

CLOSE TO HOME



DEALING WITH  
acquaintance  
rape



## “It’s not your fault”

**T**he Monday morning after it happened Natasha found herself in the guidance counselor’s office at the church school she attended. She had tried to go to class, but she couldn’t make herself enter the room. She had tried to pray, but wondered if God would ever listen to her again. Mrs. T was someone she didn’t know well, but she felt she had to talk to somebody. Fortunately Mrs. T was free and, with one look at Natasha’s face, she ushered her into her office and closed the door.

Immediately, Natasha began to cry and told her what had happened. Through her cousin, 16-year-old Natasha had met Justin, an older guy from another school. She liked him right away, so she didn’t need much persuading when he invited her out on the weekend. She was a little surprised that the date turned out to be a party, held out in the country on an empty field. She was a little uneasy that she didn’t see anyone she knew, but she liked Justin’s attention, and shivered with the risky excitement of the night. She drank some of the beer Justin offered and told herself to loosen up and have fun. She nestled close to him as they danced to the music pounding out of the boombox.

### **Humiliated and dirty**

When he led her off into the bushes, she knew they’d be kissing, but she wasn’t prepared for how quickly he moved to take off her clothes. She tried to protest but he kept covering her mouth with aggressive kisses. She struggled, but he was stronger than she was. Even though she said no, he forced her down on the ground, and pushed his penis inside her. She grew numb and lost track of what happened after that.

Somehow she got her clothes back on, and somehow Justin took her home. She crawled into bed, shaking and humiliated. She felt so dirty. She spent the weekend pretending that she was sick. She couldn’t imagine telling her parents! They already worried about her and told her she took too many risks. She didn’t want to let them down.

Natasha stopped speaking, and a few more tears slid down her face. She could tell that Mrs. T was listening carefully. Mrs. T told Natasha that she was sorry that this had happened to her. She said, “This is not your

**“This is not your fault, Natasha. Justin took advantage of you, and forced sex on you at a time and place that you did not choose.”**

fault, Natasha. Justin took advantage of you, and forced sex on you at a time and place that you did not choose. He used alcohol to gain control over you. That was wrong.”

“You’ve been hurt, Natasha,” Mrs. T continued, “and you need some help for your healing.” Mrs. T talked about people that could help her: a doctor for a physical exam, a counselor to discuss her emotions. She said that some women talk with the police to name the wrongdoing and bring the person who committed the assault to account. Mrs. T also sensed that Natasha’s family was close, and suggested that instead of rejecting her, they would probably want to be with her, especially in this difficult time.

Finally, Mrs. T took her hand and said, “Natasha, I want you to know that I will walk with you through your healing. You are not alone. God cares about your distress and will see you through this.”

## What is acquaintance rape?

**A**quaintance Rape is sexual assault by someone known to the one assaulted, often on dates. Sexual assault is any unwanted act of a sexual nature that is imposed on another person—anything from sexual touching to intercourse. While victims are usually women (and not only younger women like Natasha), they also include men.

Sexual assault can be deeply troubling and traumatic for the victim. Common responses include shock, disbelief, embarrassment, fear, depression, helplessness, disorientation, flashbacks, denial, anxiety, anger, self-blame, and difficulties sleeping or eating. To try to avoid the pain, some turn to hurting themselves or misuse drugs or alcohol. Some feel suicidal.

Those who have been assaulted react to their trauma in their own way. Survivors may have trouble concentrating on their lives afterwards. They may feel trapped in the memories of the assault, and everything they see may remind them of it. They may fear they are pregnant or have a sexually transmitted infection. Victims like Natasha have had their virginity stolen. They may fear going outside, or they may want to act violently toward the perpetrator. It could take a long time for survivors to regain their sense of safety and feel able to take charge of their lives.

If you have survived a sexual assault, it is important to know that there is nothing wrong with how you feel; it is a natural reaction to the injustice that has been done to you. It was not your fault, and you are not alone. Even as you read this, you may find yourself thinking, “But you don’t understand my situation; if you did, you’d know that I should have stopped it.” Even if it feels like it is your fault, you are not responsible for what happened to you, and, most importantly, there are people who are able to help you—and who want to.

### Myths and realities about sexual assault

MYTHS	REALITIES
Sexual assault is most often committed by strangers in dark alleyways or parks.	Over two-thirds of sexual assaults are committed by acquaintances of the victim, and 60 percent occur in someone’s home.
Sometimes a woman just “asks for it.”	No one ever asks or deserves to be raped. If a woman’s body responds with feelings of arousal during the assault it does not mean that she “wanted it.” The person who commits the sexual assault is responsible.
Sexual assault happens because someone cannot control themselves.	Sexual assault is never about uncontrollable desire. It is about power over another person and a refusal to treat that person with respect.
A woman’s duty is to please her boyfriend or husband, even if she doesn’t want to.	Healthy sexual relationships are based upon mutual respect and caring.
Only attractive young women are sexually assaulted.	Sexual assault can happen to anyone, from babies to grandparents.
If a woman does not loudly say “no” to sexual assault, it means that she consents.	Sometimes it may not be safe to say “no.” And some people, such as those under the age of consent or who are intoxicated, cannot give consent. In most cases of assault, victims do say “no” in words and body language (pushing away or looking uncomfortable). Unfortunately, these are often ignored.
Only women are assaulted.	The vast majority of sexual assaults are committed by men against women, but men can also be victims of sexual assault.
Women who dress in provocative clothing or are sexually active are asked to be raped.	Sexually provocative clothing and being sexually active does not imply sexual consent. Such views perpetuate a sense that the victim “deserved it.”
False accusations of sexual assault are common.	While false accusations do happen, they are rare. Conversely, it is common for victims of sexual assault not to report at all because of fear.

## Acquaintance rape, the Bible, and the Christian story

**T**hroughout the Bible we read of a God who brings justice to victims and freedom to those who are oppressed. Especially in the life of Jesus, we see God's desire for wholeness and right relations among all people. In the light of these main themes of Scripture, we consider one biblical story of acquaintance rape: Amnon's sexual assault of his half-sister Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1-21).

Amnon became obsessively attracted to Tamar, and consulted his cousin Jonadab on what to do. Jonadab devised a trap for Tamar, which Amnon then set. He arranged with his father, King David, that he would be alone in his room with Tamar, and, over her protests, sexually assaulted her. After the assault, he "hated her" and ordered her from his room.

Like other victims of rape, Tamar was overpowered by her offender. Amnon acted not out of love, but from selfish force and abuse of power, giving no thought to the consequences for Tamar. For Christians, love that is expressed sexually includes attitudes of equality, respect, pleasurable play, and marital commitment (see Song of Songs; 1 Corinthians 7:2-3; Ephesians 5:21).

Tamar suffered by Amnon's refusal to acknowledge the harm he had caused. When

*Amnon acted out of selfish force and abuse of power, giving no thought to the consequences for Tamar.*

she asked him to consider her legitimate concerns, he refused. He treated her with contempt, another sign that his violence toward Tamar was motivated by selfish satisfaction. Responses such as Amnon's—both the assault and the contempt he expressed—damage a victim's self-worth and her compassion for herself.

Like Tamar, sexual assault victims may also be hurt by the deliberate or unwitting actions of bystanders. Amnon was assisted

in the assault by his cousin Jonadab. Perhaps King David was unaware of Amnon's intent, but when he consented to Amnon's plan, David increased Tamar's vulnerability. After the assault, David took no action. He "would not punish Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn" (v. 21). (In siding with Amnon David was, in effect, further victimizing Tamar.)

Initially, Tamar's brother Absalom told her to be quiet and advised her "not to take this to heart" (v. 20). This, too, is typical of many acquaintance rape cases: friends and relatives counsel them to forget it and move on. After two years, however, Absalom murdered Amnon because of the rape. It is not clear if Absalom did so because he wanted healing for Tamar, or because he wanted to avenge the wrong done to his family.

### **God hears the voice of the victim**

Rape victims often find that justice extended on their behalf sometimes does not address their deepest needs. In fact, sometimes the justice seems to bring more harm than healing; people who care about the victim take matters into their own hands instead of hearing how the victim wants the matter to be dealt with and then respecting the victim's wishes.

Even so, it is right for victims to cry out for justice. This is what Tamar does when she is driven from Amnon's room after the assault. Like that of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt and the suffering people in the Psalms, the cry she raises after being violated is a cry for justice. Jesus gave special attention to those with less power—including women, who were often oppressed in his society. His followers were to serve one another, rather than act as tyrants (see Mark 10:41-45). He showed equal regard for men and women, and called his followers to act the same way.

Throughout the Bible, God responds to the cries of the oppressed. If you have suffered sexual assault, therefore, you can take heart in God's commitment to justice, compassion, and healing.

## Steps toward healing

**T**he memory of a sexual assault is an incredibly hard burden to bear, but it does not have to control the rest of your life. You can find the way to healing and wholeness. This often requires the help of others, and it will likely take time. Here are some principles for finding help.

**1. Speak to someone you can trust.** You will need help to recover, and it is important that you talk with someone who will support you, both in your healing and in your pain. This person (or people) could be a trusted friend or relative, a fellow church member, your pastor, or a counselor at work or a school. It is also helpful to have someone who understands and respects your culture.

If, for whatever reason, you cannot speak to any of these, many communities have crisis lines and anonymous support groups for survivors of sexual assault. (Contact information can often be found in the front of the phone book or on the internet.) It is especially important that you choose a sympathetic listener who will take you seriously, protect your confidence, and not blame you or defend your attacker.

### Sexual assault and the law

When you talk to professionals, be aware that in many states and provinces, they are legally required by law to report cases of sexual assault.

If you pursue legal action against your assailant, learn about the legal codes; definitions of sexual assault can vary from region to region. Even if your assault doesn't meet the legal definition of sexual assault, however, you need to talk to someone.

**2. Find a therapist.** You may wish to schedule sessions with a professional counselor to help you work through what you are feeling. Ask your pastor or a friend to help you find a therapist who understands sexual assault and is prepared to help you recover. The local crisis line (see point one) can also be a good place to start.

**3. Consider legal action.** Going to the police can be exhausting and embarrassing, and many survivors choose not to prosecute their attackers. But naming the wrongdoing and bringing your attacker to account can aid the healing process and help you to regain control of your life. Also, consider that perpetrators of sexual assault rarely stop after one time; they will likely go on to assault others.

**4. Be patient with yourself.** You may start to be frustrated with yourself that you “can't get back to normal” quickly enough. You may even start feeling as though you are weak or foolish because you cannot recover as quickly as you would like. Give yourself enough time to feel safe and in control of yourself again.

**5. Know that God cares for you.** Being wounded through sexual assault does not change your status as a much-loved child of God. God will open ways of healing as you draw on the resources of your church: worship, prayer, lament, music, and supportive friends.

**6. Plan a service of healing.** With your spiritual mentor or pastor, consider inviting a few close friends and people you trust to participate. Among the rituals could be a symbolic restoration of purity.

## For further awareness

### Books

- Adams, Carol J., and Marie M. Fortune, eds. *Violence against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*. New York: Continuum, 1995.
- Fortune, Marie M. *Sexual Violence: The Sin Revisited*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005.
- Heggen, Carolyn H. *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, reprint 2006.
- Mile, Al. *Ending Violence in Teen Dating Relationships: A Resource Guide for Parents and Pastors*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005.
- Matsakis, Aphrodite. *The Rape Recovery Handbook: Step-by-Step Help for Survivors of Sexual Assault*. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2003.
- Mennonite Central Committee 2008 publication: *Abuse: Response and Prevention; A Guide for Church Leaders*. It can be downloaded from the [www.mcc.org/abuse](http://www.mcc.org/abuse) website.
- Scott, Kay. *Sexual Assault: Will I Ever Feel Alright Again?* Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1993.
- Warshaw, Robin. *I Never Called It Rape: The Ms. Report on Recognizing, Fighting, and Surviving Date and Acquaintance Rape*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.
- Yantzi, Mark. *Sexual Offending and Restoration*. Scottsdale; Waterloo: Herald Press, 1998.

### Substance abuse and rape

When acquaintance rape occurs, it is often in situations where alcohol or drugs are present. If you are at such events, make sure you have friends with you, and look out for each other. Perpetrators sometimes add a drug to unattended drinks, opening the door for someone to be victimized.

### Web sites

- [www.aftersilence.org](http://www.aftersilence.org)  
An online support community.
- [www.counselling.com](http://www.counselling.com)  
Directory of counselors in Canada, the U.K., and Australia.
- [www.counselingbook.com](http://www.counselingbook.com)  
Directory of counselors in the United States.
- [www.mencanstoprape.org](http://www.mencanstoprape.org)  
Mobilizes men to help create cultures free from violence.
- [www.metrac.org/programs/info/prevent.htm](http://www.metrac.org/programs/info/prevent.htm)  
Links to many other sites and resources.
- [www.owjn.org](http://www.owjn.org)
- [www.pandys.org](http://www.pandys.org)  
Large online support community; dedicated to helping survivors of sexual assault.
- [www.sacc.to](http://www.sacc.to)
- [www.sacl.ca](http://www.sacl.ca)
- [www.vwsac.com](http://www.vwsac.com)

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CLOSE TO HOME



**Local resources for help with  
acquaintance rape:**

**For more information on other Close to Home  
titles, go to:**

**[www.mennomedia.org/closetohome](http://www.mennomedia.org/closetohome)**



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