



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

bringing sexual trauma into the light

#NotOkay Last fall, on Friday, October 7, Kelly Oxford tweeted a request that people share their first experience of sexual assault. She then described being molested on a bus by an old man who smiled at her. She was 12.

By Monday, 27 million people had responded, most with their own stories. Kelly stated, "For 14 hours straight 50 people a minute had replied." Most of the respondents were women, but a few were men. Some reported incidents that occurred as early as age 5, some were teens, many were adults when the assaults occurred. Some were in the military. Assailants were strangers, fathers, uncles, babysitters, mothers' boyfriends, doctors, priests, "friends," or dates. Many of the respondents had never told anyone, some had told close friends or partners. All reported intense shame and guilt. One said, "I remember it like it happened yesterday. It lives in my body, it takes up space."

A DESTRUCTIVE CRIME

According to the nonprofit, Rape Abuse Incest National Network (RAINN), every 98 seconds someone is sexually assaulted, every 2 minutes one of those is a child. Ninety-four percent of rape victims will experience symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome; 70 percent will experience moderate mood distress—far higher than for any other violent crime. Rape is an especially destructive crime. Rape is a personal, intimate violation of someone's core sense of bodily integrity and safety, and it has devastating consequences. Sexual assault has the same kind of effects.

Only 6 of every 1,000 accused perpetrators will spend time in prison. How can that be? Because violence towards women is accepted and sanctioned in our world. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that a political candidate can speak openly of lewd and misogynistic treatment of women and still be elected president of the United States. Would we have elected anyone who had admitted to beating people up with impunity because he could get away with it?

As a therapist for 40 years I have heard many heart-rending stories of sexual assault and rape. Many women were children when the assaults occurred, one was a toddler. Most were teens or young adults. The stories are always told with extreme difficulty, and intense and relentless shame and self-blame. These feelings are often pretty intractable.

HIDDEN PAIN

The assault happened and they felt so deeply ashamed and bad that they told no one. Some felt that being raped made them unfit and undeserving of love. Some became promiscuous; others repressed their femininity and sexuality fearing that they had provoked the attack. Some stayed in relationships with abusive men who confirmed that they deserved to be beaten. Perpetrators were fathers, brothers, grandfathers, uncles, youth ministers, a psychiatrist, "dates" and friends. I feel outrage that the perpetrators went on their way, free to act out again and again while the victims carried the heavy burden of trauma.

My heart hurts thinking of these gentle, good, kind, conscientious, and loving women and the suffering they endured. This column is dedicated to you. I celebrate your courage, your perseverance, and your willingness to accept all of the raw and terrible feelings, to be with them until they passed—not gone or forgotten, but no longer in control of your life. What a gift it has been to work with you. Thank you for sharing these terrible secrets with me.

SHEDDING LIGHT ON TRAUMA

Here is the good news. Kelly Oxford brought this subject out in the open in a way never possible before. Women could share their stories and hear each other's stories on a massive scale. Only when we open a trauma to the light can healing begin. Kelly made it really okay to tell these stories—in public—in a way that felt safe. Women could begin to realize that the assaults were not their fault, that they did nothing wrong. They could recognize that they have nothing to be ashamed of—the perpetrator is the one who should be ashamed. Hopefully they will begin to accept their terror, anger, grief, and sadness, to validate those feelings, and to move forward toward wholeness and healing.

We have work to do in our world to end this epidemic: personal healing for victims, consciousness-raising in our communities, accountability and justice in our legal systems, and protection of the rights of women in our political system. Together we can make **#NotOkay** a reality and the world will be a better place for everyone. 🌱

Karen Stewart, MA, and David Stewart, PhD, are psychologists who work with individuals, couples, groups, and organizations in their Durham practice at 811 Ninth Street, Suite 220, in Durham. Reach them at (919) 286-5051. www.stewartpsychologists.com