LEARN TO LOVE AGAIN

Yes, you can have a healthy relationship, even after a sexual assault. A former victim shares her path to healing

BY WAGATE WANJUKI

So what are you writing about?” asked the deep voice on the other end of the line. After browsing dozens of profiles on a dating Web site, I had finally found someone I clicked with on the phone. Now his question was making me regret sharing my upcoming deadline. I debated whether to tell the truth.

“It’s about sexual violence at colleges,” I said finally, shutting my eyes and taking a deep breath. I hoped the vague answer would be sufficient. It wasn’t. He asked what prompted me to write about such an issue.

I exhaled. “I know this is a little weird to discuss during our first conversation,” I began, “but I worked to change sexual assault policies on college campuses after I was raped and now I’m writing about it.” I managed to get it all out in one breath, hoping if I spoke quickly enough it would lessen the impact of my words. I was relieved when he didn’t follow up and instead started to make plans for our first date.

The truth is, being sexually assaulted was far more life-changing than my hurried sentence would suggest. While in college I was raped by a man I had once loved. Embarrassed and humiliated, I tried to normalize the assault by quickly agreeing to date him again, thinking somehow that it would erase the wrong that I couldn’t quite label “rape.” The reconciliation was short-lived. When I finally gained the courage to report the assault, I was dissatisfied with the result. I realized then I had to fight for change. I’m healing through activism. I now write and speak publicly about my own experience of rape and institutional apathy. But even as I strive to help others recover by sharing my story, I still wonder how my past will impact my future relationships.

“Did I divulge my history of sexual violence too soon?”

I didn’t see my online suitor again after our first date. I don’t even remember his name. But our predate phone call will always stay in my memory. Did I divulge my history of sexual violence too soon? Should I have avoided mentioning it altogether? Or was it better to put this large part of my life out in the open right away? These are questions many Black women must face. The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network reports that almost 19 percent of Black women will suffer rape or attempted rape in their lifetime (compared with almost 18 percent of White women), with approximately 40 percent of Black women reporting coercive contact of a sexual nature by age 18, according to the National Black Women’s Health Project. This leaves almost half of us navigating the pursuit of love in the wake of a sexual assault.

While the spectre of a stranger in a dark alley is what many people think of when they hear rape, the fact is, 78 percent of all sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone the victim knows, with one in four college women likely to be raped before graduating. This violation of trust can profoundly shatter your sense of social safety and faith in others.

Because of this, sociologist and Planned Parenthood sex educator Twanna A. Hines, M.S., advises that women who have experienced sexual assault resist the urge to rush into dating or move too quickly into the next stage of a relationship, in the hope of feeling “normal.” “It’s important to remember that the most significant relationship you’ll ever have is with yourself,” she says. ▲
Webb now counsels survivors of sexual violence through her Demystifying Sexuality & the Impact of Trauma workshops, which she hosts at conferences around the country. When it comes to sharing past sexual assault with a new suitor, she advises waiting until the relationship is solid and you feel a sense of trust. “Then you can let your partner know you are looking to move forward and want to be open and honest about your past,” she says.

After the death of her first husband, Webb met and married William Webb, 41, also a counselor, last year. When he learned of Latisha’s abuse, William began researching sexual trauma to help support his wife’s healing process. He now cohosts workshops with his wife. “Many men will respect a woman for being straight up and honest,” he says. “When a woman we can see ourselves marrying comes into our lives, we want a chance to love and understand her. We may not know everything she needs, but we can learn.”

As I return to the dating scene, I’m inspired by couples like the Webbs. Still, I know many survivors struggle with finding an understanding partner. One night I posted about my seemingly perpetual singleness in a Facebook group of rape survivors and activists. To my surprise, the thread quickly gained speed with others weighing in on the challenges of finding someone willing to date a survivor. One woman lamented, “Guys are afraid of me because now they think I will just cry rape.”

While such responses are disappointing, discovering how a potential partner really feels can help survivors identify who is—or isn’t—worthy of their time. But it’s also useful to understand that hesitation on the part of would-be suitors may be nothing more than their uncertainty about how to approach us, especially when it comes to sex. Latisha encourages survivors to identify their triggers—experiences that could spark a traumatic memory—and communicate them clearly. “Say your partner touches you on your shoulder from behind and you freak out,” she explains. “That might be because your attacker approached you the same way, but your partner won’t know that unless you tell him.”

Sharing your feelings will help your partner better understand what behaviors to avoid, but ultimately, having a healthy relationship after an assault is a process that begins with the survivor. “Do you want to be healed?” asks Latisha. “Do you want to be whole?” The answer for most of us is yes. That means being gentle with ourselves, taking our time and trusting that love will follow.

Wagatwe Wanjuki is a feminist and activist for social justice and lives in New York City. To share concerns, ask questions or report a rape, call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800-656-HOPE (4673). It’s free. Confidential. Available 24/7.

**AUTHENTIC LOVE**

Not sure if you’re ready to reenter the dating scene? Latisha Webb, Ed.D., suggests questions to ask yourself before starting a relationship.

1. **Who am I?** When you interact with people for the first time, do you send your representative or are you authentic? Are you transparent and easily understood?

2. **What are my needs and core values?** We all need attention. We all seek positive reinforcement, and we all need affirmation. Our self-worth increases when we are affiliated with others.

3. **How do I relate to others and myself?** Being authentic and transparent sheds light on other people’s pretense. Make a vow to yourself to allow your little light to shine.
I’m a big guy who hits quarterbacks for a living, so I’m the last person most would expect to teach young men about domestic violence. Despite the messages the culture bombards us with, healthy manhood is about being respectful and caring for others, not solving problems with violence. Three years ago I partnered with the organization A Call to Men to teach young men what healthy relationships and real manhood look like. It’s something I learned from my father, who showed me and my two older brothers what it is to be a man. Because of my stature—I’m 6 feet 7 and more than 300 pounds—talking to young men about the importance of treating people with decency captures their attention. They’re like, Wow, he plays a physically demanding sport and he’s talking about caring for others and respecting them.

I’m a vocal opponent of domestic violence because it hits close to home. I’ve known people trapped in unhealthy relationships, and I’ve seen the violence that takes place in our communities. Last year, when I heard that Kansas City Chiefs player Jovan Belcher had murdered his girlfriend, Kasandra Perkins, then turned the gun on himself, I was shocked and saddened. I was even more alarmed when slate.com reported that 21 of the 32 teams in the league had a player on the roster who had been arrested for domestic violence or sexual assault. While most of the men in the league are good guys, there is clearly work to be done. Domestic violence is not just more acceptable, to demonstrate anger. Instead of telling a young man he needs to man up, we must teach him to think differently about what it means to be a man.

I was blessed with two awesome parents who showed me what a healthy relationship is all about. My father taught me how to relate to my peers, and my mother raised me to be a gentleman who opened doors, carried bags and treated a woman with the utmost respect. My parents have been married for 42 years, and next May I’ll be jumping the broom as well. Teaching young men to love themselves and others is as exciting to me as sacking quarterbacks and making plays. But if we’re going to put an end to domestic violence and raise a generation of healthy young men, we need everyone to join the team.

If you are in danger, call 911 or the U.S. National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-7233 (SAFE).

We can rid our communities of violence by creating environments where men can process their emotions. A women’s issue; it affects us all. Men can’t stay silent anymore.

Some ways we can rid our communities of violence are by creating environments in which men can discuss and process their emotions and by giving them the tools to communicate their feelings effectively. One of the biggest challenges I’ve encountered in my work with young men is teaching them to recognize that anger is a secondary emotion that comes from a place of hurt. As men, we have a hard time saying we’re hurt. It’s often easier, and even more acceptable, to demonstrate anger. Instead of telling a young man he needs to man up, we must teach him to think differently about what it means to be a man.

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