

Traumatic Memory

The mission of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape is to work to eliminate all forms of sexual violence and to advocate for the rights and needs of victims of sexual assault. 

Position:

The Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape acknowledges the uniqueness of traumatic memory.

PCAR advocates for a victim/survivor's right to services which support healing from traumatic experiences and for their right to seek and obtain services from mental health professionals whose practices conform to nationally recognized standards of care as set forth by professional associations and state licensing boards.

PCAR supports comprehensive human service curricula addressing the process of healing and the effects of sexual trauma on individuals and societies.

Rationale:

The result for many victims/survivors of sexual assault and abuse is emotional trauma. Victims may cope with this form of trauma through dissociation, and other coping mechanisms which impact their memory, thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the violence/abuse.

This impact of trauma and its impact on memory are widely recognized by mental health professionals. This includes the identification of memory distortions as one of the key diagnostic features of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The delayed retrieval of traumatic memories, accompanied with psychological distress by military combat veterans has been the subject of clinical reports since the early part of the last century.

Background:

The reliance upon a victim's recovered memory as one evidentiary element of a criminal and/or civil action has been controversial since it was first utilized in the courts in the 1990's. Memory which is remembered either after some period of time, through a trigger event, therapy, interview, or other



means has been debated as unreliable and described as “false memory.” As a result, the existence of “traumatic memory” resulting from a trauma such as sexual assault/abuse has also been challenged, in professional and public realms.

The debate and confusion caused by these challenges may cause distress to victims/survivors who experience recovered memory, and other forms of traumatic injury. This distress may lead to reluctance by victims/survivors to seek counseling and other mental health assistance, or confusion as to where that assistance may be found. Criminal and civil justice professionals, working with victims/survivors, may advise them to avoid therapy and other forms of support in order to minimize the possibility of the creation of “false memories,” delaying needed mental health intervention.

The Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape may issue statements regarding public policy affecting sexual violence victims and rape crisis centers. All position statements adopted by the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape will be viewed as the official position statement, the center, when publicly or privately voicing oppositions to the statement, will do so in the capacity of an independent program and in no way as a member of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape.



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