Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault in America

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 In an ideal world a relationship between a husband and wife or boyfriend and girlfriend, would be in perfect harmony and bliss, built upon trust and love between the pair. However this is just not the reality we are living in, domestic violence and sexual assault occurs on average to nearly 20 people per minute in the United States, which equates to about 10 million women and men yearly (NCADV 2014). According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence or NCADV website, “1 in 4 women and 1 in 9 men experience severe intimate partner physical violence, intimate partner contact sexual violence, and/or intimate partner stalking with impacts such as injury, fearfulness, post-traumatic stress disorder, use of victim services, and contraction of sexually transmitted disease.” These statistics are frightening and dangerous. The amount of psychological and physical harm that a person can sustain from domestic violence and sexual assault at the hands of their partner is monumental with long lasting affects, both on the victim and possibly innocent bystanders like children who are exposed to the violence. As if being abused by their partner isn’t enough, victims of sexual assault are at greater risk of getting a sexually transmitted disease, which further effects the victims psyche, making them feel even more helpless and depressed. According to the NCADV website, 19% of domestic violence involves a weapon, and in the presence of a gun in a domestic violence situation increase the risk of homicide by 500%. How can we as a society except such remarkable numbers in homicides related to domestic violence? It is difficult to comprehend how in 2019 there are still people who believe that because; the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution reads that we have the right to bear arms, that it is not only justifiable to have a weapon for personal use, but it is upheld by the Constitution, and denying them that right is against the law. How many innocent people have to die or injured in domestic violence cases before we say “enough”? The statistic of increased risk of homicides by 500% when a gun is used, the statistic of 1 in 4 women and 1 in 9 men experiencing some form of domestic violence or sexual assault, is out of this world, and as human beings and nurses we need to do more to change these statistics. If we don’t correct these numbers and dramatically reduce them, things will only get worse. Domestic violence and sexual assault is a vicious cycle and can influence future generations who are exposed to these traumatic events.

 As with all problems that we encounter in the community, domestic violence and sexual assault is not limited to just the victims of the crime but, can and does affect the families, friends, neighbors, and community of the victims as well. Domestic violence and sexual assault impacts all aspects in the life of the victim such as psychologically, physically, emotionally, professionally, and economically. The victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault are usually between the ages of 18-24 and are women. The abuse usually begins with the partner verbally abusing the victim and then escalating to slapping or hitting the victim. The abuser will try to apologies and justify the abuse, then the abuser will try to make up with the victim, followed by a short honeymoon phase, and then the cycle of abuse begins again at the slightest bit of anger or frustration. The victims may even blame themselves for triggering the abusive episode. In the article titled State of Fear: Domestic Violence in South Carolina by Matthew Robins it states, “This stigma has the effect of empowering the abuser while simultaneously making the victim feel powerless, further reducing the victim’s ability to deter the abuser” (Robins 2017 pg 647). This statement showcases how the victims blame themselves for the abuse and further give power to the abuser, while making the victim feel more powerless. It is a vicious cycle that resembles a person riding a wild roller-coaster ride that they cannot get off of. Domestic abuse shelters are available throughout the United States for victims but not all States have plenty of shelters or space in the shelters as they would like there to be. In the article titled State of Fear: Domestic Violence in South Carolina by Matthew Robins it states, “This is exemplified by the states lack of domestic violence shelters. Women who do not have a safe place to flee with their children are less likely to leave their abusers. Women who do not leave cannot limit or put an end to their abusers’ opportunities to control them through violence. With continued access to the victim, the abuser’s use of violence becomes cyclical and harder to challenge” (Robins 2017 pg 647). This statement shows how when there is a lack of support/shelters for the victims of domestic abuse they are far less likely to leave their abusers and are even less likely to leave if they have children. As the evidence shows, domestic violence can have a negative affect on a community and the way it is perceived. States need more funding so that they can provide support and shelter for victims of domestic abuse. In order for States to get more funding, the States will need to pass legislature that would grant them these moneys. Along with passing legislature for funding, there needs to be more laws that protect the victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault. These laws need to empower the victims and deter and weaken the abuser. States can form laws that are stricter on the abusers such as, setting much higher bail judgments, enforced and obligatory anger management/group therapy, and longer prison sentences. Another issue plaguing our country is sexual assault.

 Sexual assault occurs on a daily basis throughout the United States, and its presence is very prominent in the American higher education system. Studies have shown that about 20% of women have experienced a sexual assault encounter by their senior year of college (Streng & Kamimura 2016). While another study found that students who attend higher education institutions are subject to increased risk for sexual assault and rape than the general population (Streng & Kamimura 2016). Students who have experienced sexual violence are more likely to report psychological disorders such as, major depressive disorder, anxiety, and post traumatic stress disorder (Nickerson 2013). Survivors of sexual assault are also more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, and drop out of school when compared to students who never survived a sexual assault incident (Zinzow 2011). The facts and statistics that Streng and Kamimura present in their study about sexual assault, is very disturbing and new to me. As a college student I was aware that sexual assault cases are more like to happen to, women who know their attackers and that the ages of these women were relatively young, but I never knew that so many of these sexual assaults happen to women when they are in college. Another scary aspect of the study is that many sexual assaults are either not reported or labeled “rape myths”, which is the false belief that, rape is the victim’s fault and the victim’s are to blame (Streng & Kamimura 2016). As a women’s nurse and a father to an 8 year old girl, I would want her to be able to go to college one day G-D willing, without having to be afraid that she will have to face such scary statistics and facts. More needs to be done for the safety and well being of women’s health. Colleges can invest in more public events that speak about sexual assault and when to speak up and seek help. Colleges can develop classes that teach young women strategies on how to avoid being in situations that can lead to unwanted attention and situations such as, not drinking alcohol more than they can handle and doing drugs, both of which can reduce their ability to stay vigilant and aware of their surroundings, as well as self defense class so that women can better protect themselves. Lastly colleges need to invest in educating their students about false beliefs and the misconceptions about what sexual assault is and who is at fault. It is extremely important that the victims are not blamed for getting sexually assaulted as this could only cause them psychological harm and deter future victims from coming forward with their stories.

 In order to put a halt to sexual abuse, we as a society first need to look at why women are vulnerable to attacks, the public perception of women, and their roles in society. In 2013 a film titled My Masculinity Helps was made public, and was funded by a grant awarded to the North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault. The movie was divided into 9 chapters, each with a running time from 2 to 8 minutes. The focus of the movie was to define sexual assault, rape, and consent, as well as examining men’s greater authority in institutions which places greater responsibility on them to address sexual violence, examines how objectifying women contributes to oppression and sexual violence, and finally it also address the way to intervene and support a survivor, and prevent sexual violence (Chapleau 2015). This movie can be a great tool, which schools, work places, hospitals, and government offices can use as a teaching tool to help understand the culture we are living in and what is within normal limits and expectable and what is not. Young men are very susceptible and easily influenced by their peers in a negative way from a young age. By showing the a movie like “My Masculinity Helps”, can really help in clearing up myths and misconceptions about what sexual assault is, It can help guild men in understanding that women are not toys or objects to be had and owned, but rather to respect, cherish, and love them. In the article titled, Using Masculinity to Stop Sexual Violence: Must Women Be Weak for Men to be Strong? by

Kristine Chapleau it states, “[m]arketing research has found that African American men tend to respond positively to health messages that are embedded in stereotypic settings. In particular, the barbershop is considered culturally important to African Americans” (Chapleau 2015). This statement show that when a message that has great significance is transmitted by using situations and stereotypes that relate to the audience, it is received and accepted much better. Educating the public about sexual assault in a way that they can relate and understand the material easily can go a long way in helping reduce the number of sexual assaults in this country.

As women’s health nurse I need to be prepared to help any women who might need help with either domestic violence situation that they might be facing. According to Domesticshelters.org there are 10 things that we can do in order to help someone in need and they are as follows, knowing the signs of domestic abuse and sexual abuse (controlling all finances, threatening violence, intimidation), not ignoring the situation (not wanting to get involved), lending an ear (listen without judgment), be available (keep your phone with you in case of violence escalation and attempt to escape by the victim), know the number to a near by shelter, check in regularly (ensure safety), be a resource (research shelters and escape plans), write it down ( documenting every incident, including date, time, location, and injuries), get the word out (raise awareness in the community), and put your money where your mouth is (don’t support the culture in music, television, and games that glorifies violence against women) (Domesticshelters.org 2019). By adhering to these ten recommendations, we can help women who are experiencing domestic violence and sexual abuse. Victims of domestic abuse are scared and might not know how to ask for help, and as a nurse I need to stay vigilant and an open eye to the very real possibility that my female patients can be going through domestic abuse but, to afraid to say anything because of either revenge, financial situation, child custody, and immigration status.

 In the of sexual assault, as a nurse I would try to prevent this from happening by teaching women the four steps to protect yourself and friends, as described in the Rainn.org website. According to the Rainn.org website women can help keep their friends safe by learning hot to intervene in a safe and confortable way in different situations, and having this knowledge can help stop a sexual assault from happening. The acronym is CARE and it stands for, create a distraction, ask directly, refer to an authority, and enlist others. The first step is to “create a distraction”; this can give a person at risk a chance to get to a safe place, step two is to “ask directly” to a person who might be in trouble; asking something like “would you like me to stay with you?” , step three is to “refer to an authority”; calling 911 or sharing your concerns with a security guard, bartender, or another employee, and step four is “enlist others”; by enlisting the friend of the person you are concerned about, to check on their well being and safety. By teaching women to use these simple steps we can help reduce the risk and opportunity that a sexual assault may take place.

 In conclusion I as a registered nurse, a father to three children, and husband would have to say that after writing this extensive paper that, the studies, research, and statistics about domestic violence and sexual assault is very concerning and scary. While it is obvious that more and more information is available about domestic violence and sexual abuse on the web, journal articles, and community postings, there are still both women and men alike who have knowledge deficit, misconceptions, and myths about these troubling issues. As the public becomes more aware of these issues that are happening in their community to their families, friends, and neighbors then more positive change can come about. When more of the general public, and not just healthcare professionals and social workers, know how to look out for signs of domestic violence and sexual assault, then more “outsiders” can try and intervene at an earlier stage of the abuse and can drastically alter or change the outcomes of these terrible situations. Schools and workplace environments can play a big role in educating their students and employees about domestic violence and sexual abuse. As I stated in the paper, yes laws have changed in favor of protecting victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse, but more can and should be done. Another interesting point about legislature and laws that benefit or protect the victims is, the other side of the coin, what about the abuser, what happens to an abuser who goes to prison for an assault charge in a domestic violence case, the abuser goes to prison as punishment but, does he really learn from his mistake?, does his get sucked into the “system” and his life spiral out of control and starts breaking the laws in more aggressive ways such as, selling drugs because they cant get a job due to having committed a felony. These things need to be looked at closely and taken into consideration. Of course domestic violence and sexual assault perpetrators need to be punished but where does the cycle end?

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