

http://www.ptleader.com/opinion/perspectives/start-the-healing-by-first-believing/article_2dd8a376-3791-11e8-a365-1fa4c1f37b57.html

Start the healing by first believing

Perspective by Teresa Shiraishi 11 hrs ago



As the #MeToo movement grows, conversations about sexual assault and harassment are becoming more commonplace. Silence is being broken by survivors every day.

One of the barriers to speaking about a sexual-assault experience is the fear that you won't be believed, that you may even be blamed for what happened. As a therapist at Dove House, I have heard countless stories in which victims have been met with disbelief and victim blaming by family, friends, law enforcement and helping professionals. The pain of this betrayal can be immense.

Why do people struggle to believe survivors? It is difficult for us to understand that people we know, respect and trust can cause harm. It is difficult to grapple with the feelings of helplessness that come when we realize that we don't have full control of whether bad things happen to us. We can sleep better at night imagining that people are raped because of their risky choices and that rapists aren't in our families, or amongst coworkers, friend groups and communities. However, the reality is that perpetrators are more often people who we are close to. The reality is that any of us can be a victim.

CONFLICTED FEELINGS

When Sherman Alexie, a famous Native American writer, and Aziz Ansari, an Indian-American actor, comedian and filmmaker, were accused of sexual misconduct, I felt that conflict. I have a lot of respect for both men and the art that they have created.

I fully believe the survivors who spoke, and I have to explore the complicated feelings that come with the understanding that people I respect have caused harm. Instead of villainizing the men or blaming the victims, I'm trying to challenge myself to understand this situation in its full complexity.

I hope that part of the #MeToo movement is being able to have those hard conversations, acknowledging that people we know and love have caused harm, and asking the question: What can healing look like in our community around something as devastating as sexual violence?

Things are shifting. High-profile people are being held accountable for the harm they've done. As the #MeToo movement gains momentum, we hear less victim blaming and more support for survivors. The people coming forward with their stories are being believed.

Why is it important that we believe survivors?

Because false reporting has been researched. In one analysis in 2010, false reports were found to be very rare: between 2 and 6 percent.

Because survivors often share that not being believed by those you love and trust is re-traumatizing.

If we don't believe someone's story, the violence can continue. In the Larry Nassar sexual abuse case tried earlier this year, some of the child victims had spoken out earlier about their abuse, but were not believed. Nassar's sexual abuse was able to continue for decades.



An important task for all of us who want to end sexual violence is to believe survivors when they share their stories. Whether it is someone you know, a story you read in the paper or a rumor you hear, start by believing.

We can also make changes on a systemic level. Dove House is leading a campaign to proclaim April 5 “Start by Believing” Day. We invite support from local partners to sign on to the proclamation.

We have reached out to the Jefferson County Prosecutor’s Office, Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office and the Port Townsend Police Department, and are awaiting replies.

Join us as we present this request to the City Council on April 2.

Teresa Shiraishi is a therapist at Dove House Advocacy Services, and a social worker and community activist. Assisting her with writing this piece were the Rev. Kate Lore, new assistant minister at Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, and Bekka Bloom, who supports development at Dove House.