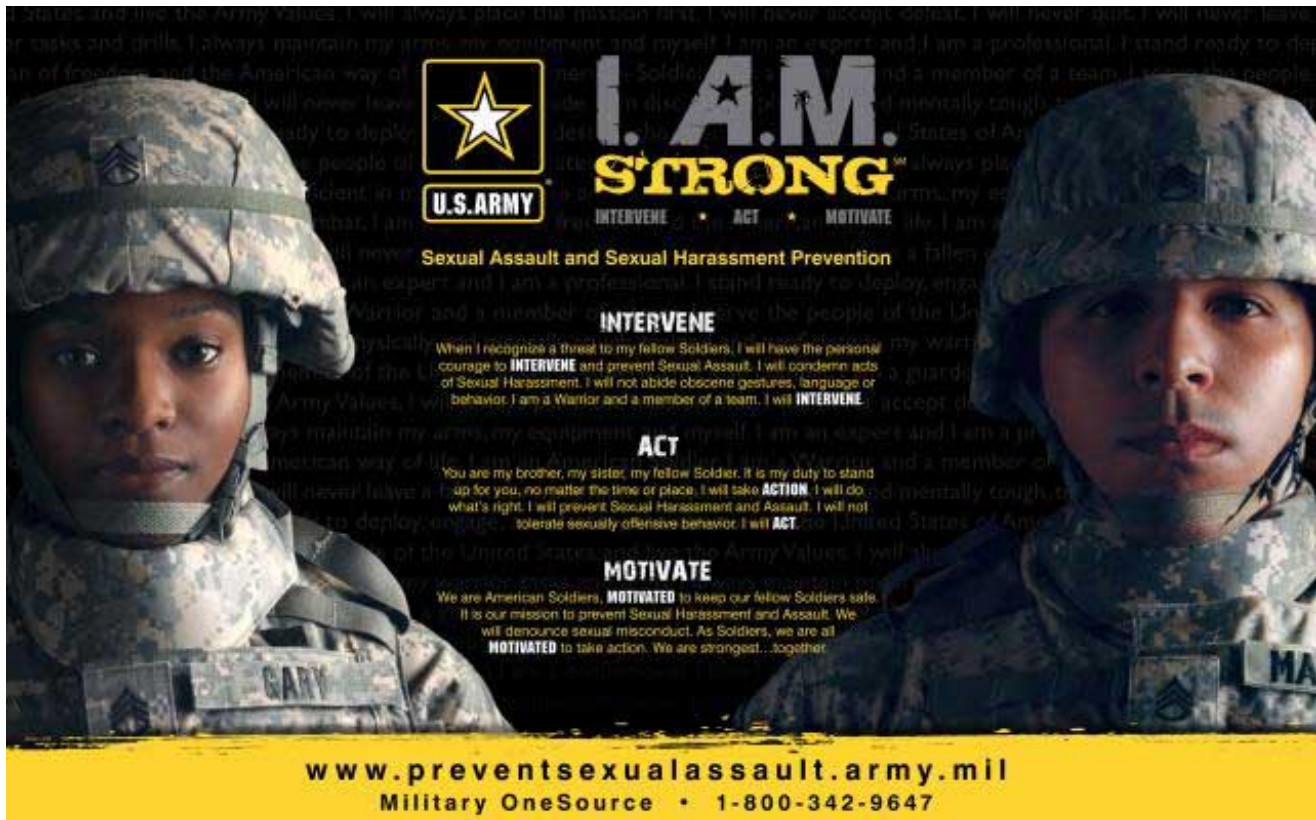


Commentary: What does sexual assault cost?

Cynthia Kelley, Fort Polk Army Community Service

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Most rape victims are too embarrassed to report their assault to the proper agencies because they know their perpetrator and are worried about repercussions.

We see that phenomenon quite a bit in the military when dealing with clients through the Army Community Service Family Action Plan Victim Advocacy Program. Most of our victims know their offenders and the fear of being shunned or not being part of the team anymore makes them reluctant to report.

It is easier for most victims to report a sexual assault if the assailant is a stranger, somebody waiting for them in a dark corner on their way home, rather than the nice guy that everybody at work respects.

Many clients we have worked with did not want to come forward and report because they blamed themselves. "Maybe I shouldn't have been drinking...", "I should not have agreed to watch a movie with him without anybody else present...", "It's my fault for trusting him..." are statements that we hear on a

regular basis.

Besides self-blame for the traumatic experience they have been through, victims of sexual assault deal with other physical and psychological problems. It is important for victims to seek help and get counseling.

The Army offers resources including victim advocates, Social Work Services counselors and chaplains, just to name a few. The problem we see is that victims that decide to deal with their trauma themselves ultimately get to a point where they cannot function anymore, whether at work or in their families. One rape victim shared the following account of her assault ...

"Rape has repercussions far beyond the physical trauma, the damaged clothing, the embarrassment. Rape damages a victim in ways seen and unseen. The physical wounds heal but the emotional trauma is forever."

My journey into victimhood began on a warm night during my freshman year. I was an 18-year-old high school graduate enjoying my first taste of freedom and adulthood at my state college. I'd never experienced such freedom. I was raised in a large family, all brothers, guys were my friends, and I had a steady boyfriend back home.

Living in the dorm was beyond exciting -- always someone to talk with, always a party and we felt safe because it was an all girl dormitory. When you're 18, nothing bad is ever going to happen to you and your friends are your world. Well, on a beautiful fall night, one of my friends raped me. We were drinking but not enough to blot out the images that flash through my mind even today. We were laughing and watching television and somewhere between laughter and morning I was introduced to sex in the most brutal fashion imaginable.

Years later, when I finally told someone, I found myself saying over and over again, 'I wish it had been a stranger, a stranger.' I would have felt less guilty, less ashamed ... I let my rapist into my room, offered him food and drink, shared my company and sofa and he left with my soul.

While writing this story, I was asked: "What did rape cost you?" It cost me my youth, trust, faith in my own judgment ... in hindsight I can see that I reacted to my rape by self-destructing. I alienated friends and family because I couldn't share my experience. My rape became a shield that I used to keep people at a distance. I didn't want my parents, boyfriend and brothers to be disappointed in me and I knew if I told them they would blame me just as I blamed myself. Rapists are monsters; any idiot should be able to recognize a monster, shouldn't they?

What did rape cost me?

It cost me college - I flunked out.

It cost me my body - I viewed it as something damaged, something dirty. I abused it for years.

It cost me love - I couldn't let the man I love touch me and he didn't understand, so he left. I cloaked myself in anger and despair. I careened through life going from job to job, avoiding commitments, avoiding love. Punishing myself by denying myself every dream I had ever cherished.

As I write this, I ask myself - all this trauma from just one physical act of aggression? I could detail

the aggression; my rapist used his size and strength to control and hurt me. But it was more than the physical assault. It was having no control, no right to stop what was happening to me. I thought he would kill me. I didn't tell and in doing so I protected my attacker.

Today, I'm a lot older. I found the help I needed to put my rape where it belongs. Today, if I were hurt in the same way I would not say no just to my rapist. I would be screaming it for my whole community to hear. 'I am here - I have been hurt - it is not my fault - I do not have to cooperate and be a good victim - I will take my control back. I am finally free.'

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