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DEAR ABBY,

Your response to a recent letter by “Distraught in the Northwest” has us distraught in the Northeast. Today, your column contained a letter from a teen disclosing multiple incidents of sexual abuse perpetrated by her friend’s father. Your advice to her saddened us, because by saying, “First you have to forgive yourself,” your reply was blaming her for what happened.

Victim-blaming occurs when a victim of a crime is held partially responsible for what happened to them. Would you have had a similar response if she was the victim of another crime such as theft? When someone is sexually abused, they are never to blame.

Sexual abuse and violence are often a hidden part of our culture, and are not uncommon. Abuse can come in many forms, including sexual acts such as rape and other types of penetration, inappropriate touching, voyeurism, exhibitionism and pornography. Studies show nearly 20 percent of the population will experience some form of sexual violence during their lives.ⁱ

It is a violation of trust and power usually conducted by someone the victim knows. In this case, her friend’s father crossed the line. In 2010, nearly 41 percent of female victims reported being raped by an acquaintance.ⁱⁱ These situations, such as the one mentioned in your column, have nothing to do with a victim’s behavior. Sexual assaults occur when a person decides to abuse someone by exploiting an opportunity or vulnerability and exercising power, force or violence.

The teen expressed that she felt confused and betrayed, and that’s why she hasn’t said anything. The feelings that she is experiencing are common. Survivors of sexual abuse often feel alone, and fear further isolation if they report the crime. People who sexually abuse hope their victims don’t say anything, so they can keep their crimes a secret. The majority of cases, an estimated 63 percent, are never reported to the police.ⁱⁱⁱ

We know that increasing awareness of sexual violence leads to preventing it. In the future, when a reader discloses abuse, please let them know they are not alone. Offer help by going the extra step to provide information and resources to them. Each state has a sexual assault coalition, and these coalitions work with local programs in the community to provide services and support. For a listing of programs working to prevent sexual violence, visit www.nsvrc.org/organizations.

The advice that you dispense through your column can impact thousands. We saw the response to your letter as a teachable moment. We value victims’ voices and encourage open dialog. April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. This year’s campaign emphasizes, *It’s time ... to talk about it*. Please join us in doing so. For info and resources, visit www.nsvrc.org/saam.

Sincerely,
The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC)

ⁱ Tjaden, P. & Thoennes, N. (2000) Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice.

ⁱⁱ Black, M.C., Basile, K.C., Breiding, M.J., Smith, S.G., Walters, M.L., Merrick, M.T., Chen, J., & Stevens, M.R. (2011). *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 Summary Report*. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rennison, C. (2002). *Rape and Sexual Assault: Reporting to Police and Medical Attention, 1992-2000*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
<http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/rsarp00.pdf>