

Sexual Assault Survivors and Information: Needs and Recommendations

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Abstract

This paper examines the information needs of sexual assault survivors, with a focus on the kinds of information these individuals may be seeking and how libraries can best assist survivors with their information needs. The paper begins with an overview of sexual assault as a pervasive problem in society to form a basis of understanding of what a sexual assault survivor may be experiencing and the kinds of barriers that may affect their information seeking. The information needs of sexual assault survivors are complex because of their experiences of violence and trauma. These factors often result in mental and physical health challenges and potentially distressing information-seeking experiences. To best serve sexual assault survivors in libraries, I recommend a trauma-informed approach to librarianship, which underscores the importance of safety, empathy, and empowerment for the survivor. A trauma-informed approach to librarianship can assist sexual assault survivors in remedying potential distress through forming trust, validating their experiences and identity, valuing their voice, and ultimately supporting their healing.

Keywords: sexual assault survivors; information needs; information seeking; information barriers; library services; trauma; trauma-informed librarianship

Sexual assault survivors have complex information needs and their positions as survivors of trauma and violence make any information seeking complicated. This paper will address the information needs of sexual assault survivors and offer recommendations of practices that could be employed to best serve these individuals. I use the term “sexual assault survivor” to mean someone who has experienced sexual assault. In Canada, sexual assault is defined as “all unwanted sexual activity, such as

unwanted sexual grabbing, kissing, and fondling as well as rape” (Women’s Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF), n.d.). Sexual assault can affect anyone regardless of age, race, gender identity, and sexual orientation, among other facets of personal identity. Therefore, it is important to recognize the complexities of how various aspects of personal identity interact with one another to make up a person’s lived experience. This paper discusses sexual assault survivors on a more general level; however, keeping intersectionality in mind is very important as various aspects of a person’s identity can make their situation more complex. These kinds of complexities are beyond the scope of this paper, and future research into these themes is important for all sexual assault survivors of all identities to move toward a future where sexual violence no longer exists. I would also like to note that I am not neutral on this topic. I am a sexual assault survivor and I have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder as a direct result of being sexually assaulted. I have had information needs of my own in this respect and I have found seeking information has been, at times, very distressing. However, when I have found information that I connect with, it has always been powerful in terms of understanding my own experiences. This paper comes from my own personal investment in this topic and the themes and recommendations I discuss here are grounded both in my reading of the literature on the topic and in my own position as a survivor. I recognize that this topic can be very upsetting, and so I would like to remind any reader of this paper to take care of themselves and to reach out for help and support if needed (please see the acknowledgements section at the end of this paper).

This paper examines the information needs of sexual assault survivors by first considering sexual assault as a pervasive problem in society and the complications that sexual assault survivors may be experiencing. It is important to consider this context because trauma and violence are part of the survivor’s experience and we must recognize that these factors make their situation complex and potentially distressing. Once this contextual understanding has been formed, we will turn to the information needs of sexual assault survivors. Finally, I will recommend a trauma-informed approach to librarianship and information services, which I argue can be beneficial for supporting not only sexual assault survivors, but also survivors of trauma more broadly.

The trauma-informed approach to librarianship can help librarians and information professionals support sexual assault survivors in ways that assist the survivor in their healing and reaffirm the position of the library as a safe space for all community members.

Context and Considerations for Sexual Assault Survivors

It is important to first establish a basis of understanding before examining the information needs of sexual assault survivors. By forming a basis of understanding, we will have a context with which to recognize the potential difficulties that sexual assault survivors may be facing in their lives and the potential difficulties they may experience in seeking information. Sexual assault, and sexual violence more broadly, are pervasive societal problems. The Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) reports that “an American is sexually assaulted every 68 seconds” (n.d.). Sexual assault can affect anyone, but it does disproportionately affect women. According to statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice (2000), “the female proportion of sexual assault victims reached 90% at age 13 and 95% at age 19” (p. 4). Additionally, a 2018 survey on intimate partner and sexual violence found that “1 in 5 women experienced completed or attempted rape during her lifetime” (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, p. 1). To bring things to a Canadian context, the 2020 report *Prevalence of Sexual Assault and Childhood Sexual Abuse in Alberta* found that “forty-five percent of adult Albertans have experienced some type of sexual abuse in their lifetime” and that “two in three females and one in three males in Alberta experienced sexual abuse in their lifetime” (p. 6). It is important to note here, though, that these statistics do not account for those who identify as non-binary, transgender, or gender non-conforming; the *Prevalence of Sexual Assault and Childhood Sexual Abuse in Alberta* report (2020) states that “less than 1% of the sample identified their gender as transgender or non-binary. Due to the low number of completions for this subset of the sample, those results have been excluded from an analysis” (p. 4). This point reminds us of the importance of future research to understand the experiences and the needs of those who are often excluded because of the gender binary. Additionally, people of colour and transgender folks are at high risk for sexual violence and, unfortunately, members of

marginalized communities are often underrepresented or misrepresented in statistical data (Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton (SACE), n.d.). Finding accurate statistics on sexual violence can be a major challenge because sexual assault is often underreported, and so many instances of sexual assault may never be known. This point is particularly relevant to sexual assault survivors from marginalized communities who are more likely to feel unsafe reporting their assault (SACE, n.d.). Nevertheless, the statistics that we do have show that sexual violence is a large issue that affects many lives.

Sexual assault is a traumatic and violent crime and can have lasting negative impacts on survivors. Trauma can be defined as “resulting from an event, or series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being” (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014, p. 7). The traumatic effects of sexual assault on a survivor can be devastating in these respects, particularly for a survivor’s mental health and emotional and physical well-being. Post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation and suicide attempts are common amongst survivors. A 2014 report from the U.S. Department of Justice found that sexual assault survivors were most likely to “experience moderate to severe distress resulting from their victimization” as compared to victims of other violent crimes (p. 3).

Information Needs of Sexual Assault Survivors

It is important to keep in mind that although a survivor may have health needs, care needs, and information needs, they may not choose to pursue fulfilling these needs because of the possible emotional distress this could cause them. Munro-Kramer et al. (2017) state that

survivors, more often than not, elect not to pursue any post-assault care. Sexual assault often goes unreported and/or untreated despite the high rates of sexual assault and the health issues surrounding it. In fact, only a minority of survivors seek post-assault health services. Thus, it is important to explore alternative interventions to help survivors access post-assault resources and care. (p. 298)

While these authors discuss the needs of survivors in a health context, I would extend their ideas to an information context as well, and thus understanding the potential barriers that affect the ability of a sexual assault survivor to seek out information is important. Potential barriers for survivors include pervasive myths and stigma about sexual assault, such as victim-blaming, feelings of shame and guilt, and being unable to name one's experience as sexual assault (Munro-Kramer et al., 2017, p. 298).

Westbrook (2009) reminds us that survivors of violence and trauma have information needs that are more complex than everyday information needs because of the highly stressful nature of trauma and the distressing effects of trauma on a survivor. Westbrook (2009) notes that "the needs themselves differ because the nature of a crisis is to compress and heighten stress while the crisis itself can impact the individual's focus, priorities, and perspective" (p. 299). In other words, trauma makes the information needs and the information-seeking behaviour different and complicated. Trauma changes one's brain and dramatically affects how one sees oneself and others; thus, trauma can have a huge impact on one's behaviour, thinking, and perceptions (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 8). This factor of trauma can make seeking information difficult for a survivor, but it can also make the situation difficult for an information professional to provide service to a survivor.

In terms of actual information needs, the work of Finn et al. (2011) and that of Skinner and Gross (2017) provide insight into the kinds of information needs that sexual assault survivors may have. In their research on the information needs of abuse survivors, Finn et al. (2011) note that many abuse survivors seek information to understand what constitutes abuse to form an understanding of their experiences and to integrate their experiences into their own personal identities. This process is powerful because "understanding the nature of abuse requires survivors to incorporate agency and social representations into their own perceptions. Moving toward safer living is usually impossible until information on the nature of abuse is integrated into survivors' construction of their own identities" (p. 939). In this sense, information can imbue meaning by helping a survivor of abuse understand what has happened to them, understand themselves as a person who has experienced trauma, and, importantly,

understand themselves as a person who can heal from trauma. I would extend this notion of understanding to also include sexual assault survivors as sexual assault is a form of abuse. For example, the websites of local sexual assault centres tend to provide information on what sexual assault is, what constitutes consent, and many other topics related to the sexual assault survivor's understanding of their experience and the larger nature of sexual assault, which suggests that there is a need amongst sexual assault survivors to make sense of their experience (see, for example, [the topics for learning](#) at [sace.ca](#), which is the website of the Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton).

With respect to practical information seeking, Finn et al. (2011) found in their study that the main categories of information seeking among abuse survivors are “police information, legal information, and community resource information” (p. 943). In their research on the information needs of sexual assault survivors, Skinner and Gross (2017) found that sexual assault survivors have information needs related to finding legal information, information about reporting to the police, physical health information, and mental and emotional health information. Information needs could also be related to the process of healing from trauma, and so a survivor may seek information about trauma itself, responses to trauma, the effects of trauma, and overcoming trauma (Skinner & Gross, 2017). Additionally, survivors may also want information about self-care and well-being, and in this vein, may want to know about community and mental health resources that are available, such as sexual assault centres, support groups, and counselling or therapy services (Skinner & Gross, 2017).

Supporting Sexual Assault Survivors: A Trauma-Informed Approach to Librarianship and Information Services

What can librarians and information service professionals do to support sexual assault survivors and their information needs? First, a note of caution is required here as librarians and information professionals are not social workers, counsellors, or psychologists, and do not necessarily have the knowledge or experience to act in these roles for sexual assault survivors. As Westbrook (2015) reminds us:

people in crisis situations are generally struggling with so many daily life and self-identity issues that harnessing control in terms of information interactions is particularly daunting. Librarians can proffer information as a tool in both self-

identity construction and problem resolution. They are not social workers but neither do they abdicate professional responsibility to that or any other profession. (p. 19)

It is important for librarians and information professionals to keep this in mind to avoid overstepping their role. Even with this caveat, librarians and information professionals can still do their part in supporting sexual assault survivors with the tools and skills of their profession. Wilmoth (2008) states that “positive social change will be accomplished if libraries are universally known as places where survivors can begin their healing process with the assistance of caring, knowledgeable staff” (p. 13). To move toward achieving this goal, I recommend implementing a trauma-informed approach to librarianship and information services, which can help serve sexual assault survivors and survivors of trauma more broadly. The US Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014) outlines the principles of trauma-informed care as the following:

1. Safety
2. Trustworthiness and Transparency
3. Peer Support
4. Collaboration and Mutuality
5. Empowerment, Voice, and Choice
6. Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

Eades (2020) argues that the trauma-informed approach is well-suited to librarianship because of the very values of librarianship itself, which underpin the notion that the library should be a welcoming space for all. Additionally, we as community members perform a major disservice to trauma survivors if we do not take trauma seriously (Becker-Blease, 2017). In terms of day-to-day work practice, librarians and information professionals can begin becoming trauma-informed by educating themselves on trauma itself and what survivors can experience in order to build a foundation of understanding, support, and care for those who have experienced trauma. An important component of building this foundation is to shift our thinking to be more open-minded and empathetic;

this is a “movement away from thinking ‘What’s wrong with this person?’ And instead asking ‘What happened to this person?’” (Sharkey quoted in Ford, 2019, p. 22).

As the above SAMHSA (2014) principles state, establishing a strong sense of safety and trust is key for the comfort of the trauma survivor and emphasizing these points can also be a starting point for trauma-informed libraries. Finn et al. (2011) note that “in most situations, individuals’ respect for and understanding of survivors’ abuse situations are essential to developing trust in the information interaction” (p. 936). Additionally, the effects of trauma, and especially interpersonal trauma, make it such that a survivor may not necessarily feel safe interacting with others. This makes establishing trust even more important for the safety and well-being of the survivor (Pemberton & Loeb, 2020). For sexual assault survivors, “the continued aftermath of symptoms following victimization that include hypervigilance, intense fear of the perpetrator, fears related to another attack, and anxiety regarding issues related to disclosure create continued feelings of being unsafe” (Pemberton & Loeb, 2020, p. 121). To help remedy any fears a survivor may have, and to foster safety and trustworthiness, an approach of “acceptance, validation, belief in their experiences, and having a non-judgmental stance” can help a survivor feel more at ease in their healing process (Pemberton & Loeb, 2020, pp. 121-122). Along similar lines, Munro-Kramer et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of creating a culture of caring as being integral to a successful information interaction with a sexual assault survivor. In practice, creating safety and trust could take the form of signage in the library that explicitly denotes the library as a safe space, specifically as a safe space for healing. Visually marking the library as a safe space could help remind a survivor that they are safe, and that the library is here to support them, but without necessarily placing any pressure or expectation on the survivor to disclose their experiences if they are not comfortable doing so. In making this recommendation, I speak from my own experience as a survivor; when I see that a place is specifically marked as safe, I immediately feel more comfortable being there. Through a reference interview with a survivor, Wilmoth (2008) reminds us that confidentiality is an important part of establishing trust and safety and that this shows respect for the survivor and their situation. Wilmoth (2008) recommends that “a librarian who suspects that a patron is a survivor of sexual assault should make

every effort to get that person in a private area for the reference interview” (p. 11). These steps could help confirm to a survivor that the library is a safe space for them, and that librarians and information professionals themselves are safe people to interact with.

The SAMHSA (2014) principles underscore the importance of community in supporting the trauma survivor and of the empowerment of the survivor in affirming their own identity and in reestablishing their place in the community. It is important to recognize that while trauma may happen to an individual, trauma itself does not exist in a vacuum, but rather as part of systems of oppression and power (Becker-Blease, 2017). For sexual assault survivors, relevant systems of oppression and power include rape culture, which can be defined as:

The societal conditions that allow sexual violence to take place. These societal conditions include, but are not limited to, (a) tolerance of sexual harassment and violent pornography, (b) the belief that women who have consumed alcohol are sexually available, (c) restrictive ideas about masculinity (e.g., men don't cry), (d) the belief that women should be responsible for keeping themselves safe (e.g., victim blaming), (e) jokes about rape, and (f) the belief that certain groups are better than others (e.g. sexism, racism). (Conley & Griffin, 2016, p. 279)

To combat the beliefs that rape culture perpetuates and to emphasize the role of the library as a place for community and empowerment, libraries can be places of “connecting personal experiences to broader social systems that give rise to trauma and oppression, victim/survivor empowerment, and relationship building” (Becker-Blease, 2017, p. 133). To achieve these ends, libraries can form partnerships with organizations that share these values and that have resources and knowledge about these issues, such as local sexual assault centres. These kinds of partnerships could offer educational opportunities for staff and they could also take the form of providing information, awareness, and education for library patrons. In their research on sexual assault survivors, Skinner and Gross (2017) recommend having a variety of resources that are readily accessible within the library if a sexual assault survivor is in need of information and support. The library collection itself is also relevant, as mindfully

selected materials on trauma and healing could also be of help to survivors (Skinner & Gross, 2017, p. 31). Furthermore, the creation of library guides or resource lists pertinent to sexual assault and trauma could also help to spread awareness about these issues within the larger community and could assist a survivor with their information needs without the need for a face-to-face conversation, which may be distressing for some survivors (see, for example, [the resource list](#) prepared by the Oak Park Public Library (2021) in Illinois for Sexual Assault Awareness Month, among other similar efforts by public and academic libraries). With respect to the empowerment and voice of the survivor, libraries could also include the voices and wishes of sexual assault survivors (who are comfortable doing so and with proper permissions) by reaching out to sexual assault survivors in developing services and programming. This point of giving survivors the opportunity to voice their needs, concerns, and perspectives is supported by the research of Munro-Kramer et al. (2017), who found in their study of sexual assault survivors on university campuses that “it is imperative that we include survivors’ voices while looking for alternative ways to serve their needs” (p. 304). The hope here is that by implementing trauma-informed practices that emphasize empowerment and community, libraries can support sexual assault survivors on an individual level, but also help to create awareness and understanding of sexual violence in society on a broader level.

Conclusion

Sexual assault survivors have complex information needs that stem from their experiences of trauma and violence. It is important for librarians and information service professionals to understand these needs and the contexts in which these needs exist to provide thoughtful and careful service to sexual assault survivors. A trauma-informed approach to librarianship can help librarians and information service professionals provide service to sexual assault survivors in a way that is mindful of their experiences and that validates their identities. The main takeaway of a trauma-informed approach is to treat others with the respect and care that they deserve, and in a way that acknowledges their trauma, values their voice, and supports their healing. Understanding the information needs of sexual assault survivors and implementing an

approach that is mindful of the experiences of this vulnerable community is significant because this helps to reinforce the position of the library as a safe space.

Acknowledgements

To any sexual assault survivor reading this: know that you are loved.

If you feel you need support, please see the resources linked below as they may be of help to you. Please take care of yourselves and one another.

- From VAW Learning Network: https://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/issuebased_newsletters/Issue-25/index.html
- Also see the VAW Learning Network homepage: <https://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/>
- Directory of community resources in Canada: <https://endingviolencecanada.org/sexual-assault-centres-crisis-lines-and-support-services/>
- Resources from RAINN: <https://www.rainn.org/national-resources-sexual-assault-survivors-and-their-loved-ones>
- Resource list from Oak Park Public Library (mentioned in this paper): <https://www.oppl.org/news-events/health-wellness/april-is-sexual-assault-awareness-month/>
- My email: sbrown5@ualberta.ca

Conflict of Interest Statement

None declared.

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