

Responding to Disclosures of Sexual Violence: Identifying, Addressing, and Preventing Secondary Wounding

DR. ERIN WHITMORE

COORDINATOR OF RESEARCH & PROGRAM EVALUATION

FREDERICTON SEXUAL ASSAULT CENTRE



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- *Sexual Assault Crisis Intervention Training*
- *Specialized Training for Counselling Women Survivors of Sexual Violence*
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Sexual Violence Research Team

Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre (MMFC)

- Dr. Sue McKenzie-Mohr (Academic Coordinator, St. Thomas University)
- Lorraine Whalley (Community Coordinator, Executive Director, FSAC)
- Jennifer Richard (Director of Community Development, FSAC)
- Rina Arseneault (Associate Director, MMFC)
- Dr. Erin Whitmore (Coordinator of Research & Program Evaluation, FSAC)

Agenda

- What is Secondary Wounding?
- Causes & Contexts of Secondary Wounding
- Prevalence & Impacts of Secondary Wounding
- Recognizing and Countering Secondary Wounding
- Questions & Discussion

Objectives

- What can social workers do to prevent or minimize secondary wounding when receiving a disclosure of sexual violence?
- What can social workers do to support sexual violence survivors who are struggling with experiences of secondary wounding from previous help-seeking attempts?



What is Secondary Wounding?

What is Secondary Wounding?

Secondary wounding occurs when a response to a disclosure of sexual violence **blames, shames,** or in any way **harms** the individual who has disclosed.

- increases sense of self-blame, guilt, and shame
- exacerbates rather than alleviates harm
- can be perceived as more devastating than original act of violence

Sources of Secondary Wounding

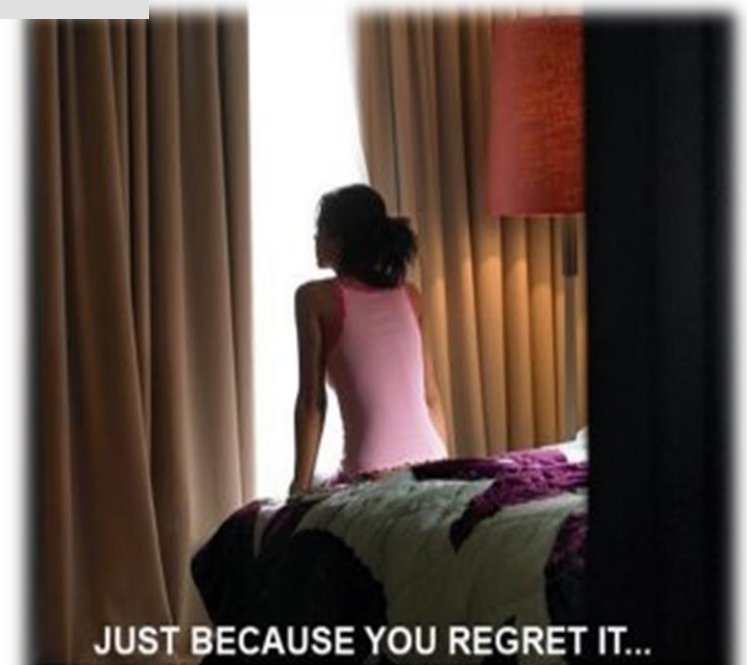
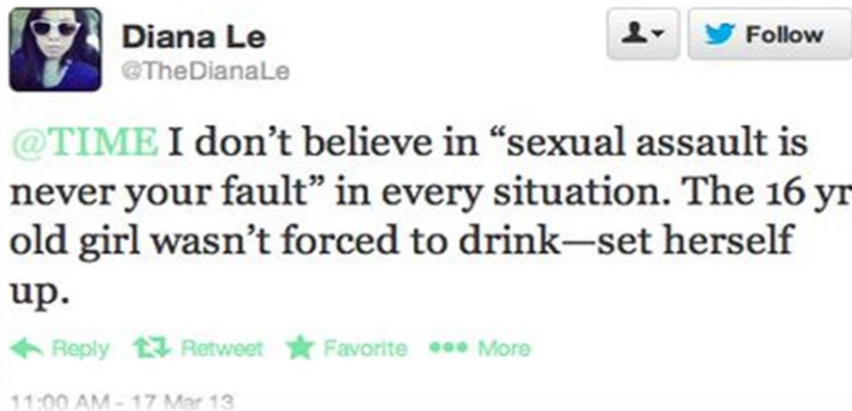
- helping professionals and systems (healthcare, police, criminal justice system, mental health, social services)
- informal support systems (family, friends)
- society and the media

A pair of hands, one light-skinned and one dark-skinned, are shown holding a small, green plant with several leaves. The hands are positioned as if gently supporting the plant. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue and green. The overall image conveys a sense of care, growth, and support.

Causes & Contexts of Secondary Wounding

'A steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action': Dad defends Stanford sex offender

- The Washington Post, June 6, 2016



JUST BECAUSE YOU REGRET IT...
DOESN'T MEAN IT WAS RAPE.

no one else is responsible for your decisions

DON'T BE THAT GIRL.


avoiceformen.com

Sexual Violence Myths & Stereotypes

- Sexual violence is committed by strangers, criminals, or people who are social outcasts, and is most likely to happen outside in dark, dangerous places.
- If someone does not report to the police, it wasn't sexual assault.
- If someone doesn't
 - ... scream or fight back,
 - ... cry or appear visibly upset,
 - ... have obvious physical injuries, like cuts or bruises,
 - ... easily recount all the facts in the proper order,it probably was not sexual assault/abuse/violence.

Sexual Violence Myths & Stereotypes

- If someone ...
 - ... wears something sexy or revealing
 - ... goes home with a date
 - ... has had sex with someone beforethey're asking to be sexually assaulted and give up their right to say "no".
- You can't say yes to sex and then change your mind. It's not fair.

A pair of hands, one light-skinned and one dark-skinned, are shown holding a small, green plant with several leaves. The hands are positioned as if gently supporting the plant. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue and green. The overall image conveys a sense of care, growth, and support.

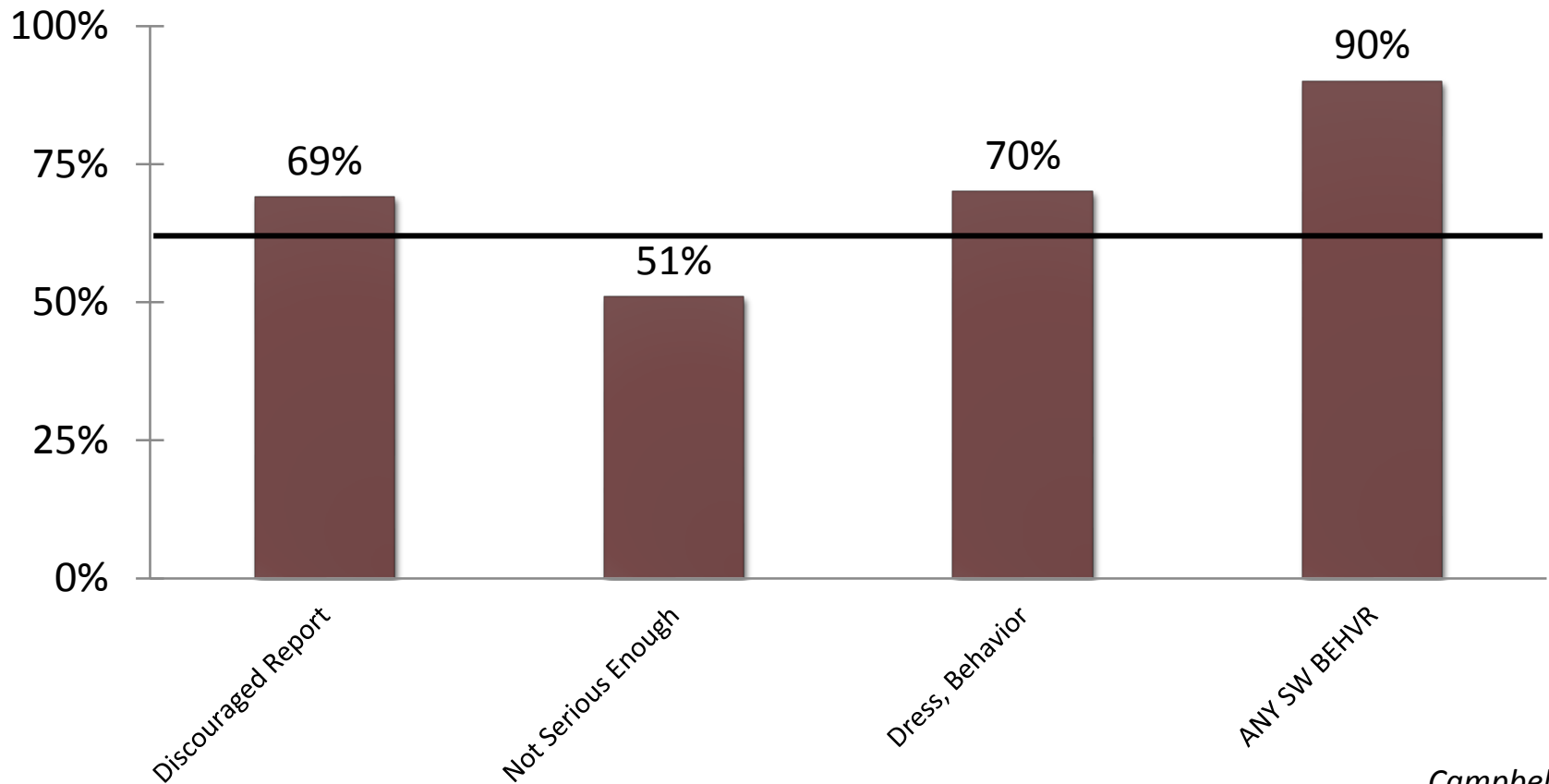
Prevalence & Impact of Secondary Wounding

Common Findings in Secondary Wounding Literature

- sexual assault victims encounter significant **difficulties** in obtaining help from **legal, medical, and mental health** systems
- sexual assault victims report feeling **blamed, doubted, and revictimized** after encounters with these systems and predominantly reported **negative experiences**
- factors that contribute to secondary wounding include **lack of experience** dealing with survivors of sexual assault; **difficulty accessing** services; adherence to **myths and stereotypes**; and **disrespectful or inconsiderate treatment** of survivors

(Campbell, 2008; Campbell, Wasco, & Ahrens, 2001; Patterson, Greeson, & Campbell, 2016; Ranjbar & Speer, 2013)

Prevalence of Secondary Wounding



Help-Seeking Experiences in Fredericton: Findings from a Needs Assessment

All of the interview participants identified at least one negative response to sexual violence disclosure

- responded with “willful ignorance” and inaction
- gave voice to victim-blaming beliefs
- subscribed to limited notions of what constitutes sexual violence

“I didn’t feel like I had anybody that understood or would support me and I thought that if I told too many people what happened, that they would just think that I was damaged or broken or they would think awful things about me.”

Help-Seeking Experiences in Fredericton: Findings from a Needs Assessment

“I don’t have a lot of confidence in the legal system and I’m seeing too many women that have gone to court just hammered, just secondary [wounding]. **It’s not secondary, it’s trauma.** And so, I mean, that’s a very difficult thing.”

“Some women have expressed frustration with the court system. They feel re-victimized going through the process of laying charges and going to trial. Having to tell their story over and over again feels degrading. They do not like having to get up on the stand to testify with the accused sitting in the court room; seeing the offender makes a lot of women anxious, upset, and emotional.”

Help-Seeking Experiences in Fredericton: Findings from a Needs Assessment

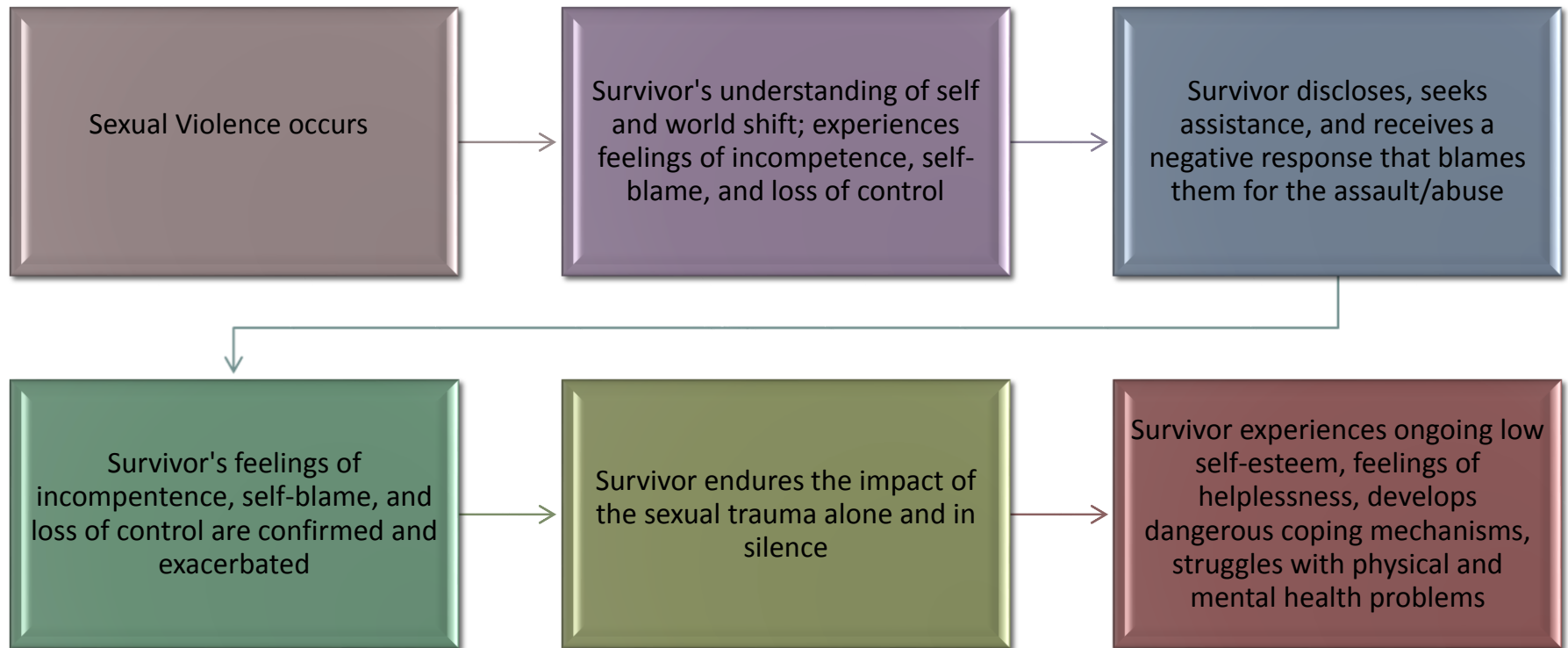
“My understanding was if I would talk to people about this [sexual violence], their going to treat me like I messed up and I don’t want people to. I don’t want any blame, and I don’t want to feel looked down on. So, **I think that really discouraged me from seeking other help out.**”



Results of Receiving Positive Support



Results of Receiving Poor Support





Recognizing & Responding to Secondary Wounding

COMMON EXAMPLES OF SECONDARY WOUNDING
FOLLOWING DISCLOSURES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Types of Secondary Wounding

- “How did you get yourself in that situation?”
- “You need to be careful when you are drinking ...”
- “Why did you go there alone?”
- “What did you expect? Think about what you were doing.”
- “Didn’t you realize how dangerous that situation was?”
- “How could you not have realized that was what was going to happen?”

**Shaming
and/or
blaming the
person for
being
targeted.**

Countering Secondary Wounding: How did you get yourself into *that* situation?

- A situation becomes “that situation” when one individual chooses to perpetrate sexual violence against another individual. The victim does not create the situation.
- No one chooses or wants to be sexually assaulted. Victims are not secretly colluding with perpetrators to make sexual assault happen.
- Be aware of hindsight bias: an inability to predict sexual violence does not mean someone is to blame.
- Resist and challenge statements that imply victims are responsible for stopping sexual assault or that victims need to police their behaviour based on constant threat of sexual violence.

Types of Secondary Wounding

- “Why didn’t you run away when you had the chance?”
- “Why didn’t you scream? We were right in the other room.”
- “If it was really rape, why did you let him spend the night?”
- “Did you say ‘no’?”

**Shaming
and/or
blaming the
person for
their reactions
during and/or
immediately
following
sexual
violence.**

Countering Secondary Wounding: Why didn't you ...?

Most sexual assault victims exhibit little or no physical resistance.

- **too surprised or confused** to resist, especially if perpetrator is known to victims
- **doubts her own perceptions** about what is happening or blames herself
- experiences **dissociation / frozen flight**
- under influence of **drugs/alcohol**
- cannot compete with **perpetrator strength and size**
- concerned by **fear of retaliation** from perpetrator if she physically resists
- worried about further **angering perpetrator** and increasing harm

Countering Secondary Wounding: Why didn't you ...?

- Learn about the **neurobiology of trauma** (fight, flight, freeze) and its relevance to understanding victim behaviour during and in immediate aftermath of sexual violence
- Support victims in **reframing behaviours** during and after assault in light of this information (i.e. “Your inability to move is evidence of your brain responding on an instinctual level in ways best designed to ensure your survival.”)

Neurobiology of Sexual Assault

- **rethink “resistance”** as any strategy the victim used to survive or cope during the sexual assault
- expand understanding of **strategies of resistance**

Think broadly about what constitutes resistance

INTERNAL RESISTANCE

Thoughts: I want this to stop.

Dissociation: I felt like I was watching it happen from the other side of the room.

I focused on the tree and watched the leaves moving.

Freeze Response: I felt like I couldn't move.

Self-Talk: I said to myself just lie here and it will be over faster.

Emotions: I was scared / terrified

PHYSICAL RESISTANCE

turning head away

shifting body

crossing legs

focusing on something else

freezing

crying

Types of Secondary Wounding

- “Why didn’t you tell someone right away?”
- “Why didn’t you report it to the police?”

**Shaming
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Countering Secondary Wounding: Reporting Sexual Assault

- Most victims **do not report sexual assault** to law enforcement; men are even less likely to report sexual assault than are women
- Victims **rarely report to the police first**; usually they go to a close friend or relative, a health care provider, or a victim advocate
- Victims often **delay reporting** a sexual assault for days, weeks, months, or even years, and many never disclose it to anyone, including their closest friends

Reporting Sexual Assault: The Victim's Perspective

They are afraid they will **not be believed** or **taken seriously**

They **know their assailant**

They are **intimidated by the assailant's** position, power, or social status

They engaged in **drug or alcohol use**

They were engaged in **illegal activity** (e.g. using drugs, underage drinking, sex work, etc.) at the time of the offense, or they have an arrest record

They are experiencing the **impacts of trauma** (fear, shock, denial, self-blame)

They **blame themselves** for the assault or fear other people will blame them

They are **confused** about whether the experience constitutes sexual assault

They are worried about **other people finding out**

Countering Secondary Wounding: Why didn't you tell / report?

- Normalize decision to delay telling / reporting and offer common explanations and reasons for not disclosing or reporting sexual victimization
- Support survivors in reframing decisions to remain silent within narratives of survival, self-protection, and coping.
- Demonstrate belief and legitimacy of survivors' experience regardless of decision to tell others or report sexual violence

Types of Secondary Wounding

- “Are you sure you’re not just overreacting?”
- “But he’s such a nice guy, are you sure you aren’t confused?”
- “It must be a misunderstanding. He wouldn’t do that.”
- “I’m sure he didn’t mean to ...”
- “Are you sure it wasn’t just a ‘bad date’ / just that you regret having sex with him?”

Expressing denial, disbelief and/or minimizing sexual violence.

Countering Secondary Wounding: “It must be a misunderstanding ...”

- Be aware of common myths and misconceptions about perpetrators of sexual violence
- Perpetrators are often
 - Known to victim
 - Possess social capital
 - Use coercion and fear through intimidation as weapons
- Ask questions from a place of belief in the survivor’s experience



Types of Secondary Wounding

- “Why aren’t you over it by now?”
- “You’re letting what happened control you.”
- “You’re lucky that’s all that happened! It could have been worse.”
- “Are you going to be a victim all your life?”
- “Well, that doesn’t sound like a *real* rape.”
- “You can’t dwell on the past.”
- “Get over it! It’s just sex!”

**Discounting
or
minimizing
the sexual
violence and
its impact**

Countering Secondary Wounding: “Get over it! It’s just sex.”

- Normalize the impact of sexual violence.
- Normalize the reality that there is no “right” or “wrong” way to heal from sexual violence and that everyone is impacted in unique ways.
- Avoid using statements that involve comparing or rating the severity of sexual violence. (i.e. “Well, at least it wasn’t as bad as it could have been”)
- Be positive about the possibility of healing and growth without shaming or blaming the victim for her lack of “progress”
- Acknowledge signs of growth, strengths, resilience, and healing while also acknowledging the difficulty and ups and downs of this process

Types of Secondary Wounding

- Seeing the victim's past sexual history as a way to discredit her disclosure
 - “Do you have casual sex often?”
 - “How many sexual partners have you had?”
- Seeing the victim's psychiatric history as way to discredit her disclosure

**Stigmatizing
and negative
labelling**

Types of Secondary Wounding

- Believing that people who disclose sexual violence are lying
 - “She cheated on her boyfriend and now she’s just trying to cover her tracks.”
- Believing that people who disclose sexual violence are trying to get attention, ruin other peoples’ lives, or have some sort of ulterior motive:
 - “She’s such an attention seeker.”
 - “She’s just mad he broke up with her and so now she’s trying to ruin his life.”

**Stigmatizing
and negative
labelling**

Ghomeshi acquittal hinged on **complainants' lack of credibility**

Globe & Mail, March 24, 2016

Jian Ghomeshi's not-guilty verdict: **Victim-blaming** is alive and well in sexual assault cases

The Canadian judge for the CBC star's trial criticized accusers' **"inconsistent" behavior** after the alleged crimes

Salon, March 24, 2016

Jian Ghomeshi judge must decide whether **witness credibility** issues taint core allegations

With no countervailing story, **judge likely to focus on credibility of witnesses**

CBC, Feb. 16, 2016

Prosecutors were over 5 times more likely to file charges if there were no questions about the **victim's moral character**.

They were also nearly 2 ½ times more likely to file charges if the victim **did not engage in any risky behavior** at the time of the assault.

Finally, prosecutors were almost 4 times as likely to file charges **if the victim reported the sexual assault to police within one hour**

Factors Influencing a Prosecutor's Decision to Charge in Sexual Assault Cases

Countering Secondary Wounding: “She just wants attention!”

- Examine personal biases and assumptions about sexual assault victims
- Demonstrate your belief in the survivor – research demonstrates that there are very few instances of people making false reports or lying about sexual violence
- Operate from a perspective that understands that people disclose sexual violence because **they want support** and **they want to begin the process of healing**; reject beliefs about disclosure that question or doubt a survivor’s motives

Countering Secondary Wounding: “She just wants attention!”

In disclosing sexual violence the survivor puts herself at risk of scrutiny, social and economic loss, judgement, and significant life disruptions.

Acknowledge the **courage** a victim demonstrates in disclosing sexual violence (rather than suggesting she wants attention or she wants to hurt others)

Countering Secondary Wounding: General Strategies

- Understand the realistic dynamics of sexual assault.
- Be informed about sexual assault myths and misconceptions.
- Do what you can to prevent, reduce, and/or address secondary wounding in your workplace. Be aware of your own potential to inflict secondary wounding.
- Explain the concept of secondary wounding to survivors of sexual violence.

PORT





Questions & Discussion

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Thank you!

For additional comments or questions please contact

Erin Whitmore

(506) 454-0460

e.whitmore@bellaliant.com

