

For a sexual assault case to be successfully prosecuted, two elements must come together.

- First, there has to be a thorough, evidence-based investigation.
- Second, the victim must be able to participate in the criminal justice process.¹
- Both of these are more likely when victims receive a positive response to their disclosure. Particularly helpful is the *feeling of being believed*.

Positive interactions with law enforcement have particularly beneficial effects, not only on the victim's emotional state, but also on the amount of information they can provide during the investigation, and their feelings of hope about the resolution of their case.²

Impact of Negative Responses

Victims can benefit from disclosing their sexual assault, *but only if the person responds positively to their disclosure*. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, and negative responses have a damaging impact – over and above the sexual assault itself.

- About half of all sexual assault victims (43-52%) rate their experience with the criminal justice system as unhelpful or hurtful.³
- Not surprisingly, these victims have worse physical and psychological outcomes.⁴
- Specifically, negative responses from law enforcement (including expressions of skepticism or victim-blaming) had a negative impact on survivors' emotions and led to feelings of hopelessness about their case. Two survivors in this study said that blaming reactions from law enforcement were what made them begin to blame themselves for their rape.⁵
- In another study, victims who disclosed their sexual assault and received negative responses had higher levels of hostility, paranoia, and phobic anxiety at a 7-month follow up.⁶
- Other studies have found that negative responses are related to higher levels of posttraumatic stress, delayed recovery, and poorer perceived health, among other negative outcomes.⁷

Examples of Negative Responses

Negative reactions from informal support providers (family, friends, faith communities) can include being doubted, blamed, stigmatized, shamed, or patronized.⁸

These responses can be separated into two types:

- Overtly hostile reactions, described as “turning against,” and
- “Unsupported acknowledgments,” where loved ones acknowledge the sexual assault but fail to provide a supportive response.

Both types of negative responses are associated with harmful effects on survivors.⁹

From **law enforcement**, negative responses can include:

- Discouraging survivors from reporting, or
- Questioning them about their prior sexual history, what they were wearing, or whether they “responded sexually” to the assault.¹⁰

Negative responses from **health care providers**, can include:

- Treatment that is experienced by victims as “cold, impersonal, and detached.”¹¹

When it comes to **prosecutors**, negative responses can include:

- Failing to provide survivors with adequate information or preparation.
- In that same study, victims also described being forced to “go through a punishing process” of reliving their assault and defending their character.¹²

Not surprisingly, victims who receive such negative responses are less likely to disclose to others in the future.¹³

- ¹ Campbell, R., Bybee, D., Ford, J.K. & Patterson, D. (2009). Systems Change Analysis of SANE Programs: Identifying the Mediating Mechanisms of Criminal Justice System Impact. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, US Department of Justice.
- ² Greeson, M.R., Campbell, R. & Fehler-Cabral, G. (2016). "Nobody deserves this": Adolescent sexual assault victims' perceptions of disbelief and victim blame from police. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 44 (1), 90-110.
- ³ For review, see Campbell, R. (2008). The psychological impact of rape victims' experiences with the legal, medical and mental health systems. *American Psychologist*, 63 (8), 702-717.
- ⁴ Campbell, R., Wasco, S.M, Ahrens, C.E., Sefl, T. & Barnes, H.E. (2001). Preventing the 'second rape:' Rape survivors' experiences with community service providers. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 16, 1239-1259.
- ⁵ Greeson et al., "Nobody deserves this."
- ⁶ Orchowski, L.M. & Gidycz, C.A. (2015). Psychological consequences associated with positive and negative responses to disclosure of sexual assault among college women: A prospective study. *Violence Against Women*, 21 (7), 803-823.
- ⁷ Campbell, R., Ahrens, C.E., Sefl, T., Wasco, S.M. & Barnes, H.E. (2001). Social reactions to rape victims: Healing and hurtful effects on psychological and physical health outcomes. *Violence and Victims*, 16, 287-302; Filipas, H.H. & Ullman, S.E. (2001). Social reactions to sexual assault victims from various support sources. *Violence and Victims*, 16, 673-692; Relyea, M. & Ullman, S. (2015). Unsupported or turned against: Understanding how two types of negative social reactions to sexual assault relate to post-assault outcomes. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 39 (1), 37-52; Ullman, S.E. (1999). Social support and recovery from sexual assault: A review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 4, 343-358; Ullman, S.E. & Filipas, H.H. (2001). Predictors of PTSD symptom severity and social reactions in sexual assault victims. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 14, 369-389; Ullman, S.E., Foyne, M.M. & Tang, S.S. (2010). Benefits and barriers to disclosing sexual trauma: A contextual approach. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 11, 127-133; Ullman, S.E. & Peter-Hagene, L. (2016). Longitudinal relationships of social reactions, PTSD, and revictimization in sexual assault survivors. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 31 (6), 1074-1094; Ullman, S.E. & Relyea, M. (2016). Social support, coping, and posttraumatic stress symptoms in female sexual assault survivors: A longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 29, 500-506.
- ⁸ Campbell et al., Social reactions to rape victims.
- ⁹ Relyea and Ullman, Unsupported or turned against.
- ¹⁰ For review, see Campbell, The psychological impact of rape victims' experiences.
- ¹¹ For review, see Campbell, The psychological impact of rape victims' experiences.
- ¹² Koss, M.P. & Achilles, M. (2008). Restorative Justice Responses to Sexual Assault. Harrisburg, PA: VAWnet, a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence / Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Cited in Campbell, The psychological impact of rape victims' experiences.
- ¹³ Ahrens, C.E., Campbell, R., Ternier-Thames, N.K., Wasco, S.M. & Sefl, T. (2007). Deciding whom to tell: Expectations and outcomes of rape survivors' first disclosure. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 31, 38-49.