

Article 6: Healing After Sexual Violence

Insights from Emily Roy - Sexual Assault Counsellor Advocate

Written by Lisa Fast

When people think about healing after sexual violence, they often imagine a clear starting point or a defined path forward. In reality, the journey looks different for everyone, and support can take many forms. Emily Roy, a Sexual Assault Counsellor Advocate at Agape House, sees this firsthand in her work with survivors across the community.

At Agape House, sexual assault counselling is not one-size-fits-all. It can include psychoeducation, safety planning, learning healthy coping strategies, support with protection orders, and, just as importantly, offering a space where someone can speak openly without fear of judgment. Adults aged 18 and over who have experienced sexual assault—or who simply have questions about sexual violence—can access these services by reaching out to book a session.

Survivors come forward for many different reasons. Some are trying to better understand their current relationships or are looking for support as they consider leaving. Others want guidance around legal options, such as protection orders, or help building coping skills. For many, the first step is simply having someone who will listen. “Sometimes people just want a place where they can talk and be heard,” Emily explains, emphasizing that every reason for reaching out is valid.

Part of the challenge in seeking support is the persistence of harmful misconceptions about sexual violence. One of the most common is the belief that it must involve physical force or visible injuries. In reality, sexual violence does not need to leave physical wounds to be real. It can involve experiences that cause emotional, psychological, or even spiritual harm, including those that occur in virtual spaces. Another misconception is that sexual assault only happens between strangers, or that it cannot occur within a relationship. In fact, research shows that most survivors know the person who harmed them, and in cases involving children and youth, a significant portion of perpetrators are family members.

These misconceptions are deeply connected to the stigma that still surrounds sexual violence. Emily points to the ongoing influence of rape culture—attitudes and beliefs that normalize or excuse harmful behaviour—as a key factor. Myths such as the idea that men cannot be sexually assaulted continue to prevent survivors from coming forward and accessing support.

Reducing this stigma starts with conversation and education. Emily encourages communities to learn more about sexual violence, challenge harmful myths, and remain open to the reality that there is no “textbook” experience of trauma. Creating

safer spaces for disclosure also means listening to and believing survivors, and respecting what they say they need in order to heal.

For those who may be unsure about reaching out, Emily offers a simple but important message: you are allowed to ask questions, and your experiences are valid. Even taking that first step can feel overwhelming, but support is available. For individuals under 18, referrals can be made to ensure they are connected with the appropriate resources. No matter where someone is in their journey, they deserve support, understanding, and the opportunity to heal.