

'The day I joined the rape survivors' support group, my life began to come back together again. I've learned the power of sharing my story and hearing other women's stories.' **By Monica A. Coleman**



Sprouting Wings

STATISTICS SAY THAT MORE THAN 500,000 women are raped or sexually assaulted each year. The day I became one of those statistics, my life fell apart. It was April 1996, and what had begun as an argument with my ex-boyfriend ended in a trauma that threatened to rob me of my sanity. During our ten months

together he had been my best friend, but I found that love just wasn't enough, so we broke up. On some level I thought we could remain

friends, but six months later, when he visited my apartment, we began to fight. We argued for hours before he overpowered me. Then it happened.

Afterward I did all the wrong things: I took a shower; I failed to call the police; I convinced myself I could go on with life as usual—without help. Big mistake. For the first week it took all my energy to get up in the morning and eat breakfast. Then I floated through the next few weeks telling myself I was just fine. *As long as he never calls me again*, I reasoned, *everything will be okay*.

But I was not okay. I'd replay that night, constantly asking myself what I could have done differently. At school I sat through lectures about sexual ethics and tried to hold back the tears. At home I had anxiety attacks every time I saw a rape scene on TV. And in bed I had nightmares about how my ex had mistaken my struggles for an orgasm. No, I was not okay. I didn't

know how to explain my ceaseless pain or why I couldn't stop crying. I was 21 years old, but I didn't know what to do or how to act. It seemed as though my world had collapsed, leaving me nothing solid to stand on.

Two months later I found myself crying uncontrollably in front of the law library and knew things had to change. That day I made myself say the word out loud—"rape." And slowly the sentence formed: "I have been raped." I went back to my apartment, opened the Yellow Pages and found a rape and sexual-assault center. When a quiet, kind voice answered the phone, I repeated the awkward-sounding phrase: "I have been raped, and I need help." Within days I was at the center, doing paperwork. I was told that a new support group would form when enough women had signed up to participate. The wait wasn't long.

In July, our group met. Of the seven of us, three were former alcoholics, five had children and one was married. Eventually, each woman in the group took on a different role in supporting the others. One hugged a lot. Another passed out tissues. That first day the coordinator asked if I had any words of inspiration for the group, and, recalling something Iyanla Vanzant wrote in *Tapping the Power Within*, I said: "When you come to the end of all the light that you know and you are about to step off into darkness, faith is knowing one of two things will happen: There will be something solid in the darkness for you to stand on—or you will be taught how to fly!"

So it began. Each week for three months, we gathered because we wanted to heal. And healing involved tears—lots and lots of tears. We cried as we complained of the terrible fear and anxiety we felt at night or even around our closest male friends and relatives. We cried as we realized that even years after the rape, the memories could be so vivid that there would still be times when we would need someone to take care of us. We cried when we tried to imagine what it might be like to trust again, love again or feel safe again. It was hard work and it hurt, but we kept returning because we'd rather cry than feel nothing at all.

The day I joined the rape survivors' support group, my life began to come back together again. I've learned the power of sharing my story and hearing those of other women. These stories have carried me through times when it seemed that no one could possibly understand my pain. In knowing the common threads of the nightmarish quilt we share, I have overcome my need to tackle everything by myself. Although it's been two years since the rape and I'm involved in a loving new relationship, sometimes it's still hard for me to share and trust. But I'm getting there. And thanks to the love and support of the women in my group, I'm finally beginning to sprout wings! ♦

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