

# THE SURVIVOR'S REPORT

## *Blaming the Victim to Maintain a 'Just World'*

Blaming victims for crimes committed against them seems pretty harsh, doesn't it? Wouldn't you like to think that you would never hold such an irrational attitude about someone who was raped or bullied? The truth is, anyone is capable of falling into the trap of victim blaming. One theory suggests this stems from a psychological concept called, "belief in a just world." As human beings, we like to believe that bad things happen only to bad people. This attitude makes us feel safe; if we are good people, bad things will not happen to us. The problem is, when we see a seemingly innocent person

become a victim of crime, it makes us feel vulnerable. To compensate for these feelings, we find ways to blame the victim for the crime being committed against them. We think "they are a bad person," or "they brought this upon themselves" and, "as long as I am good, I am safe from falling prey to the same misfortune as this person."

One British study, commis-

sioned by the sexual assault clinic, Haven, looked at this phenomenon in relation to rape and found, not only, that victim blaming was alive and well, but also that women may be harsher than men and that *people between the ages of 18-24 were especially likely to engage in victim blaming*. Dressing provocatively, accepting a drink, and dancing sexily were all endorsed by survey participants as reasons the victim should be held partially responsible for experiencing rape. In reality, none of these is an invitation, or excuse, for sexual assault.

While highlighting these elements may help increase an individual's feelings of safety, blaming the victim does

nothing to actually reduce one's chances of falling prey to the same misfortune, even when we're talking about sexual assault. Blame should be placed where it belongs, with the person who perpetrates the abuse. The Center for Relationship Abuse Awareness offers some specific strategies for what you can do to counter the victim blaming problem:

- Challenge victim-blaming statements when you hear them
- Do not agree with abusers' excuses for why they abuse
- Let survivors know that it is not their fault
- Hold abusers accountable for their actions: do not let them make excuses like blaming the victim, alcohol, or drugs for their behavior
- Acknowledge that survivors are their own best experts and provide them with resources and support

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/>

<http://stoprelationshipabuse.org/>

[http://jezebel.com/5471939/study-](http://jezebel.com/5471939/study-women-young-people-blame-victims-for-sexual-assault/all)

[women-young-people-blame-victims-](http://jezebel.com/5471939/study-women-young-people-blame-victims-for-sexual-assault/all)

[for-sexual-assault/all](http://jezebel.com/5471939/study-women-young-people-blame-victims-for-sexual-assault/all)



[www.jmu.edu/counselingctr/services/sexual-assault-services](http://www.jmu.edu/counselingctr/services/sexual-assault-services)

## FACT OR FICTION

**Victim blaming occurs when the victim, not the perpetrator, is held at fault for his or her own maltreatment. Consider how the myths below perpetuate misplacing blame.**

**Myth:** Staying in a relationship that has been abusive constitutes consent for the abuse.

**Truth:** A common rationalization for victim blaming is seen in holding the belief that a victim could have easily escaped the situation or avoided it altogether and sought out help. Continuing a relationship with an abusive partner who is blaming the other for their abusive behavior does not mean the victim is welcoming or causing ongoing abuse. It is more likely the victim is in a constant state of fear, and as a result, feels unable to help themselves or remove themselves from the relationship.

**Myth:** Abusers perpetrate sexual assault because of the victim's actions.

**Truth:** Sexual assault is not a result of a victim's individual actions, but rather a combination of the perpetrator's perception of others and feelings of power over others. Sexual assault is always a choice *the perpetrator* makes.

## Question & Answer

Dear Answer Annie,

I was recently a victim of sexual assault by my boyfriend of two years. Things had been going great, for the most part, but recently he started getting in really bad moods and yelling at me a lot. Anytime I did something that wasn't exactly how he wanted, he got angry, and last week he made me have sex to show him I was sorry, even though I had done nothing wrong and didn't want to have sex. I told some of my friends and instead of consoling me, they started listing off the reasons why he might have done that, and all of them had to do with something that I did. They said stuff like, "if you did what he wanted, he wouldn't have forced you," or "maybe you should do more nice things for him so he won't do it again" and one friend even told me that I obviously did something to deserve it. I feel hurt that my friends are not taking my side, and I can't understand how it could be my fault that he assaulted me.

Sincerely,

Confused Victim

Dear Confused Victim,

You are not responsible for your boyfriend's actions. People often struggle to accept the fact that bad things sometimes happen to good people, so they find ways to 'correct' the subconscious conflict in order to maintain a sense of the world as just and safe. No matter what you did or did not do, your boyfriend had no excuse to assault you. Consider sharing how your friends' words have hurt you and how helpful it would be to have their support. Hopefully they will realize their blame is misplaced. Sexual assault is never okay, and your boyfriend deserves to be held responsible. If your friends can't support you on this, consider seeking support through JMU Counseling Center Sexual Trauma Empowerment Program or other resources in the community.

Sincerely,

Answer Annie

*Please be advised that this article is neither a crisis/emergency service nor a correspondence therapy service. If you need either immediate attention or ongoing therapy, call JMU Counseling Center at (540) 568 6552.*