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PERSONAL FILE / THEN & NOW / RAPE CHANGES A WOMAN'S LIFE, FROM HER FAITH IN OTHERS TO HER PERCEPTION OF HERSELF. AND RECOVERY MAY TAKE YEARS. S: 1) THE FAMILY'S ROLE: LISTEN, BE PATIENT 2) WHERE TO GET HELP

BYLINE: By Liza N. **Burby**. Liza N. **Burby** is a frequent contributor to Newsday.

ON A SUMMER night in 1981, Patricia Weaver Francisco awoke from a deep sleep to terror in the dark. There was a stranger in her bedroom. Before she could even blink, the man leapt on her and raped her. When he left, he took with him treasured items from her jewelry box - and her very faith in life.

She was 30 years old.

In the immediacy of her trauma, there was no way she could imagine the laborious passage she would face to recovery - or that it would take 15 years.

Nearly 18 million American women have been raped, according to a 1998 National Violence Against Women survey, funded by the Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services. It's not likely that they will forget the anniversary of the crime. At "You Are Not Alone: A Day Honoring Women Who Have Survived Rape and Those Who Have Given Them Voice" last month in Los Angeles, nearly 500 women from around the country stood up one by one to announce their dates. One of them, a teenager, had been raped only seven weeks earlier; another woman listed three dates, according to Karen Pomer, co-coordinator of the Rainbow Sisters Project, which organized the event. The group is making plans for a similar gathering next year, perhaps in Manhattan.

Despite the record nationwide decline in crime, including rape, announced by the FBI last week, one in seven women will be raped during her lifetime, according to the Justice Department. Many of them will need a decade or more to come to terms with it. Some never will fully. For 65 percent, post-traumatic stress syndrome will make it difficult to function at work or school, with family or friends.

During the first days and weeks after being raped, women typically experience hypervigilance, anger, fear, guilt, tearfulness and shame, says Lori Pietrafesa, a social worker at Family Counseling Associates in Garden City. As they struggle to resume normal life, many experience flashbacks, particularly during moments of physical intimacy. They may avoid sex altogether, have insomnia and headaches, and they may develop phobias, such as the fear of going outside alone.

Francisco was surprised at how many stages and how many years she needed to recover. "I remember a nurse in the hospital telling me it would take three years before my life would come back, and I told her she was crazy, that I didn't even have three weeks for this. I didn't ask for it, and I didn't want to devote any time to it. It was an arrogant reaction. I had no idea I had so far to go," says Francisco, the Minneapolis-based author of "Telling: A Memoir of Rape and Recovery" (Cliff Street Books, \$ 23).

As Francisco experienced, rape causes a woman to lose trust in the world, says Elizabeth Carll, a Centerport resident and author of "Violence in Our Lives: Impact on Workplace, Home and Community" (Allyn and Bacon, \$ 29.99). This is even more likely if she knew the man. Unlike the image of a rapist lurking behind the bushes, 78 percent of rapes are not perpetrated by strangers. But women are less likely to feel responsible if the rapist is someone they don't know. And women who know the rapist are more affected by shame.

"So they are not as likely to talk about it and are less likely to get help. Only 5 percent of rapes are reported," Carll says. "But unless you share it, you tend to think you're the only one this happened to. When you talk to others, suddenly it's easier not to assume that blame."

Recovery can also depend on prior experiences. For instance, women who were sexually abused as children have a more powerful reaction to rape, says Roberta Graziano, associate professor at the Hunter College School of Social Work in Manhattan and a Flushing resident.

Other factors include the degree of violence in the assault, the woman's social support and her age, says Pietrafesa. "For an adolescent, the rape may be her first sexual experience, and because she is still developing her sense of ego she is more likely to have a longer healing period," she explains. "When a woman is more mature, she usually has that ego strength and support system in place to help her. Also, teens may suppress their feelings for years, only to have them resurface."

Teens are often reluctant to tell anyone, because they feel humiliated or fear their parents will take away privileges. A 28-year-old woman from Dix Hills recalls not wanting her parents to know that she was raped at a party while others looked on. She was 16 and a virgin.

"It took awhile for it to affect me," says the woman, who did not want her name published. "I was so confused at first - because I thought that sex equals love - that I called him up and actually talked to him. Then I went through a period in which I didn't want to be touched. I cried on dates. I started to have flashbacks that I wasn't sure were real, because while they seemed realistic they were more horrifying than I remember the experience being."

She regrets that she didn't tell her parents, because it meant she never got help. "It actually took me 10 years to get to a place where I finally felt I had control over intimate situations and to start accepting my body, and until a couple of years ago to finally enjoy sex," she says.

For a South Shore woman, parental support was key. She was a senior in high school when she was kidnaped and raped three times by two men as she was leaving her after-school job. While other girls were worrying about their prom dresses and dates, she was talking to police and prosecutors and identifying her attackers.

Almost two decades later, she says she cringes more than most people do over violent images, and ideas of bondage and torture make her nauseous. "I have no anger," she says, "but I do have a superhero/ martyr complex I'm trying to work through. I also have deep-rooted feelings of entitlement because I was a victim. It's one of the reasons my marriage broke up. I've gone through bouts of depression that are usually set off by the anniversary date or man problems."

Indeed, the most adversely affected part of a rape survivor's life is usually her relationship with a partner - with most marriages ending.

"But unless the husband is blaming and unsupportive, this is not about his inadequacies. It's about what she brings into the room with her," says Graziano. "It's hard for someone who was assaulted to feel she can be with someone who will not hurt her. You'll have to expect that sex will be affected for a long time."

Francisco's husband saw her through strained sexual relations, wild anger and crippling fears that left her unable to walk from her car to her front door, all for many years. Just when they thought she was finally doing better, the difficult childbirth of their son sent her right back to square one. Thirteen years after she was assaulted, their marriage ended.

"I remember him saying to me a couple of years after the rape, 'When are you coming back? This is getting hard. I knew then I was never coming back, that the person I had been before the rape was dead, and I grieved for her and was so angry that the person I had been was gone,'" she says. "It's tragic for the person who loves you and has to come to know you now. It's a terrible position for a partner to be in."

Graziano says that after time for healing, relationships may work better for those who were raped before meeting their partner.

Deborah Gellis, 38, of Flushing, was sexually abused as a child and raped in two separate incidents as an adolescent. She had been in treatment for alcohol abuse - which she says was a direct result of her experiences - when she met Barrie, her husband of 13 years.

Barrie, 49, says Deborah told him her story on their first date and soon after they went to couples therapy together. "We spent a lot of time talking about it and working together to learn how to deal with her moods when they came up," he says. "As a partner, you shouldn't blame the person who was raped. You're on the same side."

Deborah says: "It took a tremendous amount of work. Sometimes he'd just lift his hand, and I'd duck. I'd have flashbacks during sex. It took years and years of slow healing wounds. It takes a strong person to deal with their spouse's reactions."

A woman who has been raped may be overprotective of her children, daughters in particular, says Graziano - although some women may not be vigilant enough, because they don't believe they will be able to protect their child. Childbirth can also be traumatic. Graziano recommends that a pregnant woman tell her physician what happened so they can work together to make her feel safe about the birth experience.

It helps to recognize that the healing process can be lengthy, Pietrafesa says. "Sometimes . . . the reaction of people around you is that you're lucky to be alive, so you should be over it by now. Sympathy wears off more quickly than the survivor needs."

"It helps to know you're reacting normally to an abnormal situation. You'll only create more problems for yourself if you bury or deny your feelings," says Gary Dunn, chief psychiatrist at South Nassau Communities Hospital Counseling Center in Baldwin.

It helps to have your partner involved in treatment in some way, Pietrafesa adds, and to channel your anxieties into a constructive activity, such as political activism about rape. The Gellis created an award-winning video for public-access TV, "The Naked Truth on Incest." The South Shore woman turned her experience into inspiration to work in the system to help other victims and became a prosecutor. The Dix Hills woman volunteered to speak about her experience in a date-rape program. "As I spoke, I saw recognition and sadness on so many faces in the group. Kids came up to me after and spoke about their experiences, and I felt a huge burden fall off my shoulders," she says. "Even though I had more to do, I believe that was an important part of my healing process. Just the fact that someone else knows even remotely what you experienced helps, because you feel so alone when rape happens to you."

It helps to attend a support group, Francisco found. "Recovery is something you can't do alone," she says. "Rape is very powerful. But that power can eventually be used to transform your life. You can come through it to have a happy life." On the 10-year anniversary of her attack, she sat down to begin her book.

The Family's Role: Listen, Be Patient IF YOUR WIFE, daughter, sister or friend is raped, life as all of you knew it is suddenly changed, says Patricia Weaver Francisco, a rape survivor who has written about her experience. Helping your loved one through the long healing process and the wide-ranging symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome can be emotionally draining and confusing.

The best thing you can do is listen to what the rape survivor has to say, Francisco says. If hearing the story makes you uncomfortable, acknowledge that, rather than risk reacting in such a way that makes her ashamed of what she's telling you.

Patience - in large doses - will be important, Francisco says, because the process of healing can go on for a long time, with unsettling reactions such as flashbacks in moments of intimacy and startling fears of affectionate gestures or shadows. "Do your best to accept her reality rather than talk her out of it, which would prove fruitless and frustrating for both of you," she advises. "For instance, don't tell her to 'snap out of it or to 'get over it already. "

Be open to the inevitable changes her trauma will cause for you, as you become more vigilant about safety, for instance. "To say this won't change your life is to resist her natural healing process as well as your own," Francisco says.

Remember that, even though the powerful emotion of shame affects not only the survivor of rape but also family members, the disgrace belongs only to the perpetrator, Francisco says. And remember that although you're likely to feel guilty that you weren't able to protect her - particularly if you're the parent of a young victim - the rapist alone is responsible for what happened.

It's normal to feel both outraged and helpless if your child has been raped, but any anger should be directed at the rapist - not your child, says Joanne Gorman, sexual assault response coordinator for the Victims Information Bureau in Hauppauge. You will undoubtedly be more anxious about your child's safety, as well as that of other family members, but recognize that this is normal and be patient with yourself.

Gorman advises all family members of a person who has been raped to seek counseling, either from an individual therapist or a support group, in order to talk about their feelings - including concerns about how difficult it is to help a rape survivor heal.

- Burby

WHERE TO GET HELP IF YOU or someone you know has been raped, these 24-hour hotlines can help:

- For Queens residents, call the Crime Victims Hotline - 212-577-7777 - for referrals to support groups.

- In Nassau, call the Rape/Sexual Assault Hotline of the Nassau County Coalition Against Domestic Violence at the Adelphi University School of Social Work - 516-222-2293. Services include intakes of rape victims, individual and group counseling for adult or adolescent rape survivors and groups for parents and husbands of rape victims, according to Liza Papazian, director of the coalition's rape and sexual assault program.

- In Suffolk, contact the Victims Information Bureau - 516-360-3606 or www.vibs.org on the Web. In addition to groups for adult or adolescent rape victims and emergency room companions, the bureau runs support groups for parents of rape victims and occasionally for partners, and makes referrals to community therapists and couples groups.

To ease the potential trauma of being in an emergency room after a rape, a new pilot program provides a separate unit for rape victims so they can be cared for by professionals trained to work with them. Called SANE, or Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner, the program is currently in place at North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset, and is due to open at Good Samaritan Hospital in West Islip within a month.

-Liza N. Burby

GRAPHIC: Newsday Color Illustration by Bob Newman - Woman's blurry face with man's image in place of her left eye.

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