

# Reporting on Sexual Assault within University Communities

## A FACTSHEET FOR JOURNALISTS

**“A key factor which impacts on a person’s capacity to recover from sexual assault are the attitudes they hear on first disclosure. Journalists can play a key role in helping to shape what those community attitudes are.”**

Karen Willis, Executive Officer of  
Rape & Domestic Violence Services Australia

When reporting on sexual assault within university communities journalists frequently seek out the voices, perspectives and experiences of victim-survivors. For some survivors, the media can provide a powerful platform to tell their stories and drive change. Journalists also play a crucial role in shaping community attitudes towards sexual assault.

However, speaking to the media also carries risks for survivors. It is not uncommon for public

survivors to experience backlash including judgemental or victim-blaming comments, ostracism, and harassment. Often they will also experience unsolicited disclosure from other survivors. These factors can exacerbate existing trauma and may deter those survivors from speaking further to media.

In the past some survivors have also felt that their stories were exploited, particularly if their own objectives were ignored or if their experiences were sensationalised.

When reporting on sexual assault it is important for journalists to understand the various sensitivities and concerns involved.



## Contacting victim-survivors

If you are contacting a service or organisation that supports survivors, including student representative organisations, be aware that it is not appropriate for them to divulge the contact details of victim-survivors as this breaches privacy and confidentiality.

It is far more appropriate to offer to leave your name and contact details along with a brief introductory email which outlines the scope and purpose of your story, to be forwarded along to any survivors who may be interested in speaking. It is always the survivor's decision as to whether or not they choose to make contact.

## Conducting interviews with victim-survivors

No two survivors are the same, and all will have different motivations and objectives in speaking to media. Understanding a survivor's motivation in talking to you is an important first step as it allows you to understand what is driving their participation. When a survivor's objectives in speaking are taken into account, they are less



likely to feel exploited and are more likely to find the experience empowering and rewarding.

Survivors often want to speak to highlight a particular issue, for example: victim blaming attitudes; institutional cover-up and betrayal; the need for consent education; pushing for better services for survivors; improvements to the criminal justice system, and so on.

Seeking clarity around a survivor's objectives also allows you to gauge their goals and manage any unrealistic expectations upfront. Be open and realistic about what media coverage can and cannot deliver. (For example, if a survivor states they hope that media coverage will lead to an arrest or the firing of an individual, be honest about the odds of this happening.)

**“Many survivors wish to be heard, but prefer to remain anonymous. This is their right. Some survivors have safety concerns and fear reprisals.**

**Others are still enrolled and see their perpetrator daily on campus. Many still haven't told their family or friends as they fear being shamed, blamed or simply not believed.**

**Others still, fear judgement, ostracism, intrusive questions or being permanently branded a 'victim'. Whatever the reason, the decision to be named must always be theirs.”**

Sharna Bremner, Director of End Rape On Campus Australia

## Interview tips

- Ensure the survivor is in a private space where they feel safe and comfortable.
- Ask the survivor if they wish to bring a support person with them for the interview.
- Explain to the survivor that they can take breaks.
- Discuss the different ramifications between speaking anonymously and using their full name.
- Determine upfront if there are any legal complications or constraints.
- Avoid any questions which might imply that the survivor is at fault or to blame for a perpetrator's choices. This generally means do not ask 'why' questions as 'why' indicates that you think they may hold responsibility for what happened.
- Avoid judgement regarding the actions and choices of the survivor before, during or after an assault. There is no one 'normal' way to respond to an assault and most survivors choose not to report their assaults.
- If a survivor cries, let them. Encourage them to take breaks.



**“When journalists treat survivor stories with compassion, dignity and respect, they encourage others to do likewise.”**

Professor Catharine Lumby,  
Macquarie University

- Allow the survivor to set the pace of the interview and to explain their story and its significance in their own terms.
- Explain what a 'right of reply' is and who else you may need to speak to and why. When survivors are not aware that you are speaking to others for the story, they may feel betrayed when they later find out.
- Explain the purpose and function of fact-checking. If you need to speak to other people to confirm aspects of a survivor's story, advise the survivor before doing so and explain why this process exists. Be aware that fact-checking can be experienced as journalists disbelieving them.
- Offer to read back quotes, checking all facts and details. Be aware that any errors in fact or contradictions with other statements could have legal implications for the survivor.
- Ask if there is anyone the survivor needs to tell within their family or friends before the story comes out, so that they won't be learning about their experience via the media.
- Check in with the survivor at the end, and ensure they are provided with resources, support referral or factsheets.

## Filming and photography

When selecting imagery, avoid photos which depict sexual assault survivors as helpless or powerless.

If photographing a survivor, it is important to ensure the survivor is comfortable with the photograph and that photos will not reveal other identifying information, such as the area they live in.

Be aware that survivors may not be comfortable having their bodies in shot, and magazines should note that survivors may feel uncomfortable being dressed in clothes which are not their own.

Re-enactments of assaults are often highly triggering especially when done without the knowledge and consent of a survivor.

If using a staff photographer, let the survivor know that the image may be used again by the same publisher.

## Before a story comes out

- Explain why stories sometimes get held over and let the survivor know this is always a risk.
- Keep the survivor in the loop and let them know if there are updates or hold ups.
- Turn off comments on news articles. If this is not an option, prepare the survivor.
- Place appropriate support hotlines at the end of any story:

The National Uni Support Line:  
[1800 572 224](tel:1800572224)

NSW Rape Crisis:  
[1800 424 017](tel:1800424017)

## QUESTIONS TO ASK SURVIVORS BEFORE A STORY COMES OUT:

Do they need to lock down their social media accounts?

If other survivors contact them to disclose, do they know where to refer these people for professional support?

What support will they have on the day of the release?

Do they want you to check in with them after the story runs to debrief on how it went?

## VICARIOUS TRAUMA:

**When journalists are exposed to distressing and traumatic content, it can impact on their mood, job performance, health and wellbeing. This can become a serious WH&S injury if it is not recognised and managed.**

For support, contact Rape & Domestic Violence Services Australia on [1800 424 017](tel:1800424017). R&DVSA can also deliver training on recognising and managing vicarious trauma. Contact [training@rape-dvservices.org.au](mailto:training@rape-dvservices.org.au) for more information.

## Before publishing checklist

- Do I know why the survivor wants to tell their story?
- Is their objective reflected in the story?
- Have I considered any legal issues?
- Have I explained right-of-reply and fact-checking?
- Have I read back any quotes to the survivor?
- Is my story respectful to the issue?
- Has the survivor informed all necessary family and friends prior to the story release?
- Have I added appropriate support hotlines?
- Have I supplied the survivor with appropriate resources and are they supported?
- Have I kept the survivor informed of the release date?

## Talking about sexual assault

- Sexual assault is about power and control. Avoid language which sensationalises, romanticises or excuses sexual violence, for example: “sex attack” or “affair”.
- Challenge victim-blaming attitudes and maintain that sexual assault is always a crime which is always the responsibility of the perpetrator.
- Use statistics and facts to contextualise discussions about sexual assault.
- Include the voices of experts.

- Avoid perpetuating rape myths such as that women invite sexual assault through their dress or behaviour; that alcohol is to blame; that men can’t be assaulted; that most assaults are committed by strangers; and that sexual assault is driven by uncontrollable lust.
- Sexual assault is a choice. Focus on the actions and choices of perpetrators and do not put undue emphasis on the choices, actions or decisions of victim-survivors.

## For more on:

What Vicarious Trauma is and how to manage the impacts:

[Click here](#)

Ethical reporting on sexual assault:

[Click here:](#)

Responding to a disclosure:

[Click here](#)

The causes and consequences of sexual assault:

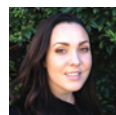
[Click here](#)

How rape myths work to silence victims and deter reporting:

[Click here](#)

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This factsheet was prepared by Full Stop Foundation Ambassador and journalist Nina Funnell with support from The Hunting Ground Australia Project and the Full Stop Foundation.



THE  
HUNTING GROUND  
AUSTRALIA PROJECT

Nina Funnell is an author, journalist and sexual assault advocate.