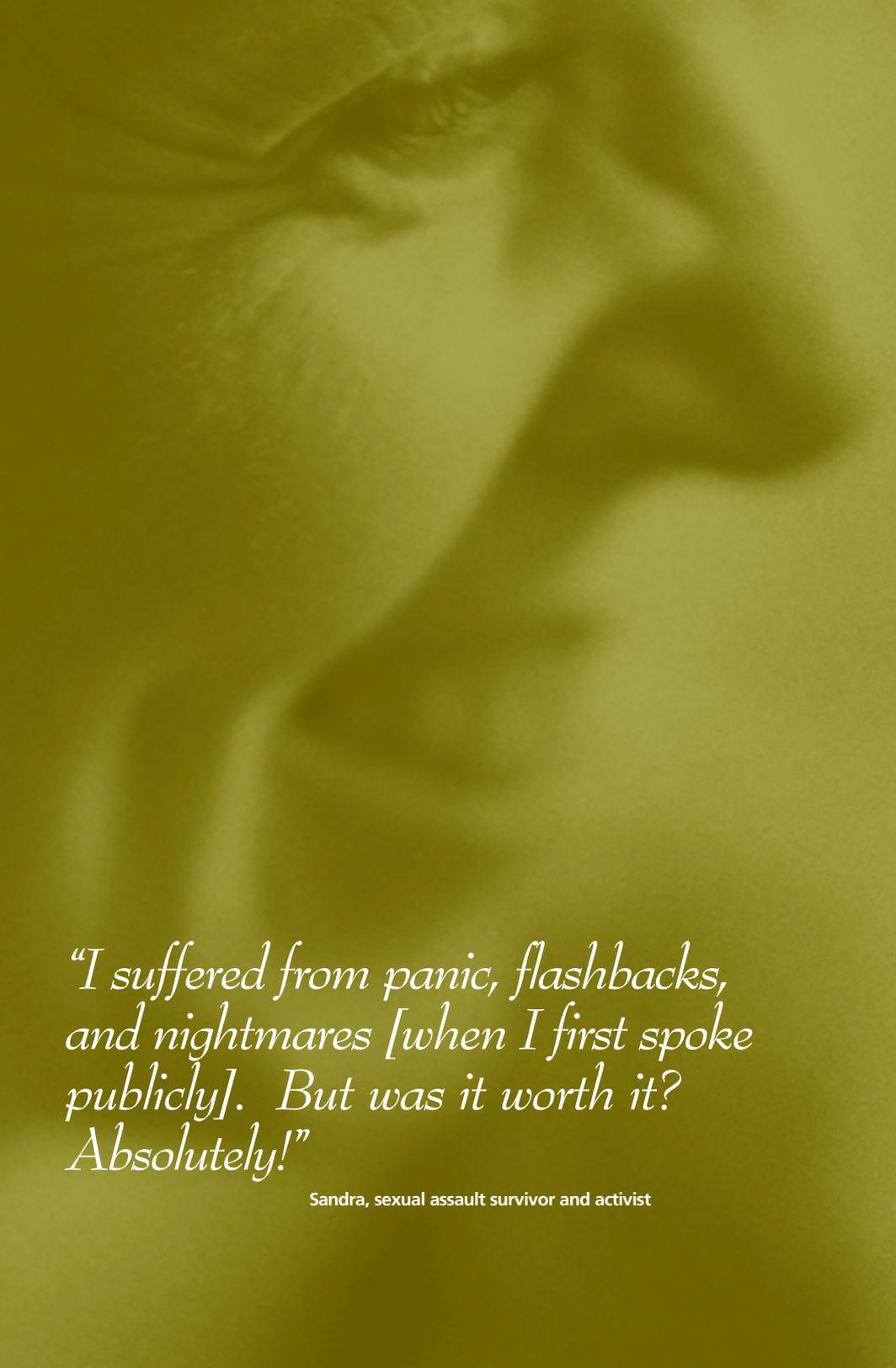




# Speaking Out From Within

*Speaking Publicly  
About  
Sexual Assault*



*“I suffered from panic, flashbacks,  
and nightmares [when I first spoke  
publicly]. But was it worth it?  
Absolutely!”*

Sandra, sexual assault survivor and activist



The Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape would like to thank the following individuals for their invaluable assistance with the creation of this pamphlet.

Amber Crawford – *Women Organized Against Rape*

Danielle Keener

Diane Kuntz – *Passages, Inc.*

Beth Lawson – *PA District Attorneys Association*

Mary-Clare Mullen – *Victims Resource Center*

Wendy Murphy – *Victim Advocacy and Research Group*

Jody Plauché – *Victim Services Center of Montgomery County, Inc.*

Lori Robinson

Sandra J. Sandhaus R.N.

Donna Wolfe – *YWCA Violence Intervention Prevention Program*

## I. Intro

**Sexual assault is a life-altering event.** Many survivors are affected by the trauma for the rest of their lives. They may suffer from depression, low self-esteem, flashbacks, fear, and difficulty with intimacy. Unfortunately, many of these symptoms are compounded by silence and secrecy. Often, survivors of sexual assault do not speak out about their experiences because they are ashamed, feel guilty, or blame themselves. Some survivors keep silent out of a sense of duty to family or fear of being ostracized for what happened to them.

During your victimization, you may have learned to not express your feelings. To express them may have increased your risk of being harmed. You may also have learned that saying “no” did not work to protect you. In such circumstances, silence may have been the only choice that made sense (Rosenbloom & Williams, 1999).

As a way of regaining their power from an event that robbed them of control, some survivors find talking about their assault an essential part of the recovery process. Some survivors want to

*“Your story is just that – your story.  
Be proud of who you are.”*

Danielle, sexual assault survivor

disclose their experiences to a few close friends and/or family members to end the loneliness or break the family silence. Others want to speak out publicly in an attempt to empower themselves and educate others about sexual violence. Whether you are speaking to a group of one or one hundred, it takes an enormous amount of courage to tell your story. Telling can be transformative. It can help you move through the shame and secrecy that keeps you isolated. It can open doors to understanding and support. Telling is one way you can become a model for other survivors. It can be empowering to speak out against someone else's crime. Speaking out can lift the burden of silence.

*The decision to talk about sexual assault can be healing, but you should never feel forced to speak before you are ready.*

Speaking out publicly is not right for everyone. No one should be pressured to tell their story. Survivors are heroes whether they speak out or not. Speaking out can mean many things – it can mean putting your story on paper for yourself in a journal entry, telling one trusted person, speaking at a national conference of advocates, or testifying on legislation at your state's legislature, for example. Whether you are considering disclosing to a trusted individual or speaking publicly about your experience, this pamphlet can provide you with some guidance.

There is no right way to tell, no right time to tell, and no right decision whether to tell. There are many different levels of telling. Telling a counselor, a friend, a family member, telling publicly, telling in writing will all feel different. You may tell with detachment, anger, sadness, or occasionally, even humor (Bass & Davis, 1988).

*“In sharing my story  
I felt a huge sense of LIFTING.”*

Donna, childhood sexual abuse and sexual assault survivor and sexual assault prevention educator



## II. Disclosing to counselors, friends, or family

Telling for the first time takes a lot of courage. Telling can be a form of asking for help, either in making the abuse stop or in working through the after-effects. Telling can be a way of taking care of yourself. Once you decide to talk about what happened to you, it is important to have a supportive network of friends and family. When building this network, it takes careful consideration to choose who and how you are going to tell. Below are some questions to ask yourself when preparing to disclose. Remember, you cannot be responsible for the reactions of others, but you can take control of your actions and be prepared for the outcome if you decide to share your experience with others.

- **Choose the person you decide to tell wisely.** Would you like to tell a counselor, friend, or family member? Does the counselor have experience in sexual trauma? If you choose to tell a friend or family member, has this person been supportive of you in the past? What is this person's relationship (if any) with the perpetrator? Will the relationship be a problem in her/his acceptance of your experience? Will this person honor your privacy and confidentiality if asked?
- **Talking face to face is not the only option you have.** Some people choose to write their stories through letters, stories, or poems.
- **Choose your setting.** Where and when will you feel most comfortable talking about the assault? Sometimes wearing comfort clothes or carrying a meaningful object helps. It may also be helpful to inform the person to whom you are disclosing that you have something important to tell her/him. This sets the tone for the meeting.

*Remember, once you share information about yourself, you cannot take it back.*



- **Prior to telling the person, make it clear how you would like her/him to react.** To avoid horrified expressions or thoughtless/insensitive comments, you may want to tell the person that you have something difficult to talk about and that it will help you if she/he contains her/his reaction. Offer some suggestions of what the person could say at the end.
- **Make your expectations clear.** If you do not want to be asked intrusive questions, tell the person. If you do not mind answering questions, make that clear.
- **Evaluate how your experience went.** How did it feel to you? What went right? What went wrong? What would you do differently the next time? What would you do the same? What about her/his reaction was helpful or unhelpful?

Make a list of the people you would like to tell. Think about each person and ask yourself how it would help you if she/he knew about the abuse. If you tell your best friend, will she/he be more understanding of your mood swings? If you tell your brother, will he stop hanging around the person who victimized you? If you tell your parents, will they stop your abuse or the abuse of someone else in the family? If you tell a counselor, what do you hope to gain from the sessions? Think about what you need from each of these people, and ask yourself whether telling them about your victimization will help you get it. Also consider how much you are willing to share with this person. You should not feel obligated or pressured to go into the details of your victimization if you are uncomfortable doing so. You may find it helpful to use the form below to assist you in preparing to disclose to a trusted support person.

I want to tell \_\_\_\_\_ . I want her/him to know \_\_\_\_\_ because I need her/him to \_\_\_\_\_ .

I am not going to tell her/him \_\_\_\_\_ . If I'm asked questions I am not comfortable answering, I will say: \_\_\_\_\_ .

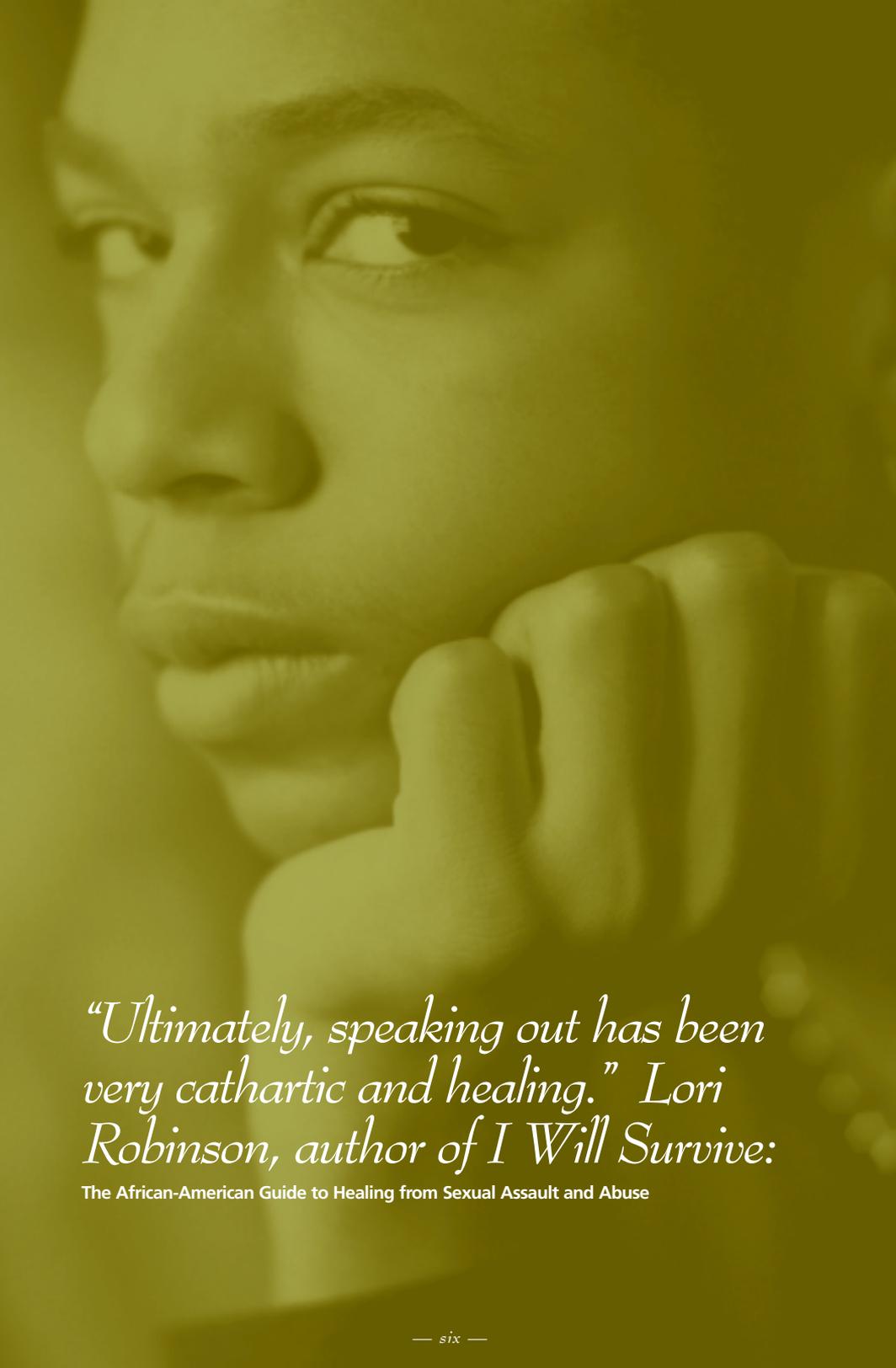
(Bean & Bennett, 1993)

### III. Speaking Publicly

Survivors of sexual violence who decide to speak out publicly often feel a sense of abandonment by friends and family who have difficulty accepting their stories. It is particularly difficult for survivors of incest or individuals who are accusing a respected member of the community. In an abusive family, the survivor who seeks help is often denounced by the rest of the family. Family members sometimes resent the fact that the survivor went public with their secret or exposed the problem. Members of the survivor's family or community may accuse the survivor of ruining the family or lying to get attention. Thus, the survivor feels abandoned or ostracized. If this has happened to you, realize that you are not alone. You deserve to heal from your trauma.

#### *The Sexual Violence Survivor's Bill of Rights*

1. No one has the right to abuse you or anyone else.
2. No one deserves to be assaulted or abused.
3. You have a right to stop the abuse that is happening to you or anyone else.
4. You have a right to pursue healing and justice for the abuse that has happened.
5. Sexual violence is wrong. The abuser is wrong.  
People who protect the abuser are wrong.  
**YOU ARE NOT TO BLAME.**
6. You did not destroy the family or betray their trust by speaking out about your abuse. The perpetrator destroyed the trust of the family every time he/she committed an act of abuse.



*“Ultimately, speaking out has been very cathartic and healing.” Lori Robinson, author of *I Will Survive:**

*The African-American Guide to Healing from Sexual Assault and Abuse*

Though the responses of friends, family, and community members can be hurtful, it is important to focus on how you feel and not how others feel. Focus on what you want to say and how you want to handle the situation rather than on any response you hope to get. Plan to process the speaking engagement with your counselor and/or trusted support person(s). Remember, this can be an ongoing task.

Going public is not the answer for everyone. The following are some questions to ask yourself when deciding if going public is right for you. In answering these questions, some survivors have found it helpful to work with sexual violence advocates or other counselors. In PA, to find an advocate or counselor near you, call 1-888-772-PCAR. Outside PA, please call 1-800-656-HOPE. Share your responses with at least one trusted support person and ask for feedback before you speak out.

1. What motivates you to go public? What do you hope to gain? What could you lose?
2. Can you achieve your goals through another means?
3. Is someone or something internally/externally pressuring you to disclose your abuse history? Who and/or what is pressuring you?
4. Are you going to use your real name or a pseudonym?
5. Will you wear a disguise of some sort?
6. Will you be paid? If so, how much?

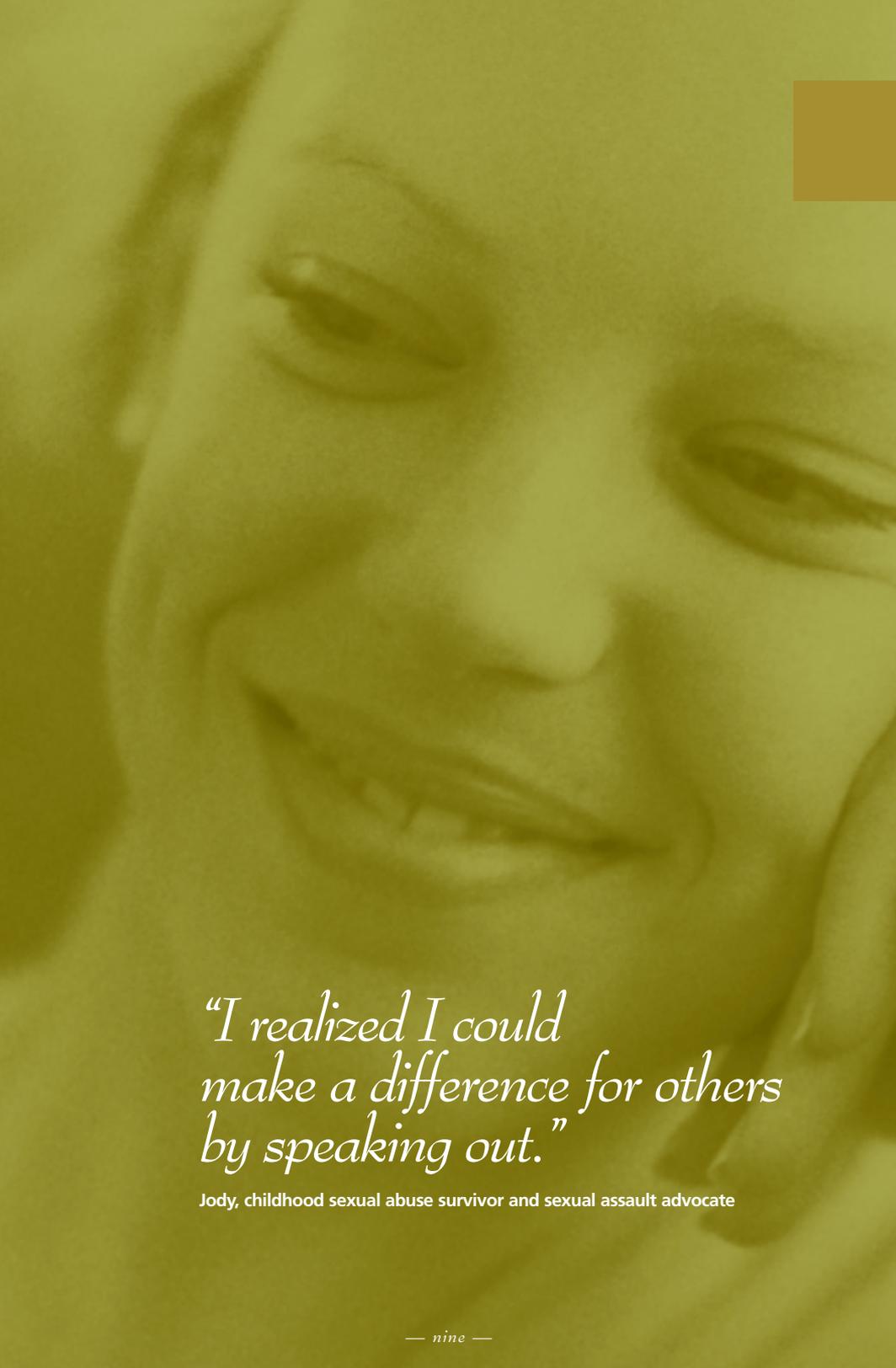
*“I got my courage [to speak out]  
from anger and frustration.  
I felt the need to make a change.”*

**Sandra, sexual assault survivor and activist**



7. Will the perpetrator be in the audience? Will your perpetrator's friends or loved ones be there?
8. Is there a chance that others will exploit you or your story? Are there safeguards available to protect against exploitation?
9. Will speaking out publicly hurt you in your present or future career, social life, or family life (including your spouse and children)? Are you willing to take that risk?
10. Have you thought about safety issues? What are they for you?
11. Would telling sever ties to your family that you would like to preserve?
12. Could you live with the possibility of being excluded from family gatherings (i.e. holidays, weddings, funerals)? How would you deal with the loss?
13. Would telling sever ties to friends with whom you would like to stay connected? How would you deal with the loss?
14. What if responses from people are hostile? Are there ways to get grounded as a way to protect against victim-blaming comments and reactions from others?
15. How might you cope if everyone around you denies your experiences and refuses to believe you?
16. How would the anger you might face from others impact you?
17. What if your audience had no reaction? How would that feel?
18. How would you process and manage your own anger and/or other feelings?
19. What support system is available to you before, during, and after the event? Are friends, family, coworkers, community members, advocates/counselors or members from communities of faith available?
20. Which support people agreed to be available before, during, and after the disclosure?
21. Can you realistically imagine both the worst and best outcomes that might result? Could you live with either one?

(Bass and Davis, 1998 and National Center for Victims of Crime, 2000.)



*“I realized I could  
make a difference for others  
by speaking out.”*

Jody, childhood sexual abuse survivor and sexual assault advocate



## IV. How to Prepare for Your Speaking Engagement

If you asked everyone in the country what their biggest fear is, the majority will tell you it's speaking in public. Many people are afraid to stand in front of a group of people and talk. It can be especially nerve-wracking when you are speaking about something as personal as sexual assault. You may be worried that you will break down, dissociate, or experience a myriad of other reactions when telling a group of strangers about your trauma. Thankfully, there are some practical tips you can follow when preparing for and speaking in public.

### Prior to the speech:

- First, make sure you are comfortable with what you want to say. Are you more comfortable with a prepared speech or are you someone who is best when speaking "off the cuff?" Whether you write down every word you want to say or just an outline, practice it. Rehearse your speech in front of a mirror, aloud to yourself in your living room, or in front of a small group of trusted friends. If you belong to a support group, practice in front of other members. This may be the first time you've heard these words come out of your mouth.
- Role-play with your counselor. Ask your counselor to hold a mock interview session with you. If you are appearing on a television show, practicing your response to questions might be helpful.
- What point do you want to make during your speech? What do you want to leave the audience with at the end? Having a goal can help you focus your speech and provide you with a "roadmap" if you get flustered or lose your place. Knowing where you want to end up will help you get there.
- Do not feel obligated to give graphic details of your assault if you are not comfortable doing so.
- If you know a microphone will be necessary during your speech, find a way to practice with one ahead of time. Hearing your voice through a microphone for the first time can be startling.

*Many survivors who speak out publicly stress the importance of counseling. Speaking out is not a substitute for sexual assault counseling. For some, receiving counseling before speaking out has been helpful in their healing.*



### **During the speech:**

- Hold something (pen cap, stress ball, small stuffed animal, locket) and focus your nervous energy into this object.
- Find a focal point. If the size of the audience is overwhelming, look over their heads to a spot on the back wall. If you have a friend in the audience, direct your speech to that person. If focusing on a friend is too hard, pick a stranger. You can divide your speech into sections and focus on a different person for each section.
- Don't be afraid to take a break. If you find yourself on the verge of breaking down, pause and take a few deep breaths. The audience will understand if you need a moment.

### **After the speech:**

- Debrief with a counselor or friend. Talk about how the speech went and how you felt while giving it. What went well? What would you change? Did you feel safe? Did you feel supported? Did giving the speech have the result you wanted? Would you consider speaking again?
- Be prepared for audience members to come up to you afterwards. Some people may want to congratulate you. Others may want to share their own experiences of sexual violence with you.
- Be aware that not every speaking occasion will have the same effect on you. After some events, you may feel wonderful. But the next time, you may break down or feel depressed or overwhelmed.

Still not comfortable speaking publicly about your victimization? Some survivors find taking baby steps helpful. Use the following suggestions as stepping stones to speaking out, or find a level where you feel comfortable and stay there.

- Volunteer at your local rape crisis center. Sometimes, speaking publicly about the work the organization does can help you become more comfortable speaking in public about your victimization.
- Contribute a story or poem to your rape crisis center's newsletter.
- Create a web page with your thoughts and feelings about your victimization.

## V. Guidelines for Talking to the Media

Some survivors of sexual violence choose to speak to the media about their assault. They find media attention helpful, beneficial, and in their best interests. Others prefer privacy. The choice is ultimately yours. A sexual assault advocate can help you weigh the pros and cons in making that choice. Some important questions to ask yourself and members of the media prior to consenting to an interview are:

- Will the/a perpetrator be part of the program?
- Will you have to sign a contract or an agreement? What will it say?
- Will you be paid? Do you think this will affect your conscience or credibility?
- In what markets and locations will the interview appear?
- Will you wear a disguise or have your appearance and voice altered?
- Can you see an advanced copy of or have input into the final version of the interview or article?
- Is there a chance the media will exploit you or your story?

There are two kinds of questions for which you should prepare answers before consenting to an interview.

1. Questions you are most likely to be asked.
2. Questions you are most afraid to be asked.

*“When I publicly shared my story, I felt released from the burden of who the abuser said I was.”*

Donna, childhood sexual abuse and sexual assault survivor and sexual assault prevention educator



## Risks and Benefits of Interacting with the Media

### Risks include:

- Press intrusions that spill over into those aspects of your life that may have little or no bearing on your victimization.
- Loss of anonymity that may compromise your physical safety as well as psychological well-being.
- Over-simplification of details of your victimization that may result in stereotypes or sensationalism.
- Unwitting compromise of criminal or civil justice proceedings.

### Benefits include:

- Emotional and psychological rewards from giving your side of the story.
- A sense of control and power.
- Opportunities to help other survivors and encourage counseling.
- Opportunities to keep pressure on law enforcement if the case is still under investigation.
- Opportunities to inspire and inform victim service professionals.
- Encouragement for local communities to be more supportive of victims/survivors.

(National Center for Victims of Crime, 2000).

When speaking to reporters, talk show hosts, and other interviewers, you have a right to be treated with dignity and respect. Here are some of the rights you are entitled to as a victim of a crime granting a media interview.



**You have the right:**

1. To decline an interview.
2. To have the services of a professional victim advocate/crisis counselor on site before, during, and after taping.
3. To select the time and location for interviews.
4. To request a specific reporter.
5. To decline an interview with a specific reporter even though you have granted interviews to other reporters.
6. To decline an interview even though you have previously granted interviews.
7. To release a written statement through a spokesperson in lieu of an interview.
8. To refrain from answering questions with which you are uncomfortable or feel are inappropriate.
9. To know in advance the direction the story about your victimization is going to take.
10. To only speak with one reporter at a time.
11. To demand a correction when inaccurate information is reported.
12. To ask that specific photographs or visuals be omitted from broadcast or publication.
13. To be informed of all other guests who will appear on the show, along with each guest's full background relative to the issue.
14. To know in advance what questions will be asked.
15. To request measures that will guarantee your anonymity (e.g., silhouette screens, disguises, electronic voice alteration, pixel and fog screening, etc.) or decline to have your picture taken for a newspaper interview.
16. To not have the television show air in specific markets and locations that may jeopardize your personal safety.
17. To be informed of the original air date and any subsequent airings of the show as soon as practicable.
18. To tell your side of the story.
19. To file a formal complaint against a journalist.
20. To grieve in privacy.

(National Center for Victims of Crime, 2000)

## VI. Legal Issues Around Speaking Publicly

Survivors of sexual violence have the same freedom of speech as anyone else. However, speaking publicly about the assault could seriously impact a criminal case. Many prosecutors suggest that if a case is pending, the survivor should not speak publicly about the assault because anything she/he says can be used in the trial by the defense.

Once a survivor speaks out publicly, she/he gives up her/his privacy rights. The survivor cannot ask the press not to publish her/his name. Additionally, the press may feel that it is only fair to allow the accused perpetrator to respond.

On the issue of naming the perpetrator, again, this is a free speech issue. The survivor has legal rights to speak out, but runs the risk of being sued for defamation. The case may not have merit, but that does not stop the defendant from filing suit.

*If a criminal case is pending, it is recommended that the survivor discuss any public statements with the prosecuting attorney before taking action.*

Survivors may find it helpful to speak with an attorney who has substantial experience as a defense attorney in First Amendment issues before speaking publicly. Generally, a consultation has a set fee and does not require a retainer or other large legal expense. For more information on legal issues concerning speaking publicly, contact **your state's District Attorneys Association**.

*“Speaking out was the biggest thing that helped me in my healing process.”*

Amber, sexual assault survivor



## VII. Finding Places to Speak Out

Many colleges, universities, and rape crisis centers sponsor “Take Back the Night” rallies at which survivors speak about their victimization. Contact your local college or university and speak with someone in women’s services. For more information about what is happening in your state or local community, call your state’s anti-sexual violence coalition. A list of coalitions and their contact information is available via the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) at 1-877-739-3895 or [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org).

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Many rape crisis centers host events during the month honoring sexual assault survivors. The events include rallies, press conferences, and workshops. In PA, call 1-888-772-PCAR for the rape crisis center near you. For calls outside PA, please refer to [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org) or 1-877-739-3895.

Volunteer at your local rape crisis center. Many rape crisis centers encourage survivors to become prevention educators or ask for their assistance in workshops and trainings. In PA, call 1-888-772-PCAR for the rape crisis center near you. For calls outside PA, please refer to [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org) or 1-877-739-3895.

You may also find it helpful to contact your state’s crime victims’ organization where you can join with other crime victims to share your story or speak out about poor treatment and injustices. In PA, contact the Coalition of Pennsylvania Crime Victims Organizations (COPCVO) at 1-570-762-3720 or [www.copcvo.org](http://www.copcvo.org).

*“I think being open and honest and not being ashamed about what happened to me definitely facilitated my healing.”*

Jody, childhood sexual abuse survivor and sexual assault advocate

## VIII. Resources

Bass, Ellen and Davis, Laura. *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1988.

Bean, Barbara and Bennett, Shari. *The Me Nobody Knows: A Guide for Teen Survivors*. New York: Lexington Books, 1993.

National Center for Victims of Crime. *Privacy and Dignity: Crime Victims and the Media*. Arlington, VA: National Center for Victims of Crime, 2000.

Rosenbloom, Dena; Williams, Mary Beth; and Watkins, Barbara E. *Life After Trauma: A Workbook for Healing*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1999.

**Please visit all five of the  
Pennsylvania Coalition Against  
Rape's web sites:**

[www.pcar.org](http://www.pcar.org)

[www.teenpcar.com](http://www.teenpcar.com)

[www.wherestheoutrage.org](http://www.wherestheoutrage.org)

[www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org)

[www.menagainstsexualviolence.org](http://www.menagainstsexualviolence.org)



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