



*The very first time a woman admits that she is a victim of sexual assault or rape is the biggest challenge for her, but that admission is the first step to becoming a survivor, Bianca of the Victim Service Center of Central Florida. (File photo)*

## UNDERSTANDING THE SILENCE: WHY SEXUAL ASSAULT VICTIMS TAKE YEARS TO COME FORWARD

By Anthony Leone | October 5, 2018 @12:57 PM

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When Dr. Christine Blasey Ford made her accusation that Judge Brett Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her while they were both teenagers at a party back in 1982, many people asked why she waited decades to finally step forward during his confirmation hearing for the U.S. Supreme Court.

According to victim advocates, it is not so simple for people of sexual assault to find the courage to admit they have been violated.

- There are many reasons why it can take years for people to speak out
- Society has a tendency to blame the victim or not believe him or her, say advocates
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For the majority of people who have been sexually abused, it is by someone they know, which becomes a barrier, said Bianca, who works at the Victim Service Center of Central Florida, a place where people who have suffered sexual assault, rape or violent crime go for help and resources.



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Bianca, who did not want to give her last name to protect her identity, says that when a person, usually a woman, becomes victimized by someone she knows, either a

family member or a boss or co-worker, her home or workplace — a source of protection or stability — becomes an enormous burden to her.

### Victim Service Center

Victim Service Center of Central Florida offers free and confidential support to all victims of sexual assault, violent crime and traumatic and rape victims.

They are the certified rape-crisis center for Orlando, Osceola and Seminole counties.

The place that should be a symbol of safety where fond memories are made transforms into a barrier that prevents her to seek help.

However, once these barriers are removed — such as moving into another home or leaving a job for a new one — gives those who have been abused the ability to move forward for the first time in their lives, she said.

The very first time a woman admits she is a victim of sexual assault or rape is the biggest challenge for her, but that admission is the first step to becoming a survivor, Bianca advised.

Many women, and even men, have carried the burden of their abuse for a long time and most often, on their own.

One of the reasons why people do not share their stories of abuse is because society has a tendency of victim-blaming and shaming, Bianca said.

For example, if a woman says she was raped, one of the most common things heard is that she deserved it for wearing a certain type of clothing, or she should not have been drinking too much or she was teasing the man.

"That is something in our society that we have to do a better job of accepting and believing people when they come forward," she said. "Someone won't come forward and seek help if they

### **Victim Service Center**

People can receive support

think the first thing they will be greeted with is if someone is questioning what their role in this was."

The #MeToo movement also has empowered more women to come forward. When someone watches media coverage of sexual abuse and rape, like entertainer Bill Cosby's case or even accusations being made, such as those made against Kavanaugh, some victims become encouraged to report what has happened to them.

"When we see a lot of major cases in the news, that can bring forward a lot of people to seek help after a long time," Bianca said. "Because they finally have a kind of a sense of community, because they are realizing after all these years of feeling isolated, like they were the only person that this has happened to, that they aren't. And that it's possible for them to have healing from what happened to them as well."

In fact, Bianca mentioned the Victim Service Center of Central Florida, which helps those who live in Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties, has seen an increase of people going to the center with claims of abuse in the last week.

On an average week, the center may see four or five cases, but during the Kavanaugh hearing, it saw 11 cases, Bianca said.

However, she added, there needs to be more willingness from society to be able to acknowledge and recognize that sexual violence is an issue and to not be ashamed or embarrassed to talk about it publicly.

services without ever needing to report to law enforcement, but Bianca encourages them to call about their rights and options through the center's 24-hour hotline 1-407-500-HEAL (4325).

Victims who are not prepared to report the abuse have an eight-year statute of limitations in Florida to report it to law enforcement and they have the evidence preserved in rape kits, she said.

## When Victim Shaming Stops The Road To Recovery

Just as Bianca said, there is a level of victim blaming that prevents some from coming out. After all, says Kathleen Kempke, no other victim of crime is blamed by society.

"If your house gets robbed, no one says, 'Gee, you live in a nice house. Didn't you expect that to happen?'" said Kempke, senior director of the Corbett Trauma Center at the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay.

Because rape victims are blamed and judged, it makes people who have been abused unwilling or hesitant to get help, she said.

"It makes it hard for recovery," Kempke explained.

### [Crisis Center of Tampa Bay](#)

The Crisis Center of Tampa Bay offers a wide variety of services for those in need.

"Victims should be believed, heard and supported," said Kathleen Kempke of the center. People can call the center at: 211.

In the national case with Ford, Kempke speculated that the doctor only came forward when Kavanaugh was described as having high morals when it was announced that he was nominated for the U.S. Supreme Court.

Kempke suggested that in Ford's mind, if Kavanaugh were to be seated on the High Court, he would make decisions that would influence others. That is why Ford took it upon herself to tell her story, Kempke conjectured.

When a victim first confesses his or her abuse to someone, that person is known as an outcry witness. Kempke offers this advice outcry witnesses:

"Victims should be believed, heard and supported," she said.

It is natural for some parents to be harsh and judgmental, and this creates an unwillingness for their children to speak out.

Kempke advocates that parents or outcry witnesses should contact a crisis center, because the victim will be believed and she or he will be able to make the right decisions.

However, things are a lot different from decades ago, Kempke said. Years ago, victims would be silent and be ashamed to say they were raped or sexually assaulted, putting the blame on themselves; or that their family, friends or even society would blame them. Now, because sexual assault is talked about more in the open, it has given more women, and even men, the resolution to speak out.

"It has changed for the better, but we have a long way to go," Kempke said.

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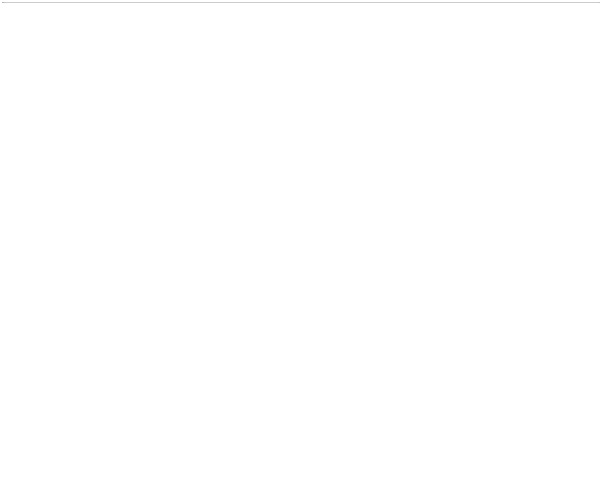
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