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“Do Not Turn Away”

Responding to the Sexual Assault Epidemic on Campus

By Emily Clark

Over the past few years, the veil of secrecy that has hidden the epidemic of sexual assault on college campuses has been lifted. Through documentaries like “The Hunting Ground,” political movements like It’s On Us, and social media campaigns including #metoo and #timesup, stories have been shared with a wider audience than ever before.

Now, just about everyone knows it’s an issue, but no one knows what to do.

As a trauma therapist, I sit across from women day after day who tell me about how their life has changed dramatically after sexual assault. They tell me about how they reached out and how people’s actions (or inaction) hurt them further. Their pain draws little black rivers down their cheeks and they feel isolated by a wall built of fear and unanswerable questions.

I know this suffering personally. As a sophomore, I was violently inducted into the sisterhood of survivors, a sisterhood none of us want to be in. As a therapist and survivor, I know all too well the aftermath of sexual violence.

Everyone knows it’s an issue, but no one knows what to do or what to say, so survivors slip into shame and the belief that they are bad, broken, unlovable, or worthless.

If you want to understand how sexual violence affects people, you have to understand how shame affects people. If you want to understand how to help people drowning in shame, you have to understand how to see the shadows around their downcast eyes and not turn away. Do not turn away. It is that simple.

Simply put, sexual violence changes lives. Everything a person once held as true is suddenly subpoenaed to the highest court in the mind...

How can my God be all-knowing, all-loving, and all-powerful and yet let something so horrible happen to me?

What is safe? Is safety even real?

Who can I trust?

Why does this keep hurting?

Will the pain ever go away?

These are some of the anxiety-ridden questions my clients bring to the therapy room. The world these women now have to accept is one where violence is real and questions are unanswerable. It's a world where pain swells and seems to go on and on. Some survivors avoid these new-found truths and appear fine...until they're not. Some use alcohol, drugs, food, busyness, and other things to distract them from their pain. Some collapse under the pressure of their confused emotions. Every survivor reacts in her own way but all reactions are rooted in pain, fear, shame, and confusion that holds her six feet under water, so she's constantly struggling to surface to breathe.

Sexual assault often leads to mental health challenges including PTSD, anxiety, and depression, which can directly affect a student's ability to succeed...or even show up. And this is precisely when survivors need their community to show up for them. But often, that is not what happens. Professors, mentors, bosses, and friends miss clues, react with anger or blame, or avoid the difficult conversations because it makes them feel uncomfortable.

In her 2018 article in *Psychotherapy Networker*, psychologist and author Harriet Lerner writes, "When people suffer...they often do so twice: first because they've lived through something painful, and second because a key per-

son in their lives doesn't want to hear about it or doesn't want to hear all of it."

Because of the interpersonal nature of sexual assault, I believe a survivor's surest way to healing is through relationship. For some, this is a relationship with a therapist, but mental health bleeds far beyond the therapy room. In my case, there were four people who held my hand through my last two and a half years of college and led me toward healing, a best friend who would sleep beside me at night to remind me that I was safe, a professor who sat with me in a coffee shop until 11p.m. when she found me having a panic attack after it was triggered by an on-campus event, a mentor who looked at me with love even though he didn't (and still doesn't) know my story, and a running partner who reminded me that I am powerful and strong.

Again, if you want to understand how sexual violence affects people, you have to understand how shame affects people. If you want to understand how to help people drowning in shame, you have to understand how to see the shadows around their downcast eyes and not turn away. Do not turn away. It is that simple.

Emily Clark, a graduate of St. Louis University ('13) and Boston College ('15), is a trauma therapist in Portland, OR.

Notes on AJCU presidents

On June 1, 2018, Dr. Michael D. Johnson became the 25th president of John Carroll University. Dr. Johnson comes to John Carroll from Babson College, where he was serving as provost and was also a professor of marketing. He has also served at Cornell and at the University of Michigan.



Michael D. Johnson

On July 1, Fr. Scott Pilarz, S.J., began his second term as president of the University of Scranton. In the meantime, he was president of Marquette University and Georgetown Preparatory School.

Also in July, Mr. Mark Phillips, chief of staff in the office of the president, became acting president of Wheeling Jesuit University.

In August, Dr. Tania Tetlow, J.D., begins her tenure as the 17th president of Loyola University New Orleans. She comes to Loyola from neighboring Tulane University, where she has served as senior vice president and chief of staff and has also taught law.



Tania Tetlow