who is hurting.
- Don't apply your own interpretation of the event to the victim or their situation. The significance of the assault is determined by the victim, not by our viewpoint. Remember, it is the meaning of the event to the person that is important.
- Don't discourage the victim from reporting the assault to the police because the offender is well-liked, has a good reputation, or is cared for by the victim.
- Don't make the victim talk to you about their experience. Allow them the choice to share at their own discretion.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Kansas Sexual Assault Hotline: [1-888-363-2287](tel:1-888-363-2287)

Kansas Attorney General Victim Services Hotline: [1-800-828-9745](tel:1-800-828-9745)

National Sexual Assault Hotline: [1-800-656-4673](tel:1-800-656-4673)

Kansas victim advocacy programs: KCSADV.ORG

Kansas Child Advocacy Centers: KSCAC.ORG

Nationwide anti-sexual violence organization: RAINN.ORG

Free Sexual Assault Evidence Collection Kits from the KBI for qualified medical professionals: [1-785-296-1137](tel:1-785-296-1137)

'Retrieved September 27, 2019 from <https://rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence>