

Jaycee Lee Dugard and rape trauma syndrome



By Anna K. Richter

South Lake Tahoe Women's Center's board, staff and volunteers were thrilled to hear the news that Jaycee Lee Dugard was alive, and our hearts went out to her the instant we learned she had young girls, ages 15 and 11. Doing the math, we recognized instantly that Jaycee Lee had been sexually assaulted. We spoke together as a staff about what she and her daughters and family are likely to go through along the road to healing.

The Department of Justice reports that a woman is raped in our country every 2 minutes. Since rape is one of the crimes least likely to be reported to law enforcement, it is likely happening more often.

We can only speculate on the details of what happened to Jaycee Lee over the past 18 years, but survivors of sexual assault often experience what is called Rape Trauma Syndrome. The progression from the first stage, the acute stage, to the adjustment and normalization stages can take years.

Considering the unique circumstances of Jaycee Lee's isolation and the extremely high level of mental manipulation that may have been used as a tool by her alleged abuser, it is likely she may have only just begun to understand the level of emotional, physical, sexual and psychological abuse she has endured. It may be a while until she can grasp the depth of

what she has been through.

The trial will expose the details, and the trial itself is likely to be extremely emotionally and physically taxing, draining and painful for Jaycee, her daughters, and their support system. On top of the trauma of the past 18 years, Jaycee will face the horror of having these experiences as a part of public record – deeply personal accounts of the abuse are likely to reach the public, and the shame, guilt and self-blame she may feel will likely be amplified by this public exposure.

Every survivor's experience is different, but just after the assault, the acute stage of Rape Trauma Syndrome can last from a few days to several weeks or more. Survivors often experience emotional shock, wonder how the assault could have happened, and express things like, "I feel so numb, why can't I cry" or feel shame, self-blame and guilt. They may experience paralyzing anxiety, anger, and even dulled sensory and memory functioning. They may also react with hysteria, or even hypervigilance and experience exhaustion that often accompanies it.

After the initial shock and numbness, victims often move to what is called the adjustment stage, which can last for years. In this stage, victims face many challenges because the outside world expects them to resume their normal lives, but they suffer from a host of emotional and even physiological responses to the abuse they suffered. They may experience depression, feelings of powerlessness, anxiety, mood swings, flashbacks, insomnia, headaches, pain, suppressed or ravenous appetite, and extreme distrust. They may sometimes also withdraw from friends and family and have a difficult time resuming daily life activities, or may actively work to suppress any and all thoughts of the assault from consciousness, trying to blot it out completely.

Phobias sometimes develop, such as a fear of being alone or

fears related to the characteristics of the assailant like curly hair, the smell of alcohol or cigarettes, a type of car, paranoia about strangers, or even a global fear of others.

It may seem counterintuitive, but some survivors will try to push others away. Survivors will need unwavering support, flexibility and understanding from friends and family at this time.

In Jaycee Lee's case, her support system will be invaluable as she works to integrate her history into her life and begins to move on to a new life, one that she has the power to define for herself.

The final stage of Rape Trauma Syndrome, the normalization stage, can take many years for a survivor to reach. At this time, the victim integrates the event into his or her life history; the physical and physiological reactions to the assault no longer control daily experiences.

Survivors acknowledge the guilt and shame they feel but let go of feelings of self-blame – they have learned the tools they need to regain a sense of control and power over their lives.

It is our hope at South Lake Tahoe Women's Center that Jaycee Lee Dugard will have access to the very best support from friends, family, and professional counselors and programs to find ways to begin to heal from this experience. While it may seem like healing from such trauma is impossible, we must remember the incredible strength and courage that it took for her to survive the past 18 years.

Jaycee Lee Dugard is a survivor, and with time, and the support of her loved ones and her community, she will heal from what she has endured.

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