

Psychologist discusses how #metoo creates solidarity for victims of sexual harassment

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Harvey Weinstein. Brett Ratner. Kevin Spacey.

Every day brings a new wave of sexual harassment allegations against high-profile Hollywood figures. Victims from show business, news media, and the tech and startup world have been speaking out—using social media as a platform to share their stories, stand in solidarity with one another, and expose the alleged offenders.

As the proliferation of voices continues to put sexual harassment in the national spotlight, what will be the psychological impact on victims? How can those dealing with trauma get the [mental health](#) care they need? We asked Christie Rizzo, associate professor of applied psychology in the Bouvé College of Health Sciences, these questions and more.

Amid these sexual harassment allegations, many people have shared their stories online using the #metoo hashtag. Is there a psychological explanation as to why more people tend to come forward after one person speaks out?

When we are looking at anyone's disclosures—male or female—about their own experiences of sexual harassment, it's important to remember that they often feel like they're in a vacuum. They don't necessarily have context for whether or not other people have preceded them or whether

others will follow. And from a psychological perspective, when somebody is confronted with an individual harassing them or touching them, it's not expected. They're often wondering, 'Could this be something else? How will I deal with all of the stress that would come from reporting it?'

I think in the moment for that individual, there's a lot of, 'I've moved on, it's behind me, I just don't want to deal with it,' because it's so incredibly emotional and the emotions are so difficult to manage. There's also the potential impact on your career, and that's a complete unknown. In that moment, you're making a mental judgment of risks versus benefits, and for many people, especially when there's no physical evidence of what happened, they see the risks outweighing the benefits.

When other people start to come forward and validate the experience that you've had, you start to see this wasn't an isolated incident. That person is part of a larger story and they see the benefit of speaking about it. I think there is also a psychological process of wanting to have solidarity with others who have had these experiences, because it's very isolating to be the victim of sexual assault and sexual harassment. By one person going public, and I mean really public—what we're seeing are people in the movie industry, actors who are really well-known—people are really shining a light on their experiences, and that provides this potential safe space of coming forward with what happened in that very isolated moment.

One of the women who has accused Harvey Weinstein of harassment broke her non-disclosure agreement so she could speak out. What are the psychological impacts of non-disclosure agreements?

I was watching the morning news one of these days and thinking, 'How

much have we really looked into the impact of these non-disclosure agreements?' I am not aware of any research that's been done to really understand not only how NDAs affect the victim in terms of their ability to recover, but also how it affects the larger understanding of what this person has done to other people. If every person is signing an NDA, those people also can't talk to each other, and it really prevents us from seeing what we've been seeing with Harvey Weinstein, where it's just one person after another. It really feels like every day there's another person. You do have to wonder, what is the impact? I think it's a good question that I think we should definitely explore.

In the international conversation that society is having about sexual harassment, is there any part of the story you think hasn't been fully explored?

The biggest issue that I don't feel is addressed adequately is the perceived decision that women are making to not speak up. Society puts a lot of pressure on individuals who have been the victims of [sexual harassment](#) to report the perpetrator in order to protect society from that person. That kind of mentality really doesn't take into consideration the experience of the person who's been victimized, how difficult it is to come forward in a circumstance where it's kind of a "he said, she said." It's really so invalidating for individuals who've had these experiences, because you're just trying to figure out what you're going to do that next day.

People wonder why they speak out a year or two later, and I think that really minimizes how incredibly difficult it is to come forward. These are individuals who are just trying to keep their heads above water in terms of the distress that comes with being the victim. That's the narrative I wish we would spend more time talking about, rather than asking, 'Why are they just coming out now?'

The issues with Harvey Weinstein are so fascinating too because they're in the context of an industry that has had this history of sexualizing its employees. Each of these individuals, male and female, in this industry, are self-employed in a sense. They really don't have a lot of protection. Many of the people who are coming forward were harassed early in their careers, so it wasn't like they felt they had enough clout that they could sustain the potential backlash of accusing somebody so powerful. They are really left out on their own.

What do you recommend for people who have experienced of sexual harassment, in terms of taking care of their mental health?

For anyone who has experienced trauma—and it doesn't necessarily have to be sexual trauma—it is important to learn about what the normal psychological reaction to trauma looks like, as well as the signs that perhaps your reaction is problematic, or perhaps consistent with a psychological diagnosis like PTSD or depression. If that's the case, it's important to seek out [mental health professionals](#) to get that psychoeducational information.

What I've seen in the work I do with predominantly adolescent girls who have had traumatic experiences is that they're not necessarily recognizing when their reaction to the trauma is starting to interfere with their daily functioning. They're not showing up to counseling until they're already extremely impaired by the experience. They're unable to step into an elevator alone with a man present because their heart is racing and they're reliving the trauma they experienced, or they're not able to get up and go to work or go to school because their mood is just so low, they're starting to question whether they're ever going to recover.

It's important to educate yourself early in terms of what to look for, and

if you know what those warning signs are, get the support you need early so it doesn't end up interfering with some of those important domains of functioning.

Provided by Northeastern University

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