

# Flashbacks, nightmares and memory burn – why sexual assault victims stay silent

8 October 2018, by Daryl Lovell



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With the FBI background investigation report now passed to the White House, a Senate vote could come as early as Friday on the future of Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. His nomination has been under immense scrutiny following reports of sexual assault allegations that happened decades ago. Since coming forward, there has been much public discussion and dialogue about memory as it relates to trauma, and why it takes years for some survivors to report the crime.

Afton Kapuscinski is the director at Syracuse University's Psychological Services Center and president of the Central New York Psychological Association. She says victim silence is often the byproduct of cultural messages that implicitly or directly blame those who come forward with allegations.

Kapuscinski says, "In my clinical practice, I have met many sexual assault survivors. I am frequently the first person they have ever told about their experience, and relatively few pursue legal action. Feelings of shame and anxiety about telling their stories are common responses to [sexual trauma](#) for many women who do not [report](#).

"Their silence is in part the byproduct of cultural messages that implicitly or directly blame and doubt women who come forward with allegations. Women are aware that convictions are rare, while the cost of speaking up can be heavy. Only about 1 in 10 sexual assaults reported by police result in a conviction.

"Survivors of sexual [trauma](#) are commonly haunted by intrusive flashbacks and nightmares emphasizing certain traumatic details that are vividly 'burned' into their memories – while some aspects of the event are not recalled.

"Following severe threats to our bodily integrity, changes immediately occur in our neurobiology that are intended to ensure survival by facilitating vigilance to cues associated with threat in the future. Survivors' memory systems prioritize details of the event that are perceived as central to the danger, and it would therefore be expected that some peripheral details, such as those occurring before or after the trauma, would not be recalled."

Provided by Syracuse University

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