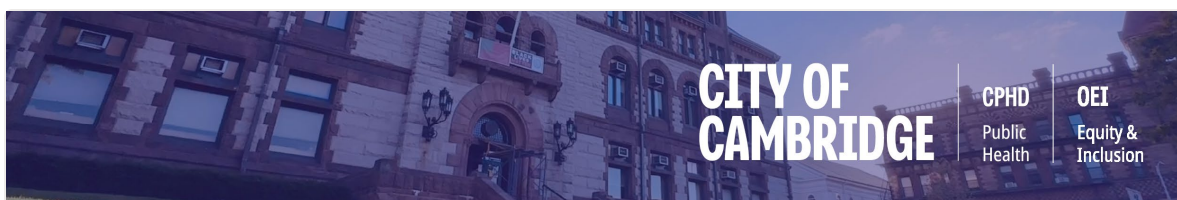


From: [McNeal, Dion](#)
To: [McNeal, Dion](#)
Subject: Check Out Blog 3 of the Sexual Assault Awareness Month Blog Series
Date: Tuesday, April 22, 2025 2:15:56 PM
Attachments: [image001.png](#)
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Blog 3 of the Sexual Assault Awareness Month Blog Series



McNeal, Dion
Internal Communications Manager

Dear **City Staff**,



We are back again to continue our blog series for Sexual Assault Awareness Month. If you missed our first two messages, [you can find them here](#). It will help give context and framing as you continue to read. We will hold a virtual event for further discussion on Wednesday, April 30, at 1 p.m. [Please register if you would like to attend](#).

This week, we will talk more about coercion; how to support survivors; and how to hold accountable conversations. How we respond to people is a powerful tool to address sexual violence and support healing. We hope that you walk away feeling more equipped to do so. We continue to include a **trigger warning** for this content as well as [encouragement to take care of](#)

yourself when you engage in today's reading.

Disclaimer: *The content that we explore together may be triggering for some. We know that there are survivors among us. This blog series is not intended to and does not constitute legal advice nor is it a replacement for seeking services and support if needed.*

RAPE AND ALL FORMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE ARE NEVER A SURVIVOR'S FAULT!



Power and Control Dynamics

"Studies estimate that no more than 20 percent of rape incidents are reported to police." Herman, J. L. (2023). *Truth and Repair:*

How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice. Hachette Book Group.

As we continue think about how to support community members and loved ones, it is important to frame the context in which sexual assault happens. As you might remember from our definition in [Blog Series: Sexual Assault Awareness Month \(SAAM\) Post 1](#), sexual violence is ultimately about power and control. The image to the left displays some of the complex dynamics such as economics and emotional abuse that are used to coerce people as forms of non-physical force. Here are [more examples](#) of how this can show up in relationships. We invite you to consider factors that are not mentioned here, such as immigration status and disabilities, among others. For example, if an immigrant's supervisor threatens to terminate their employment based on their immigration status unless they engage in sexual acts, **that is coercion**. Even if the individual performs those acts, they did not consent; they have been coerced.

Similarly, if a person with a mobility disability relies on a "friend" for essential daily activities, like bathing and using the toilet, if that friend inappropriately touches them during these activities, it does not constitute consent if the individual remains silent. In this example, they may avoid speaking up because when they tried to advocate for themselves in the past, that person didn't perform these tasks for days. This is coercion and abuse.

There are countless forms of coercion that can be used against people, many of which are closely connected to our various identities and life experiences. Consent and coercion cannot coexist. These complex and layered dynamics are also reasons why survivors frequently do not report their experiences of sexual violence to law enforcement.



Supportive Conversations

"Healing rejects absolutism and engages complexity. Trauma's truths are hard to tell." Simmons, A. S. (2019). *Love WITH accountability: Digging up the Roots of Child Sexual Abuse*. AK Press.

It can be incredibly difficult and terrifying for someone to share their experiences of abuse and assault. If someone chooses to share their story with you, it means they are placing a lot of trust in you. How you respond to them can support their healing or devastate them more deeply.

"As our patients told their stories and were met with compassion rather than scorn, their despair gave way to renewed hope, and their isolation to a renewed sense of

community.” Herman, J. L. (2023). Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice. Hachette Book Group.

“For those who are the most directly victimized, the complicity and silence of bystanders-friends, relatives, and neighbors, not to mention officials of the law-feel like a profound betrayal, for this is what isolates them and abandons them to their fate....Often, survivors will feel the bitterness of these betrayals more deeply even than the direct harms inflicted by perpetrators.” Herman, J. L. (2023). Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice. Hachette Book Group.

Responding to disclosures of sexual violence can be intimidating, especially when you acknowledge the power and impact of your words. We want to provide you with some tools to help you respond with empathy, compassion, and concern. There are many ways to offer support to someone, and we have outlined some key considerations below.

1. **Listen to** the person sharing with you. Listening means you are not interrupting or telling them what to do. You are allowing them time and space to share. Once they finish, then it is time for you to speak and ask follow-up questions.
2. **Thank them** for trusting you with their story. Affirm their experience. Name that it was not their fault, and they are not responsible for the violence committed against them.
3. **Ask them how they would like you to show up for**

them and respect their answer. This may look like holding space, validating their feelings, or simply not judging. This is NOT the moment to push your personal beliefs about what they should do.

4. **Never blame, shame, or emasculate survivors** because someone else chose to assault them. Never minimize their experience or tell them what you would do if it were you.
5. **Practice confidentiality!** They entrusted you with this information. It would be a violation of their trust and privacy to share it with someone else. Exemptions may apply, such as if they are a minor and the violence is ongoing.

When people we care about are hurt, our protective instincts kick in, and we want to help them heal. However, we cannot undo the pain and harm caused by someone else. Trying to control their actions after an assault can often make things worse. A survivor's sense of control over their life and body has been shattered, so it is **crucial to respect their ability to make decisions for themselves**. In this moment, trusting your friend, loved one, or colleague and allowing them the space to make their own decisions demonstrates that you respect their autonomy, agency, and power over their lives and bodies.

If you are a survivor who was wounded further when you shared your story, we are deeply sorry. We hope that you find the courage to try again and are met with the care and compassion you deserve.

Accountable Conversations

In an ideal world, people would **NOT** commit acts of sexual violence. In an ideal world, if/when people commit acts of sexual

violence, institutions would **NOT** cover up their violence nor would they shield perpetrators from the consequences of their actions. Unfortunately, that is not the world we live in. Until we are able to build a society where these things are true, we must find other things we can do as community members to address sexual violence.

As we shared in our [last message](#), the likelihood that we all know people who use sexual violence is high. While some would never reveal their acts of violence, others regularly communicate the [abusive values](#) they hold and may even disclose their acts of violence. We are all greatly influenced by the community around us. Your words and actions impact people who use violence as well as survivors. Most people tend to remain silent when they hear things that make them uncomfortable. **That silence is loud to survivors and perpetrators alike.**

"I felt the silence that surrounds sexual violence. I saw how that silence isolates survivors, protects perpetrators, and allows for the community to support rape culture as ignorant, passive bystanders." Herman, J. L. (2023). *Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice*. Hachette Book Group.

Below are some things to keep in mind when holding accountable conversations. These apply only to people you are in relationship with, for example: family members, friends, colleagues, etc. It may not be an appropriate or safe course of action with a stranger.

1. **Address it. Every time.** When you hear someone make a statement that blames survivors for assault, explain that the only person who is ever responsible for sexual assault is the

- person who commits it. There is no justification for assault.
2. **Address it. Every time.** When you hear people say things that are sexually violent, do not excuse it away. Make it known that the comment was violent and that you are not okay with that way of thinking.
 3. **Question them** about what they mean when they make statements/jokes that are questionable. Request an explanation. If you disagree with their rationale, voice that clearly.
 4. **Do not** make excuses for/or minimize their words or actions.
 5. **Get additional** help/guidance if you have concerns that there is ongoing violence directed toward someone especially if there is a minor involved.

Engaging in these conversations depends largely on whether or not you want to stay connected to this person. That is your choice. We take a moment to highlight that there can be increased safety through accountability. When someone who commits sexual violence is surrounded by people who know about their actions, those people have the ability to take preventative steps to limit opportunities for them to assault anyone else in the future.

When they are isolated or move to new communities, no one knows their history and therefore, no one is on alert to watch their behavior. For example, if a professor has a history of sexually harassing students, other staff members can take steps to ensure that students are not left alone with that professor in the future. However, if that professor moves to a new environment where no one is aware of their past behavior, there would be no precautions in place to protect the students. As a result, the harassment and its harmful effects could continue without interruption.

This may be an unfair burden, but it is also an opportunity. You get to decide whether or not to take it.

In the Next Blog, We'll Share More About...

In our next and final post, we will share more about what you can do to address sexual violence as a community member. Thank you for your continued engagement on this journey.

Below are a few resources if you would like to learn more. Please feel free to reach out to us if you would like to talk further.

[Please use this link if you would like to register for our virtual event on April 30 at 1:00 p.m.](#)

- [How to Get Help from BARCC](#)
- [How to Help A Friend](#)
- [How to Get Help from Cambridge Police](#)
- [Anonymous Hotline for People Who Use Abusive Behavior](#)

Who's Behind This Blog Series



Hi, I'm Teakia Brown [she/her], the Director of Community Engagement at the Cambridge Public Health Department. I lead **Population Health initiatives**. I have a multidisciplinary background in violence prevention, community engagement, and reproductive health care.

In past work, I have taught sex education classes, ran teen dating violence programs, and worked directly with people who have experienced violence as the Medical Advocate coordinator for the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center. I am deeply committed to this topic and look forward to exploring what sexual assault means to us as City employees and how we can make a meaningful impact on the communities we serve.



Hi, I'm Shameka Gregory [she/her], Coordinator of the Domestic and Gender Based Violence Prevention Initiative for the City of Cambridge. I am a licensed independent clinical social worker who has worked in the field of domestic and gender-based violence for the last decade.

The way that I think about and approach these issues has changed tremendously in my experience time. I have learned from the wisdom and experiences of survivors as a therapist and an advocate. Those are the perspectives I bring to this conversation and what I wish to share with you. As a City and a community, we must always **center** survivors and **listen to** survivors.

Until next time

We look forward to bringing you another blog post highlighting sexual awareness month.

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Domestic/Gender-Based Violence Prevention Initiative and CPHD,
City of Cambridge

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