



## **Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence**

### **Podcast Transcript**

**Season 3 Episode 5: April 7, 2021**

### **Secrecy of Abuse: How Abusers Use Shame**

Presented by Marissa, Adult Domestic Violence Advocate, and Nouchée, Dual Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Advocate

MARISSA: Hello and welcome to The Women's Center's Wednesday Workshop, a podcast that shares helpful insight for survivors, community members, and service providers alike. The Women's Center is based out of Waukesha, Wisconsin. We welcome and serve survivors of all ages, races, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, nationalities, and immigration statuses. The mission of The Women's Center is to provide safety, shelter, and support to empower all impacted by domestic abuse, sexual violence, child abuse, and trafficking. Each episode will feature instruction on healing topic. Today our topic is Secrecy of Abuse: How Abusers Use Shame. We are your hosts, my name is Marissa, I'm the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate here with The Women's Center.

NOUCHEE: And my name is Nouchée and I'm the Dual Domestic Violence/Sexual Abuse Advocate at The Women's Center. April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. During April, Sexual Assault Awareness Month is a focus time to empower survivors by bringing awareness promoting prevention and inspiring change. Sexual assault is pervasive in our community and affects people of all genders and all ages. Nearly one in five women and one in 71 men in the United States have experienced rape or attempted rape at some point in their lives. However, rape is the most underreported crime. 63% of sexual assaults are not reported to the police. Tragically in Wisconsin, one in 10 children will be sexually abused before the age of 18. In eight out of 10 cases of rape, the victim knew the person who sexually assaulted them.

Each year thousands of people find safety, shelter, and support through our doors. We are the only agency of our kind in Waukesha County and we are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. By honoring SAAM, you're adding your voice to a movement that seeks to build a more peaceful community and showing your commitment to stand with survivors.

Support for The Women's Center comes from WaterStone Bank, a community bank celebrating 100 years of service in southeastern Wisconsin. WaterStone Bank is dedicated to providing resources for youth on their journey to financial independence. Learn more about WaterStone Bank student checking program and digital banking at [wsbonline.com](http://wsbonline.com).

MARISSA: Follow along for our upcoming events and listen to our other Sexual Assault Awareness Month podcast, The History of SAAM and How to Support Survivors from last April, and on April 21st, our next podcast is called Breaking the Silence and Telling Your Story, also honoring SAAM.

April 28th is our EmPower Luncheon, held virtually on Zoom from 11:30am to 1:30pm. We are very excited to host Pulitzer Prize winning journalists Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, who broke the news of Harvey Weinstein's decades of sexual assault and abuse for the New York Times. Their book, "She Said: Breaking the Sexual Harassment Story That Helped Ignite a Movement," revisits their landmark investigative reporting into sexual assault and the "complicity machine" that often surrounds it. Painstakingly researched, their account is less about Weinstein himself and more about the structures that enabled him to thrive while so many people in his world were very aware of what he was doing – perpetuating blatant rape culture, victim shaming and blaming. Kantor and Twohey looked for answers to the question, "What does it take for victims of sexual assault and harassment to be believed?" Throughout this podcast, as well as in our next episode, we will be referencing quotes from "She Said" to better paint this picture.

April 28th is also Denim Day, and this can be done anywhere, anytime, and all you have to do is wear denim to raise awareness of sexual assault. I'm going to briefly explain a little bit of the history of Denim Day, but I want to provide a trigger warning for description of rape. Skip ahead if you need to and take care of yourself. Denim Day was created after the Italian supreme court dismissed a rape case after stating that the rape was consensual because the victim wore tight jeans and had to help the rapist remove them. Enraged by this verdict, within a matter of hours, the women in that Parliament launched into immediate action and protested by wearing jeans to work. This was observed world-wide with the first official Denim Day being in LA in April of 1999. This has continued every year since, developing into an international movement.

All month long, we will be having virtual toolkits on our website. We will include links to all of these events and resources.

NOUCHEE: Moving into the topic of our podcast today, we want to explain what shame is. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, shame is a painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, or impropriety. Feeling small amounts of shame is

a normal natural human emotion which we will discuss shortly. Shame can be inflicted by others as a way to maltreat or manipulate an individual and keep the survivor stuck in a cycle of negative self-talk. Abusers trap the survivor by placing shame upon them for trying to be their own person, or for reacting to abuse. A quote from She Said to further explain shame is, “I felt completely caught in a situation that intuitively felt to be wrong but wasn't sure whether I was the problem. And it was completely normal.”

MARISSA: And again, isn't shame healthy? Sometimes, there are healthy forms of shame, and that involves feelings of guilt, which can help us move towards positive thinking and behaviors. It has a focus on the desire to change our behaviors, hold ourselves accountable for our own actions as well. Growth can be uncomfortable for this very reason. We reflect on those past shortcomings in order to move forward and our shame and guilt is managed in a healthy way. But of course, the focus of our podcast today is going to be on that unhealthy shame, shame that's inflicted onto us by others. And this sort of shame is a paralyzing assessment of oneself as a person. Again, it can be imposed on us by the words or behaviors of an abuser which will be our primarily focus. This comes through the lens of self-evaluation. We use the emotion of shame to describe ourselves in negative terms-or an abuser can do this too- calling ourselves insecure, worthless, stupid, foolish, and so on. This sort of shame can stop us from expressing our true feelings and wants and may also be used to invalidate ourselves and our right to take up space in this world.

NOUCHEE: So how do abusers use shame as a tool? Shame allows abusers to further exert power and control over survivors. As we'll discuss through the next few moments, shame can control the survivor's ability to come forward about the abuse. Abusers may also use shame to discourage survivors to speak out in order to save the abusers reputation or social status. Abusers know that survivors' stories have power, so they use shame to prevent being “canceled” or having a ruined image. This year for SAAM we are working to #CancelRapeCulture and hold abusers accountable. We will be mentioning phrases that cause shame and use victim-blaming to silence survivors. Please note that these may be triggering so skip ahead if you need to. Some things that abusers may say to survivors is: you deserve this, nobody's going to believe you, you're never going to get someone better than me, you lead me on or you're revealing clothing, we're friends so this is okay, you're crazy, you're drunk, you're an addict (so weaponizing mental illness or substance use).

To show how abusers use shame in real life we'll be inserting a quote from She Said, “Before they parted, [a Weinstein board member] had a question. ‘Are you sure this isn't just young women who want to sleep with a famous movie producer to try to get ahead?’” And another quote, “He counted on my shame to keep me silent.”

MARISSA: So on that note, and as illustrated by that long list of statements that Nouchee read, we unfortunately live in a society that is more outraged by individuals finding themselves in situations where they've been assaulted, rather than the fact that perpetrators are committing assault in the first place. This is rape culture. This is what we're trying to cancel here. To provide a quote from She Said, "The United States had a system for muting sexual harassment claims, which often enabled the harassers instead of stopping them. Women routinely signed away their right to talk about their own experiences," that I'll be explaining later, "Harassers often continued onward, finding fresh ground on which to commit the same offenses. The settlements and confidentiality agreements were almost never examined in law school classrooms. This is why the public never really understood that this was happening."

And so again, as we can see, rape culture presents itself in our systems too, like the legal system. One of Weinstein's most infamous tools was the NDA, or non-disclosure agreement, which legally bound victims to not share any bit of their story or take any legal action against him. These NDAs were combined with large cash settlements to make the silence more enticing. To provide another quote from She Said, "Women signed these [NDAs] for good reason, the attorneys had emphasized. They needed the money, craved privacy, didn't see better options, or just wanted to move on. They could avoid being branded tattle-tales, liars, flirts, or habitual litigators. This was a way to get paid and get on with their lives. The alternative, taking this kind of lawsuit to court, was punishing. [...] No wonder many viewed settlements as surer propositions." And this isn't just a Hollywood issue, as this dynamic can present itself in local systems as well. Even when we remove those big dollar signs and legal contracts, abusers and assailants often attempt to manipulate the courts to discredit a survivor or intimidate and shame a survivor enough to scare them out of pursuing legal action.

Using a lot of the phrases Nouchee mentioned previously, survivors of assault and abuse often feel shame for not seeing through the abuser or for falling for their "act". When in fact, abusers often carefully calculate their outward appearance so that they don't "look like an abuser". Referencing She Said, "in public Weinstein boasted of feminist credentials." This makes it even harder to come forward, as it's hard to hold someone accountable when they appear to be innocent or even "for the cause". Like Nouchee mentioned, abusers may also use allegations to speak on canceled culture and evade accountability by presenting themselves as a victim of a ruined image.

NOUCHEE: Carrying shame can be a heavy burden. Shame without support or kindness can overwhelm us. It can also be difficult when our support systems contribute to the shame. You deserve support and if that is something that you aren't getting from those around you, consider expanding your support system whether that looks like joining a support group, seeking therapy, listening to podcasts such as this one, or talking to your local domestic violence/sexual assault advocate. Suppressed shame over a long period of

time can lead to depression and anxiety. A quote from She Said explains that “it's exhausting, [abusers try] to whittle you down little by little.”

Shame can direct our behaviors as well. So negative self-talk or perceptions of ourselves. Shame can make us put others needs ahead of our own, embarrassment to express our needs or concerns, making ourselves smaller for the benefit of others, silencing ourselves for suffering alone, and not reaching out to others for help.

MARISSA: Shame is often something that we can try to transform for ourselves, too. First and foremost, knowing that the abuse or assault was not your fault. Perpetrators depend on victims feeling like the abuse was their fault, but this isn't true. Every episode we say this: it was not your fault. Another important thing to know is, again, you did not deserve this, and there is nothing that you can do that makes you deserving of assault or abuse. When having sexual contact with others, all individuals deserve respect at all times, especially surrounding sexual consent—and remember, only yes means yes. Help is available when you're dealing with this shame; surround yourself with supportive healthy individuals, or utilize hotlines, virtual groups, podcasts such as this, anything that you need to feel supported. It's really important to practice self-care too, this is a big part of healing, and something that can often be forgotten about too. This looks different for everyone! Trial and error can help you find what self-care looks like for you specifically.

NOUCHEE: Listen to your inner dialogue. So, recognize when you slip into negative self-talk. Observe it but don't criticize yourself for the negative self-talk and gently correct yourself. Practice self-love. Listen to our podcast on this topic for more details. Mourn your wounds. This requires us to identify and feel the pain associated with the shame and hurt we feel. You survived something traumatic. Take this time to physically and emotionally heal. Acknowledge that you are alive today and though someone was trying to take your power, you survived despite it all. And forgive yourself. It's easy to beat yourself up with hindsight, but you did what you could with what you knew. You can only act from the awareness you have at the given moment.

MARISSA: Absolutely true. And again, if you are struggling with starting the process of transforming the shame into healing, feel free to reach out to an advocate. If you're in the Waukesha/Greater Milwaukee area, we're available to help.

I want to wrap this podcast up with a quote, not from She Said, but from Brene Brown. “If we share our story with somebody who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can't survive.” If you've been shamed by an abuser or others around you, we want to remind you that you do not deserve that type of behavior, and you deserve to be safe in sharing your story. It's so helpful to try and validate your feelings and experiences by

practicing positive self-talk and reminding yourself that you did nothing to deserve the shame and abuse. Many survivors find comfort in sharing their own story with others, like the brave survivors that came forward in the Harvey Weinstein case. Want to share your story but don't know where to start? Again, we will dive deeper into this topic in our next episode.

In addition, we have a new Spotify playlist this month! Music can be one of the most empowering tools out there, and we want to use this playlist to help us all #CancelRapeCulture and break the silence of sexual assault and abuse. Trigger warning: these songs may include references to abuse, so listen only as it remains helpful to you. This playlist, as well as the links to our events, will be on our website.

NOUCHEE: Thank you for joining us to learn more about Secrecy of Abuse: How Abusers Use Shame. Our next episode will be about Breaking the Silence and Telling Your Story. Thank you to WaterStone Bank for their support of Sexual Assault Awareness Month and the mission of The Women's Center.

The Women's Center focuses our work in partnering with clients to overcome barriers and gain a life free from violence. Our work is grounded in equity, upheld by inclusion, accountability, self-reflection, and continual growth. We believe that it's important for survivors to feel seen and heard. We believe that Black Lives Matter because we cannot end violence without addressing the distinct injustices that Black and Indigenous People of Color face. We know that all forms of oppression are ultimately connected, and when we center individuals most impacted, we're also supporting survivors who have faced any form of violence. While we're not experts in anti-racism work, we aspire to be allies in this movement. We all have a responsibility to contribute to unlearning racism and intersecting forms of oppression that take place in our communities.

If you'd like to talk with an advocate about your own experience with abuse, please call our 24 hour hotline at 262.542.3828. Learn more about The Women's Center at [www.twcwaukesha.org](http://www.twcwaukesha.org), and find the resources mentioned on this episode by clicking "Resources," then "Podcasts" on our website. Thank you, and be well.