Sexual assault can take various forms: harassment, inappropriate comments, groping, catcalling, forced witnessing of someone’s nudity, intimidation, transactional sex etc. Sexual trauma is distinct from natural disaster because the perpetrator’s intention to hurt, humiliate, dominate adds another dimension. Over the past year, there has been an increase in disclosures and we now see in the public arena what we have heard behind the closed doors of our offices. This month’s issue will explore the topic as a statement of solidarity for the survivors who had the courage to break the silence, and as an attempt to challenge the rape culture we live in.

The top of the book pile

Maya Angelou was raped at age 8 by her mother’s boyfriend and experienced abuse later in life. Although this book is more about general wisdom from a prolific African American poet than sexual violence, it is inspiring to absorb her resilience and depth by going through the pages of this gem, and read the trauma between the lines of a full life beautifully described.

Rape myths on trial

In 1988, I watched the drama based of true events called The Accused, featuring Jodie Foster. I was very disturbed by what I saw, and at the end, we could read “a woman is raped every 4 minutes.” This was so shocking to the teenager I was at the time; I was naively convinced that this would shake all men and women, just like it shook me, and that society would be serious about seeking to eradicate sexual violence for good.

But here we are, 30 years later. Why every 98 seconds a person is sexually assaulted in this country?

Our narratives and beliefs around sexual encounters should be examined. Rape myths are attitudes and false beliefs about rape that are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rape myths</th>
<th>Reality</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Real” rape involves the use of physical force</td>
<td>Victims can experience a shock, be stunned or appear compliant because verbal threats made them feel they would die if they didn’t comply</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rape implies a forceful/obvious resistance by the victim</td>
<td>The injuries are not always visible and in addition to the psychological damage, there can be STDs, unwanted pregnancies…</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual assault victims experience severe physical and/or anogenital injuries</td>
<td>Because of the initial shock, feelings of shame, fear of stigma and generally lack of support from criminal justice and legal systems (avoidance due to fear of re-traumatization/invalidation), some never report to the authorities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual assault victims immediately report the crime</td>
<td>It is widely recognized that sex offenders often know their victims</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rapists are strangers and sexually deviant</td>
<td>A person still owns her/his body and has a right to say no, married or not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husbands/partners are entitled to unlimited sex “on demand”</td>
<td>Entitlement and lack of frustration tolerance (narcissistic issues in perpetrator)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“No” often means “yes”</td>
<td>Unlike drunk drivers who should be held responsible for causing deaths or injuries on the road, a person who is intoxicated while raped is taken advantage of. Plus, isn’t the validity of “consent” while inebriated questionable?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women who are sexually assaulted under the influence of alcohol intoxication are “at least somewhat responsible”</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source:

Barriers to reporting a sexual assault

Because of society’s pervasive victim-blaming attitudes (and certainly the lack of trauma-informed skills), some feel that the criminal justice system re-victimizes them. Therefore, a small proportion of sexual assaults (16-35 %) are reported to the police. The offender is more likely to be reported if a stranger as opposed to intimate partner or acquaintance.

The following reasons were among the ones listed by survivors for not reporting an assault:

- fear of reprisal
- belief that the police would/could not do anything to help
- did not want family to know
- fear of the justice system
- did not know how
- feel the crime was not “serious enough”
- fear of lack of evidence

As a result, only 9 % of all rapists get prosecuted and only 5 % of cases lead to a felony conviction. Three percent of rapists will spend a day in prison. The other 97% walk free.

Source:
https://mcasa.org/

Trauma and prostitution

Have you worked with patients who engaged in prostitution or sex trading? Whether they were doing this “by choice” or had been trafficked, have you screened for past history of sexual trauma? Sex work was listed as one of Maya Angelou’s experiences. As mentioned, she had also been a victim of sexual trauma. A study by Stoltz et al found that two types of childhood maltreatment, sexual abuse and emotional abuse, were found to be independently associated with sex work after controlling for socio-demographic variables.

Source:

Local events

Lin Farley, the first person to use the term “sexual harassment of women” will be the guest at a round table discussion at the Education Bldg on Oct 16th at 12:00. She will also give a lecture on Oct. 17th at the Education bldg (Matsui lecture hall) at 5 pm, and a reception will follow. Email: hs-specialevents@ucdavis.edu to RSVP. Sexual harassment can affect both men and women.

If you or a person you know are triggered by the recent events in the news, please reach out. Help is available. There are compassionate listeners who will believe your story and offer support. It is never too late to heal. YOU ARE NOT ALONE.
Career-building reflections:

You are wondering how you can address the problem of misogyny, gender-based violence, rape as warfare...? Education and dialogue on the proper ways to interact with one another will be fundamental. Everyone has a role in ending sexual violence and other forms of abuse. There are volunteering opportunities at WEAVE and other organizations. As physicians, we are well placed to promote conversations about healthy sexual development, and explain how the taboo character of sex or its misconceptions, repression etc. can lead to frustration and acting-outs. Coaching Boys into Men is an evidence-based approach to empower male youth in stopping abuse.

The power of semantics

The “minor/serious” sexual assault legal distinction is meaningless to survivors and conceals a shared felt experience (Muldoon et al). Survivors rarely, if ever, consider an assault “minor”. In fact, it seems like creating subcategories distract from the core issue (sexual violence) and blurs the perpetrator’s accountability. The way we structure language could also perpetuate certain victim-blaming attitudes. In his TED talk “Violence Against Women – It’s a Men’s Issue”, Jackson Katz explains how the structure of our language conspires in keeping attention off men. For instance, a lot of people hearing the word “gender” think “women”. Or even the way we structure sentences shifts the focus. According to him, this is one of the ways that dominant systems reproduce and maintain themselves. We need to formulate questions differently and focus on the perpetrators: “Why so many men abuse physically, emotionally, sexually, women, girls and boys?” Katz also asked: “… what is the role of the various institutions in our society that are helping to produce abusive men at pandemic rates?” This TED talk was filmed in 2012. Dear residents, we have a long overdue homework...

Did you know...

Sexual assault is part of the college experience for too many youth with 23% of females and 5% of males experiencing sexual assault during their college years.

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE (4673)
WEAVE support line: 916-920-2952
http://www.my-sisters-house.org/getting-help/sexual-assault/