

### **What makes a therapist proud during rape trauma counseling:**

- \*The moment a survivor begins to argue back against a critic in her life, and demand respect;
  - \*The moment a survivor ditches a bad boyfriend because she will no longer tolerate power and control disguised as love;
  - \*The moment a survivor tells me she listens to Ani Difrancio and Tori Amos for strength, rather than ICP and Eminem;
  - \*The moment a survivor reads her trauma story and finally weeps for her loss;
  - \*The moment a survivor realizes that this issue is bigger than her, and that part of her recovery is to take on activism to change things for future survivors;
  - \*The moment a survivor, who had refused to ever be touched by anyone, gives me a hug goodbye when she's done with me;
  - \*The moment a survivor realizes I've been helpful, but she's outgrown the need of me;
  - \*The moment a survivor stops asking me (or anyone else) to tell her how she feels and why, and begins to identify her OWN feelings and reasons;
  - \*The moment a survivor has the courage to state her disagreement with me, her father, her sister, her mom, ANYONE she has been told all her life she has to submit to;
  - \*The moment a survivor realizes that cutting herself is not a form of fighting back, but journaling and telling her story IS;
  - \*The moment a survivor realizes that abuse and love are very different (and so are rape and sex);
  - \*The moment a survivor pulls up next to me on the road and makes the "Rock On!" hand gesture and yells at me, "Matt, you f\*\*\*in' ROCK! I ditched that a\*\*\*\*e because of you!" (when really, she ditched that A-hole because of HERSELF becoming strong);
  - \*The moment a survivor stops giving me all the credit for her recovery--as complimentary as that is--and finally says with pride, "you know what? *I* did this! I worked damned hard, and I made it!"
- Sigh. And to think, people actually ask me, "How can you do that kind of therapy? doesn't it depress you?"

You can do all of these things. But they won't happen by just waiting for yourself to get better, and they won't happen if you are destroying yourself in unhappiness.



All this time you thought I was weak  
When I was just pretending  
All this time you made me believe that I should be sorry  
You should be sorry for making me fall  
Gradually I will get wiser  
I will get stronger  
I will be bolder  
I will not settle  
-Rosie Thomas

“I just think you should know, I have real trust issues with men.”

This has become one of the most common statements that rape survivors make to me on Day One. And frankly, many of them take one look at me and are scared to death: I’m 6’5”, I have long hair, I wear the traditional beadwork and jewelry of my Native American tribe, and I often wear large leather boots. To a rape victim, I can be an early test of their courage. “I just think you should know, I have real trust issues with men,” she says.

I look back at the tiny, awkwardly-seated, nervous 18-year-old girl in front of me. Her seat across the desk from me is too large for her and it’s been accidentally set too low, making her seem even smaller as she vibrates her right knee up and down, up and down, her arms held across herself. Despite every visual clue of smallness, I am frankly impressed with the guts it must take for her to come to my office, plop herself down, and start her first conversation with me in this way.

Shannon tells me that she has seen four previous therapists, including other males, and that her distrust and anger at men has frustrated the therapy process in the past. She doesn’t expect this to be any different. Shannon is a rape victim, and has been brought to my office for therapy after three weeks in a hospital following a serious suicide attempt. But her face shows a flash of surprise and puzzlement at the answer I give her: “Of course you have issues with men,” I reply. “I wouldn’t expect you to feel any other way. If you’re here saying that today, it’s probably because men have done a good job justifying you not trusting them, and I’m not going to try to talk you out of that!”

Shannon explains to me that whenever she has divulged her “trust issues,” other therapists have tended to initiate the same script: “Well, you know all men aren’t bad” and “that’s an irrational belief we’ll need to work on” and “Okay, but you can trust *me*” and “That could block your therapy.” Consequently, Shannon’s first experience in nearly any attempt at therapy is to have the very core effects of her rape invalidated. She is used to being told her feelings are wrong, irrational, or exaggerated. She is used to being treated as a defective girl, needing to be *fixed*.

Shannon tells me, “I’m here because I was...*raped*” (pausing before spitting out the word). No eye contact. Leg vibrating wildly now.

Instead of asking her the questions she expects—“What happened? Who was it? Did you report to the police? Why not?”—I ask a new question: “What things have you tried using to help you cope?”

She says, “Mostly, listening to music by powerful women singers.” She doesn’t expect fierce giant-guy-me to know anything about this.

Instead, I burst into a smile and ask, “Hey, do you like Ani DiFranco?”

Shannon’s eyes nearly pop out in astonishment. They say without words, “*This* guy knows who Ani DiFranco is?” (Ani DiFranco is a feminist folk singer.)

We talk music and art, and she is suddenly eager to tell me all about her “coping music,” as she calls it, which everyone else tells her is “depressing and bad for you.”

Shannon ends the session by telling me that in the three years since her rape, she has used alcohol heavily, cut herself, and allowed multiple additional men to sexually abuse her while she remained passive. She concludes, “I don’t think anyone can ever know me. I’m empty and I don’t let anyone else in because knowing me would change them into something bad.”

Victoria is an attorney, and one of the most intelligent women I have ever seen in therapy. She’s also become completely convinced of her worthlessness. She is doubled over in agony, actually shaking in spasms of despair, her face tear-stained as she confesses to me, “I just hate myself so much! And I keep waiting for you to show me your disgust at me, and it never comes.”

I tell her that there isn’t a molecule in my body that could feel disgust for her, and not one flicker of a thought in my mind that I would ever give up. She says, “I know. And I don’t know why.” But in truth, she *does* know why my disgust never comes. She knows that this work is more than a paycheck, more than a career path; she knows that for those of us who do this, it is *always* personal, no matter the careful boundaries we therapists set to protect ourselves from the emotions of rape recovery work.

Victoria describes coming through some of the most excruciating violence any patient of mine has ever described, despite my years in rape crisis work. At times she will nearly vomit during therapy as she feels waves of sadness and despair in her struggle to recover from rape. She, like Shannon, wonders if there really is any way through this, yet she trusts me to continue anyway: “I know if I don’t finish this, I *will* be dead soon.”

Both of these women, and so many others, have struggled with the same troubling questions: “Is there actually any hope that I can get past this? Can I get my life back? Is there such thing as resurrection after rape?”

Thank God the answer is yes.