

Reflection Questions

How may secondary wounding experiences have caused an impact in the following areas:

- *Did it alter your ability to seek assistance or to associate with certain groups/institutions?
- *Did it change your attitudes towards certain types or groups of people, particular government or social institutions or the general public?
- *Were your religious or spiritual views affected?
- *Did it affect your family life, friendships, or other close relationships?
- *Did it alter your views of your social, vocational and other abilities?

Countering Secondary Wounding Experiences

1. What knowledge and broader awareness helps you to counter and resist secondary wounding messages?
2. What is vital for people to help protect against sexual assault/abuse stigma and stereotypes becoming internalized?
3. How have you already been resisting secondary wounding messages?
4. Where should our community's and society's focus be in combating the predominance of sexualized violence?
5. What would you like to say to other people who have been affected by these harmful attitudes and messages?



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Sexual Assault & Secondary Wounding



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Understanding Secondary Wounding

The reactions of those in formal or informal support roles to individual's disclosures of recent or past sexual abuse/assault have a direct impact on how the person will continue on the journey of recovery. The messages that are directly or indirectly implied can have a damaging impact upon the person's identity, beliefs, and sense of personal competence and worth, along with their basic trust and safety with others, community institutions, and world-view.

Secondary wounding experiences are common for victims of crime and violence. Many victims report that their secondary wounding experiences were more painful and devastating than the original traumatic event because the shock of the original betrayal was further coupled by a subsequent betrayal from those who were regarded as sources of support. We know that the most important factor, which helps to determine the extent of long-term post trauma effects for an individual, is the level of support they receive following a traumatic event. A growing body of research is indicating that those victimized by sexual assault are often denied help by their communities, and what help they do receive often leaves them feeling blamed, doubted, and re-victimized. These negative experiences have also been termed "the second rape/assault" or "secondary victimization".

Three Streams of Secondary Wounding

Secondary wounding occurs when individuals and institutions respond following a disclosure by:

- Shaming/blaming the person for having been targeted.
- Shaming/blaming the person for their reactions during/immediately following the sexual assault.

- Shaming/blaming the person for the symptoms/coping mechanisms they have developed as a result of sexual assault/abuse trauma.

Examples of Secondary Wounding

Some examples of secondary wounding are quite obvious while others are subtle. It's not only the words we use but also the tone in which we speak. We may all think that we would never be a source of secondary wounding and fail to recognize questions or attitudes that may unintentionally contribute to how a person is internalizing meaning following a sexual assault experience. We may even think that we are being helpful or protective by giving certain advice, which is instead creating internalized shame and a sense of incompetence in the person.

***Denial/Disbelief/Avoidance:** Statements such as: "This couldn't have happened", "You've imagined this", "You're over-reacting", "You're making this up", "You're very confused", or failing to acknowledge the disclosure.

***Discounting and Minimization:** Statements that convey: "That wasn't as bad as it could have been", "You're making too much out of it", "You're lucky and should be thankful that's all that happened", "I don't think he meant to do it". "Why aren't you over this by now?" "Just put it behind you", "Are you going to be a victim your whole life?" "How could one incident have affected you so much?" "You're letting it control you".

***Implying Blame for Being Targeted:** Statements inferring: "Why did you go there with him" "You should have known better?" "Didn't you lead him on?" "Why were you out there alone?" "You shouldn't let yourself get so drunk", "You were assaulted again?".

***Implying Blame for their Actions**

During/Following the Assault: Statements such as: "Why didn't you run/scream out when you had the chance?" "Why didn't you tell someone right away?" "If it was a sexual assault, why didn't you report it to the police?".

***Stigmatization of the Person:** Seeing the person as permanently damaged and deficient (e.g. interpreting most, if not all of their emotions and behaviors to the past trauma and not taking concerns/complaints seriously, misinterpreting their distress as a sign of deep psychological problems, shaming the person for strong trauma reactions, viewing the person as unstable or incompetent/incapable or as using their trauma to manipulate or as an excuse, labeling the person in a negative way such as an attention seeker, resistant/ non-compliant individual, non-credible person).

***Failure to Protect Privacy:** Not fully maintaining the person's confidentiality and privacy following disclosure. (e.g. pressing for more details of the assault, confronting the assaulter without permission, discussing their personal information with other individuals that the person has not given consent for).

Internalized Shame

Secondary wounding is a major cause of internalized shame, which is one of the most damaging impacts with potential lifelong consequences spreading throughout many or most areas of individual's lives. Those who experience sexual abuse/assault trauma are at particular risk for internalizing shame due to the humiliation of experiencing one of the most invasive forms of human violation, coupled with socially condoned sexual assault myths that question and blame victims causing secondary wounding.