

Campus Culture Project Packet of Reading Materials

Reading	Due
“We’re Called Survivors Because We Are Still Here”	Week 3
“Frank” Transcript	Week 6

We're Called Survivors Because We're Still Here

A few of the things you will walk through on your way to "OK."

01/06/2012 | [Sady](#) | [rainn](#), [rape](#), [sexual assault](#)

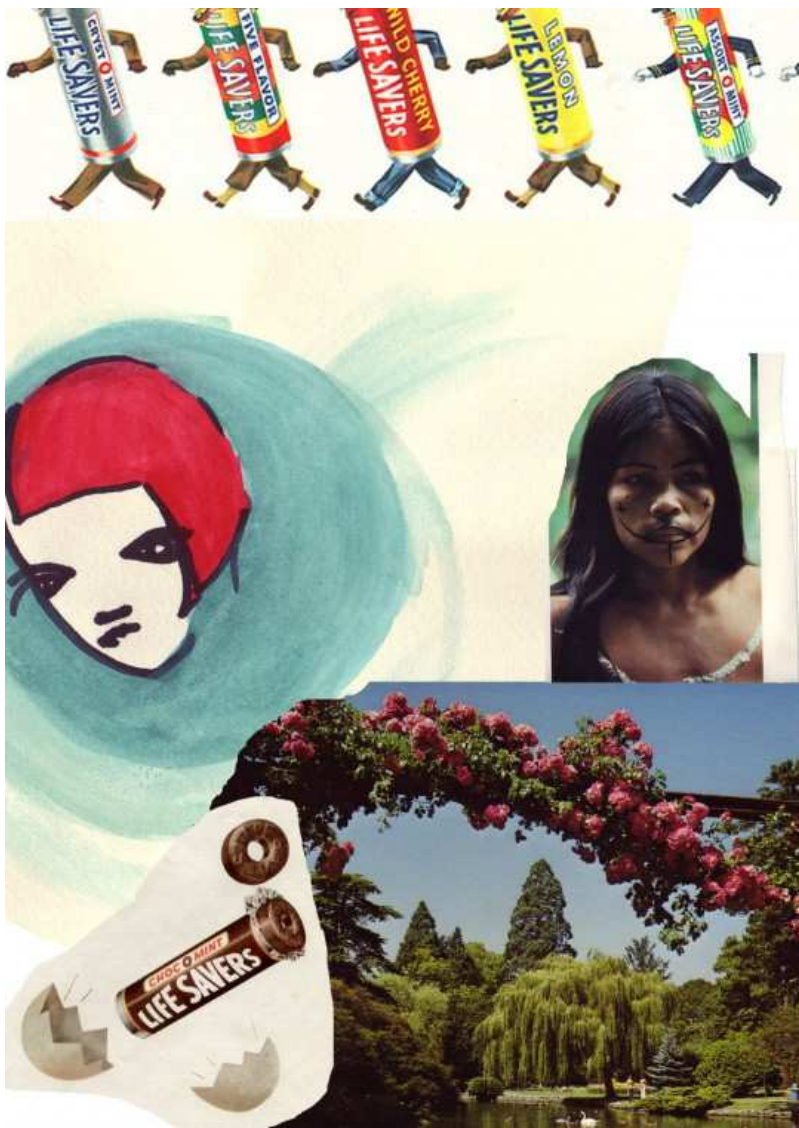


Illustration by [Sonja](http://rookieamaq.com/author/Sonja) (<http://rookieamaq.com/author/Sonja>)

First let me say this: I am so, so sorry about what happened to you. What might still be happening to you.

If you have been sexually assaulted—recently, or a long time ago, when you were

little, or this year—then I'm writing this piece for you. And, like many people to whom you may speak about this, my first response is that I honestly don't know what to say. I can't tell you that I know what you're going through: I don't. Your experience is yours, not mine, and I can't assume that I know all about it. You get to have your own feelings. And I know that I, personally, really hate it when people tell me that some awful feeling or situation of mine is "going to be OK." Because, sure, it's *going* to be. But right now, it's not. So I don't know when the "OK" starts, so don't talk to me about it, because right now I want to talk about *right now*.

So, I'm definitely not going to tell you that. What I can tell you is that I am so, so sorry that it happened to you. And I can tell you that it happened to me, too. I was sexually assaulted. And in this, I am not unlike many, many other women, including many of the women I respect and admire most, and many of my friends. (It has happened to a lot of men, too, but a lot more women.) And, having talked to those friends a bit, and having gone through some of this myself, I know that there are a few things nobody talked me through, and that I want to talk through with you.

It is, actually, going to be OK. But it's probably not OK right now. And right now, you probably have no idea when the "OK" is going to start. So you don't have to be OK right now. You are going to get yourself there, eventually. Here are a few of the things you will walk through, on your way.

1. Solitude

You are not alone in this. But for a while, you will probably feel as if you are. I mean, why wouldn't you? What your attacker did to you was completely outside the range of what we think of as "normal human behavior." Or even *cruel* human behavior. When cruel people dislike somebody, they normally just curse, or yell at them, or something. They don't *force sex* on that person. But someone forced sex on you, and maybe that person has done it more than once, or maybe more than one person did it; that's an experience that's completely outside of anything we think of as "normal." You may even think that you must have done something bad to make it happen, or that you are a bad or weird person because it happened, or that it couldn't possibly have happened to anyone else.

Well: it could have. (It has.) None of this had anything to do with you personally. The most important thing, for me, when I needed to understand this, was looking at statistics. If you are a girl, you're not alone: [One in four girls](http://www.wvu.edu/chw/preventionandwellness/vp_casas_res_stat.shtml) (http://www.wvu.edu/chw/preventionandwellness/vp_casas_res_stat.shtml) is sexually assaulted before the age of 18, and girls between the ages of 16 and 19 are [four times](http://www.rainn.org/get-information/statistics/sexual-assault-victims) (<http://www.rainn.org/get-information/statistics/sexual-assault-victims>) more likely than the general population to be sexually assaulted. And if you are a boy, you're not alone, either: up to one in six boys reports being sexually assaulted before the age of 16. If your attacker was or is someone you know, or a family member, that can feel uniquely terrible. And it *is* terrible. But it's not unique, so you're not alone there, either: most rape victims know their attackers, and child sexual abuse is perpetrated by family members about 34% of the time.

These facts are very scary for a lot of people to think about. But they will keep you from feeling like a freak, or like you—and you alone—"deserved" the sexual assault. Sexual assault is very common. One-in-four-girls-level common. I'm guessing that if you gave a plane ticket to one out of every four girls in America, and made them all fly to some desert island so that you could see what they have in common with one another, you wouldn't be able to find a single universally shared factor. So, no: this was not about you. And no: you are not alone.

2. Confusion

Right now, you may have some trouble believing that what happened to you was sexual assault. You may feel that it was "not violent enough," or that you "didn't fight back hard enough," or that it didn't look like the kinds of sexual assault you've seen on TV or in movies. This is an extremely common reaction, even

among adults, and even among people who have actually experienced very violent assaults: forced sex and molestation are so scary that your brain often refuses to fully acknowledge them. One woman I spoke to described her experience, and then told me that “if it had happened to anyone else, I would call it rape.” That’s not an instance of this woman being wrong; that’s a demonstration of how shock works. Over and over, it has been shown that people who experience overwhelming, frightening, shocking events—soldiers in war time, people whose relatives die suddenly, sexual assault victims—feel, at first, as though what has happened is somehow not real.

Let’s make a deal, you and I. I’m going to describe a few common forms of sexual assault. In exchange, you will follow the very simple advice I have for you at the beginning of the next paragraph. Sexual assault can consist of any of the following things: If someone touched your genitals or your anus with any part of their body, or any object, without your permission, that’s sexual assault. If someone touched, kissed, or fondled any part of your body without your permission, that’s sexual assault. If someone threatened to get you in trouble or hurt you unless you did something sexual with them, that’s sexual assault. If someone did something sexual to you when you were unable to resist—if you were trapped, or unconscious, or very drunk or high and hence not able to understand or control what was happening—that’s sexual assault.

That list is incomplete. But here’s the most important part: if you think you *may* have been sexually assaulted, or if you think you were *probably* sexually assaulted, or if you would call it sexual assault *if it happened to somebody else*, you need to talk to a doctor about it, and ask her/him to call the police. Call a rape crisis hotline—RAINN (<http://apps.rainn.org/ohl-bridge/>) is the biggest and most easily accessible—and ask them what to do and where to go; if letting your parents know about this is dangerous (for example, if you were attacked by a parent) remember to ask the hotline if the hospital is required to notify them. If you’re really concerned about privacy, don’t give your name or phone number when you call. Seriously. RAINN even says this on their web page (<http://www.rainn.org/get-help/national-sexual-assault-hotline>); they might be required to tell authorities what’s happened to you if you’re under 18, but they can’t, unless you tell them who you are.

If the assault happened very recently, if it is at all possible, go straight to the hospital and ask for a sexual-assault forensic exam, so you will have proof against your attacker. Don’t shower, don’t change, don’t read the rest of this article: GO. If it happened a long time ago, then go to a therapist. This, again, can be complicated when you are young; therapists normally can’t tell anyone else what you say, but if they think you’re in danger, especially from your parents, they might be required to notify someone. So ask the therapist which information they can share, and what they *must* share, and with whom, before you start talking. Get an honest, plainly worded deal you can both agree to. When you talk, you don’t have to call what happened “sexual assault” if you don’t want to. Just describe what happened, as best you can, and then you and the therapist can decide what to call it afterward.

This is all a bit scary, but I recommend that you talk to these people for two reasons. First, I don’t know who your attacker was, so I don’t know who else you can talk to. And second: no matter what your situation, you need support from people who understand sexual assault and can help you heal. Sometimes people don’t understand sexual assault, or are cruel about it, so you absolutely do not have to talk about what happened with people you don’t trust. But therapists and rape-crisis counselors are hired to understand. Right now, you are dealing with something that can have a lot of long-term consequences, and you can’t always see those consequences clearly when you’re living through it. You need to be in touch with at least one person whose first priority is keeping track of you, and making sure that you are OK.

3. Pain

Pain is a message. You are probably going to experience a fair amount of it, so it's important that you know this. No matter how bad it is, pain is not a judgment, or a punishment, or a weakness: pain is a message, from the part of you that wants to live, telling you that something is wrong.

After a sexual assault, pain can take many different forms: You can be overwhelmed with emotion, or you can be completely numb. You can be angry all the time, or sad all the time, or scared all the time, or all three. You can have vivid flashbacks about the assault, or you can have trouble recalling it. Sometimes all of this happens to the same person. Consensual sex can become scary or complicated in ways it wasn't before—some people start to have a lot more sex, some people have a lot less, some people can only have it in really specific ways for a while, lots of people just feel differently about or during sex, even if it doesn't seem like anything has changed. Some people seem fine unless they're exposed to one specific thing that reminds them of the assault: a touch, a joke, a song, a place—for someone I knew it was a day of the year. No matter what form your pain takes, it often looks really messy. But don't let anyone tell you that it's wrong. I don't care which jerk told you to “handle it” “better”; you are receiving a message, right now, from a very necessary part of yourself. The message is, “I want to live. Get me some help.” It's urgent. That is why it hurts.

The problem, with this kind of pain, is that it can last. It can follow you around, wake you up at night, and not let you sleep. All you can think about is the pain, and you start to forget what it's like to *not* be in pain, and you will try anything, *anything*, to make it go away. Here's the problem, though: when all you can think about is pain, you are not going to be making the most clear-headed decisions. And when you will try *anything* that promises to make the pain go away, some of the available solutions are really stupid. People who have been sexually assaulted are more likely to become alcoholics.

<http://www.musc.edu/vawprevention/research/mentalimpact.shtml> People who have been sexually assaulted are more likely to develop an unhealthy relationship with drugs. So if you're not sober or drug free right now, try being sober. Get help to do that, if you need it. See how things change. I don't say this to be judgey, and I did in fact drink before I turned 21, so I'm not saying it because I'm an old-timey schoolmarm who doesn't get the kids and their parties. Drugs and alcohol are just very bad for people in crisis. You really need your whole brain right now, so that you can get better. Anything you use regularly can create long-term changes in how you process emotion—pot is bad for some people's anxiety, alcohol exacerbates depression—and it's all really easy to overuse when you're freaking out. Also: getting wasted doesn't take away the pain; it just makes you temporarily unaware of it. So if you have serious problems to deal with, and you're putting drugs or alcohol on top of that, well: it's sort of like turning on the television to distract yourself from the fact that your house is on fire. The fire will only get bigger. You will only get hurt. But you won't notice the danger, for a long time, because you're watching the show. Try being sober, if you're not already, and see if you get better at putting out fires.

I am assuming, here, that you already know about the *even worse* option, for making the pain go away. This option is not an uncommon way for survivors to try and resolve their pain: in a study of rape survivors specifically, one in three had considered suicide. So it's not strange if you've thought about it. But if you are thinking of killing yourself, or if you are hurting yourself in any way, you need to talk to a therapist about this, or (again) call a hotline, *right now*. Those people can talk through your specific situation with you, and I can't. They have years of training, and I don't. I will just tell you this: no matter what is happening, the possibility of change exists. Most people who want to die don't actually want to stop existing; they want the pain to stop existing. They feel powerless over the pain, and they think it will never end. But there is literally no one more powerless than a dead person. As long as you are alive, there is something else you can try; there is some new way you can try to take your power back. Dead people can't try anything.

Pain is a message. What it says is: “I want to live. Get me out of this.” Don’t ever try to shut that voice up.

4. Being OK

One day, you’re not going to think about this every day. It may be hard to believe that. I know that whenever something really bad happens to me—not just big traumas, like sexual assault, but also relatively normal but awful things, like losing a job or a relationship—I’m convinced that I won’t ever get over it. And in some ways, I never do. I’ll never have that job again. I’ll never be loved by that person again. For the rest of my life, my life will be different, because something was lost. And I’ll never go back to being someone who hasn’t been sexually assaulted. That’s something else I lost. A big something. My life would be different if that hadn’t occurred.

These things still hurt, sometimes. All of them do, the little ones and the big ones. They all still sometimes break my heart. But I’m older now than I used to be. So I know, now, what happens when the heartbreak is over.

The end of heartbreak is not, generally, big. It doesn’t announce itself. No one comes to your door with a brass band and crowns you King of Over It and plays the Glorious Anthem of Recovery. It’s just this: one day, you’ll be sad about what happened. You’ll sit there, with the sadness, expecting it to break you; you’ll expect to go right back to the heart of the pain, the messy animal howling part that you were always so sure would never go away. And then you won’t go back there. And in that moment, you’ll realize something: you haven’t actually been there for a long time.

“Being OK” isn’t a celebration. “Being OK” isn’t a guarantee that you’ll never feel the pain again. “Being OK” is summed up in six words: that happened a long time ago.

This has changed you. It is always going to be something that has changed you, for the rest of your life. It will pop up in ways that surprise you. There will be days when the pain is back. If you have post-traumatic stress, you are not going to have an easy time of this. You are going to have to walk through more than most to get to “OK,” and you may have to keep walking back to it, over and over. But you are not alone, and help exists, and “the rest of your life” is hopefully going to be a very long time. One day, all of this will have happened a long time ago. That’s what I can tell you, about being OK.

And the fact is, you are not ruined. You are not broken. You are not forbidden to be OK. I actually felt guilty about this, when I realized it was happening to me—I thought there was some rule that meant I would only ever get to be bravely suffering and sort of all right, and that if I were actually happy, it would mean that I had betrayed myself and my experience. But this is not a 19th-century novel about a fallen woman; this is your actual life. No rule or event can forbid you from being happy. You can get past “OK.” You can get *way* past “OK.” You can actually get to “great.” That’s where a lot of the sexual assault survivors I’ve met have ended up: GREAT. So I’m not telling you that you have to be happy now. I’m telling you that it’s possible, and common. And one day, you might end up there, and not even realize it until you take a second to look around.

No matter where you are, though, you are not drowning, right now. But you are in the water, and it’s dangerous. So you have to grab the rope that leads you back to the boat. I am not the rope; I am talking to you so that you know the rope exists; I am talking to you so that you have a few ideas of how to make it to “OK” again. You’re out there in the water, and I’m just telling you to look around for something that’s going to save you.

Because primarily—here is the big secret, the part I wish someone had told me—*you* are what’s going to save you. Doctors can help you, and you’ll be the one who visits them. People can be trustworthy and capable of helping you heal, if you

reach out—you'll be the one who reaches. You may need to get past a bad relationship with a chemical, or a bad relationship with yourself—you'll be the one who gets past it, the only one in the world who has that power. And maybe, on some days, you are going to literally save your own life.

I know you can do this. I know it. Because look at what happened to you. Look at what you've been through. And then, take a second to notice this part: it happened, and *you are still here*. Not just here, but reading an article on the internet about how to save yourself! And you've made it to the second to last paragraph! And it is a LONG article.

We call one another "survivors." We don't often take the time to think about what that means. What it means is "the people who are still here." What it means is that you faced down something that no one should ever have to. And that even this terrible thing was not enough to stop you. What it means is that you are incredibly strong, even in the moments when you don't know that. What it means is that you are not drowning—there is a rope, a lifeline, and it will bring you back to the boat, and back to safety. What it means is that you are the rope. Grab on. ♦

Sexual Assault and Alcohol on College Campuses

Below is the transcription of an interview conducted by Dr. David Lisak (Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts, Boston) with “Frank,” a pre-law student. The interview was part of a study in which 1,882 men were interviewed about their relationships and sexual partners. After conducting the interviews, the study focused on 120 of those men who described actions that fit the legal definition of rape. None of those men had ever been prosecuted for their crimes. The study found that most of these men were repeat rapists, responsible for an average of 5.8 rapes each. Though they freely admitted that they’d had sex with unwilling partners, they didn’t consider their actions rape. The 120 rapists were responsible for 1,225 separate acts of personal violence, including rape, battery, child physical abuse, and child sexual abuse.

Frank: We had parties every weekend, that’s what my fraternity was known for. And uh, we’d invite a bunch of girls, lay out a bunch of kegs or whatever we were drinkin’ that night, and everyone would just get plastered. And we’d all invite girls, all of us in the fraternity. You know, we’d be on the look out for the good-looking girls especially the freshmen, the really young ones. They were the easiest. It’s like they didn’t know the ropes kind of, you know, like they were easy prey. And they wouldn’t know anything about drinking or how much alcohol they could handle. So, you know, they wouldn’t know anything about our techniques.

Lisak: And what were those techniques?

Frank: Well we’d invite them to the party. You know, we’d make it seem like it was a real honor, like we didn’t just invite any girl, which I guess in a way is true. You know and then we’d get them drinking right away, we’d have those kegs but we’d also have some kind of punch also, you know, like our own home brew. And we’d make it with a real sweet juice and just pour in all kinds of alcohol. And it was really powerful stuff. The girls wouldn’t know what hit them. They’d all be guzzling it, ya know, because they were freshman, kind of nervous. And it was just juice anyway right?

Lisak: Well, when you say it was just juice, you mean the girls wouldn’t know that it was spiked with alcohol?

Frank: Well, they knew. I mean they knew that. At least the smart ones did. I mean it was a party right? Not some, you know, like social tea. I think they must have known. Most of them did anyone. The ones who didn’t had to have been really naïve.

Lisak: Well did you count on them being naïve?

Frank: Yeah, the real young ones. The naïve ones were the easiest. And they'd be the ones that we'd target.

Lisak: What do you mean by target?

Frank: Well that's what we'd call them. You know, we'd all be scouting for targets during the week. You know, we'd pick them out, work them over during the week, then get them all psyched up to come to one of our famous parties. They'd be the ones we'd really work on.

Lisak: What would happen once they were drunk at the party?

Frank: Well that's when one of us would make our move. You know, by then each one of the girls had been kind of staked out by one of us. Meaning one of the guys would be working on them, getting them drinks, you know keeping the juices flowing so to speak. You kinda had to know your moment, you know, when to make your move. You basically had to have an instinct for it.

Lisak: Can you describe what happened in the specific occasion referred to in your questionnaire?

Frank: Yeah sure, I had this girl staked out. I'd picked her out in one of my classes. You know, I'd worked on her. She was all prepped. I was watching for her, and the minute she walked into the door of the party, I was on her. And she was really good looking too. And we started drinking together, and I could tell she was kind of nervous. I could tell she was nervous because she was drinking that stuff so fast.

Lisak: What was she drinking?

Frank: Well it was some kind of punch we'd made. You know, the usual thing.

Lisak: Did she know it was spiked with alcohol?

Frank: I don't really know although she must have after a while, because she started to get plastered, in just a few minutes. And, so I started making my moves on her. I kinda leaned in close, got my arm around her. And then at the right moment I kissed her, and moved in a little closer. You know, like the usual kind of stuff. I'm sure it was no surprise to her. She'd done it a thousand times before. And after a while I asked her if she wanted to go up to my room, you know, get away from the noise. And she came right a way, so. Actually it wasn't my room. We always had several rooms designated before the party, you know that were all prepped for this.

Lisak: Designated rooms?

Frank: Yeah, we'd set aside a few rooms to bring the girls up to once they were ready.

Lisak: What happened when you got to one of the designated rooms?

Frank: Well she was really woozy, by this time. So I brought up another drink, you know, sat her down on one of the beds. Sat down next to her. And pretty soon I just made my move. I don't remember exactly what I did first. I probably, you know, leaned her down on the bed, started working on her clothes, feeling her up.

Lisak: How did she respond?

Frank: I don't remember. I started working her blouse off and I think she might have said something. I don't remember. I didn't expect her to get into it right away.

Lisak: Did she say anything?

Frank: Yeah at some point she started saying things like, "You know I don't want to do this right away," or something like that. I just kept working on her clothes. You know, she started squirming, but that actually helped, because her blouse came off easier. I kinda leaned on her, kept feeling her up, getting more into it. She tried to push me off, so I pushed her back down.

Lisak: Where you angry?

Frank: Well, you know, it pissed me off that she'd played along the whole way and then decided to squirm out of it at the end. She was so plastered she probably didn't know what was going on anyway. I don't know. Maybe that's why she started pushing on me. But I just kept leaning on her, pulling off her clothes, and at some point she stopped squirming. I don't know. Maybe she passed out. Her eyes were closed.

Lisak: What happened?

Frank: I fucked her.

Lisak: Did you have to lean on her, hold her down when you did it?

Frank: Yeah, I had my arm across her chest like this, you know. That's how I did it.

Lisak: Was she squirming?

Frank: Yeah she was squirming but not as much anymore.

Lisak: What happened afterwards?

Frank: I got dressed and went back to the party.

Lisak: What did she do?

Frank: She left.