

Pandora's Project

Support and resources for survivors of rape and sexual abuse.

[Home](#) [About Us](#) [Community](#) [About Sexual Assault](#) [Library](#) [How To Help](#) [Resources](#)

[Home](#) > [Library](#) > [Articles & Essays](#) > Self-Blame & Survivors

Was it my fault? Self-Blame and Survivors

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Was it my fault?

This is one of the most common questions we see posed at [Pandora's Aquarium](#) and in other survivor communities. It should really come as no surprise that survivors blame themselves; it seems that society only takes rape seriously when the victim was violently overtaken by a stranger jumping out of the bushes. For most of us, our rapists were wolves in sheep's clothing. They were our dates, our friends, our teachers, our cousins or fathers or mothers or husbands.

In the United States, only 40% of survivors report the crime. Of those, "a mere 7 percent go to trial, and only 1 percent of accused rapists are convicted."* When the courts aren't placing responsibility where it belongs, it becomes even harder for society to see us as victims whose actions played no role in what happened. And, therefore, it becomes even harder for us as survivors to realize that we are not to blame.

Did my choice lead to my rape?

We make hundreds of choices each day. Some are clearly good (wearing our seatbelt) and some are more neutral (eating potato chips for lunch instead of an apple). But some choices we make end up being bad only because of an intervening factor. For instance, one day last summer I parked outside instead of in a covered garage, on a day that happened to bring a huge hailstorm, and my car sustained \$2,000 in damages. "How stupid," I thought. "If only I had parked in the garage." What a bad choice I made!

But how was I to know that we'd get the worst hailstorm of the decade?

For rape survivors, we often think, "Why did I get in the car with him?" "Why did I go to that party?" "Why did I get drunk?" This is risky business, this second-guessing of our actions. We can second-guess all day long, but the bottom line is that we would not have been raped had our rapist chosen to be respect us and our autonomy, to not commit a crime, to be a decent human being. The buck stops there.

While not all choices are "good" we have the right to make neutral or bad choices without anticipating someone else will take advantage of us and rape us. We have the right to have a drink or go on a walk through a park. Drinking unsafely and walking alone at night likely do make a person more vulnerable. I think most survivors would agree with that. But *no one* has the right to rape us, ever, no matter what we say or do.

A common victim-blaming argument

Let's say you throw caution to the wind and cross a busy intersection without looking both ways. If you did this, you would expect to be hit by a car, right? You would be responsible for your choice to cross the street unsafely, and responsible for being hit by a car. So why are you responsible for your actions and the result in this case, while a survivor of rape is not responsible for being raped if he or she drinks, or walks alone, or trusts a neighbor?

I often see this argument for assigning personal responsibility to survivors instead of placing it solely on the rapist. At first thought the analogy makes sense and persuades many people. But if you look at the analogy critically, the fallacy becomes clear.

In the busy street analogy, the victim *solely* is putting herself at risk of an accident. No matter how hard the driver tries, he will

not be able to avoid hitting her. He cannot slam on the brakes hard or fast enough to prevent the accident.

On the contrary, no rapist rapes by accident. He or she makes a choice. He or she is not just another victim. The rapist, as opposed to the car driver, has plenty of time to make a choice. Unfortunately, the rapist makes the wrong choice and we suffer for years because of it.

Re-writing your internal script

"I was drunk..."

"I walked alone in the dark..."

"I wore that mini-skirt..."

"Why did I go upstairs with him?"

"I opened the door for him..."

"I stayed when I should have left..."

Strike these thoughts from your mind. You had the right to drink. You had the right to go on a walk. You had the right to dress however you wanted. You had the right to trust him. You had the right to make your own choices, and you are responsible for them. But no one has the right to perpetrate abuse against another. No one had the right to rape you.

Were there choices you could have made that would have protected you? Of course. You could have spent your life learning self-defense. You could have stayed in bed all day. You could have not moved to that city in the first place. You could never walk by yourself. You can spend an eternity making a list of the choices that would have saved you from being raped.

But the absolute bottom line is this:

Only one person makes the choice to rape. There are things we can (and should!) do to protect ourselves, but the only person who can prevent rape is the rapist him or herself. Bad decisions, neutral decisions, good decisions; to me it doesn't matter. We should be able to live our lives, we should be able to trust our family and our neighbors. Rapists should not rape. Period.

* Louise Palmer, "How we Healed", Self Magazine, April 2007, pg. 218.

Suggested further reading:

The Rape of Mr. Smith: "The law discriminates against rape victims in a manner which would not be tolerated by victims of any other crime. In this example, a holdup victim is asked questions similar in form to those usually asked a rape victim."

The Rape Crisis Information Pathfinder: An excellent article on victim-blaming.

RAD: Realistic self-defense tactics and techniques for women that focus on awareness, risk reduction, and risk avoidance. After the initial fee, there is a free lifetime return and practice policy. This program is *highly* recommended. And remember: while there are steps you can take to reduce your risk, such as taking a RAD class, all risk will never be completely eliminated, and the responsibility for rape is always on the rapist.

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[About Us](#)
[Community](#)
[Message Board & Chat Room](#)
[About Sexual Assault](#)
[Library](#)
[How to Help](#)
[Resources](#)

Pandora's Project provides resources and operates an online support group, message board, and chat room for survivors of rape and sexual abuse. No services are intended to be a substitute for professional assistance. Crisis support can be found [here](#).

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