

1. "forever a survivor"

I am forever changed. Forever scared, forever alone, forever a victim. Forever strong, forever healing, forever a survivor!

2. "let go of painful memories"

After my sexual assault it took me a couple of months to truly process what actually happened to me. The experience was extremely traumatic to say the least, and for a long time I couldn't even talk about the experience without breaking down. Even though I still experience PTSD because of the attack, I know and truly believe that I am now mentally stronger because of it. On the downside to being attacked, I now get nervous and anxious around men I don't know or my friends don't know; especially men over the age of 40, just because my attacker was around that age. Being raped also caused me to learn how to attempt to let go of painful memories and instances where I've been wronged in horrible ways and try and grow from them so that I can move on.

3. "changes come in waves"

How have I changed since sexual assault?

Understanding how one changes after sexual assault is a layered question. I believe the changes come in waves and we may not be conscious of each of them at the time they are occurring.

In my case, the changes that occurred in the beginning were negative. I stopped trusting, felt great shame and had an overwhelming sense of no value. This kind of feeling can leave someone powerless, especially with no healthy outlet. I found my outlet in work. After college (where the assault occurred) I was in overdrive relative to the determination to succeed. I chose a career that is high stress - and damn all I could. My success fueled me & I was very good at my job. The sense of value was powerful, but I did not feel that elsewhere. It is hard to explain a life where I cared so much professionally, yet so little personally. This cycle existed until I met my husband. Interestingly enough, we met at work. I began to care about life again, relationships, people, even romance. I returned to church and found an inner strength. What I learned was that I allowed this assault to dictate 10 years of my life. I never sought help, my shame

said I didn't deserve it. Looking back, that makes me both sad and angry.

Through faith, and the patience of my husband, I learned to love myself again. The birth of my children brought a whole new love to my heart. I can say that I raised my boys to respect & value others ... maybe at times the message was louder than usual because of my experience.

I was never vocal about this experience. I only shared it during a youth conference because that particular summer, we noticed so many of our youth struggling. So many didn't believe that they could run to adults - that we didn't "understand the dark." I decided to share my story in the hopes that these beautiful youth would run to safety when needed. And know they are enough.

Another real change in me surrounds forgiveness. It never occurred to me to forgive this person that assaulted me, even with my strong faith. I had banished that memory. Until I learned he unexpectedly passed away. His family left devastated, and all I could think was "now he got away with it forever." This took my breath away, but through

a lot of thought I decided, this is what forgiveness is all about. I knew, I am the only one that knows his secret. And I chose to forgive. It was powerful, and I look at forgiveness differently than earlier in my life.

The last change that comes to mind is about my care for women of all ages. Young, high school, college, adult... we are a strong & resilient gender. We must be patient with one another & always extend a hand... even if it is not asked for. I think I have a stronger sense to what others may be going through. It is a gift received from a painful experience. It is my honor to encourage women well. For that, I am truly thankful.

4. "accepting the change of yourself"

How have you changed since your sexual assault?

When thinking about this question I want to say I have grown stronger since my sexual assault. Though as I thought more into the question I realized that I am not as strong as I thought. I realized I am more sensitive to my surrounding and things such as conversation I have with people become harder for me the more sensitive the conversation is. Even after 2.5 years I want to say I am strong and nothing can hurt me but I know it can. I still feel broken and unhealed from what has happen to me and I know that even though I feel this way now does not mean that I will feel like this forever. I feel like I have changed for the better even if I am starting from the bottom now after suppressing it for 2.5 years. I want to be more than what I think of myself. I want to think of myself as a strong survivor. Even though I feel broken someday does not mean I am not growing and reclaiming myself and I am constant remind myself of that. I know that changes is always occurring and it is more about accepting the change of yourself to build a stronger person. Self-worth of who I am and who I am becoming is the change I have come to see since the sexual assault and no one can take what I have built of myself and this change I have wanted to see for so long.

5. "a person with worth and hope"

The first time when I was 5 didn't affect me until I was 11. I became scared to hang out with guys, especially alone. I became quiet and independent. I became scared to leave my house. I would never go walk around my neighborhood without someone else. Then the second person began. During the time with him, I never felt confident in my body, in my ability to be my own person, or in my life choices. I felt helpless and lonely. After a random boost of confidence, 5 years later, I finally cut him out. However, I still felt worthless and guilty. It took me another 2 years to face my burdens and insecurities and to accept them. Despite forgiving both of them and accepting the situations, I still felt hopeless and scared; scared to be alone with men, scared to interact sexually, scared to be touched, scared to be used, but most of all, scared to be hurt again. Fears consumed me until I graduated high school. Going to college gave me the confidence I never had. I became a person with worth and hope for better. I not only lost my fears, but I also conquered them. Today, I still have some hesitations in certain situations, but for the most part, I have grown into a stronger, more mature, and independent woman who knows my worth, and most of it is due to learning and growing from my experiences.

6. "not for them but for myself"

During life after my assault I grew as an individual. I learned to recognize situations that make me feel unsafe. I learned forgiveness not for them but for myself.

7. "stronger than I have ever been"

Being sexually assaulted was never something that I thought I would have to experience in my lifetime. Sadly as I aged I realized it's more common than most people think, and by the age of 15 I became a victim of sexual assault. Once I reached college and my group of friends began to expand, majority of the women I met were also victims. Shortly before my 20th birthday I was assaulted again. Experiencing something like this twice really devastated me but it also taught me how strong I am mentally. I used to struggle with telling people "no" in any situation, but I am now able to set personal boundaries and stick to them. I'm able to stand up for myself, my friends, and others. Even though this is something I never would've wanted to happen to me, part of me is glad that it gave me the mental strength that I have to this day. Some people may think that because I am a woman who has been sexually assaulted that I am weak, but I am stronger than I have ever been and I will continue to gain strength throughout my life.

8. "a physical reminder"

I have changed so much. More notable is the change after the second time I was raped. The first time I experienced a spike in sexuality. I didn't want to have more sex, but I was determined to make it lose its value so that my assault "didn't mean anything." After the second time I found myself broken and feeling worthless. I assumed that once I had been raped once that it wouldn't happen again. Somehow it made me "safe." It did not. Now I have more compassion for others knowing that everyone is going through something and that it is important to be gentle with others. I talk openly about all that happened even though it is hard. Once I was sharing my story in a room full of people and someone pointed out later that I had been pinching the inside of my elbow the entire time. A physical reminder to myself that I was in the present and not reliving my trauma. I have to remind myself that I am in my body. I tend to dissociate so much more than I ever did before the assault. Intimacy, especially sexual, is something I don't have at all. I don't know if I will ever find a "love" that doesn't make me feel used/cheap/dirty. But I hope. I hesitate to say I'm cautious now, really I stopped living as much. I don't know. Right now isn't the best. But these things happen in waves. Tomorrow I will be okay. At least for a moment.

9. "through hell and back twice"

In the movies, Sexual assault is usually portrayed as the scary man in the dark alley or a stalker in the night who drugs or kidnaps their victims. However, only about 10% of rape and sexual assaults are committed by a stranger in that way. Roughly 90% of all rapes committed are by someone that the victim knew. Often times in their own home. Unfortunately, I have lived through both scenarios of rape. I have been the main character of the horror movie that was my reality and I have been betrayed in the worst way by someone I knew and trusted; only a few months apart. I experienced severe physical and emotional PTSD all while balancing work and being a full time student. Everything I had ever known before my rapes had changed. I viewed people and the world differently. Every stranger I come across is automatically a threat to me; especially if they resemble my attackers in any way. Places I knew to be safe now seem like a place of opportunity. Being able to fully trust someone seemed impossible. It has taken me years of coping, processing, and working on myself to get to where I am today. I established a good support system and have learned to love myself and life again. For a while after my rapes, I always wished that my life could go back to how it was before but now I don't wish that. Surviving the worst thing I could imagine twice has made me realize my strength. Even now on my bad days I know I can survive anything. I will be forever changed and carry the emotional scars with me but now I carry it with pride. I have been through hell and back twice and come out on the other side stronger than I ever could have imagined. I am not a victim. I am a SURVIVOR!

10. "I could finally breathe again"

The morning after, I sat on the floor of my shower and cried. I still remember exactly how I felt. A numb, empty, hollowed out carcass of the girl who once called my body home. I didn't even notice the blood, until I watched it mix with my tears and wash down the shower drain, along with every bit of dignity, pride, and sense of self that I had ever felt. I couldn't even bear to look at myself in the mirror. My inner monologue was reduced to a never ending silent scream. I wanted to tell someone. To shout from the rooftops what a monster he was. But when I tried to share my pain, to make it audible, I was only met with more hurt. Silenced by a society that put an invisible piece of tape over my mouth and would rather watch me choke than tell my story. What were you wearing? Did you flirt with him? Were you drinking? Like if I smile or wear a low cut shirt I give up my right to consent. I give up my right to control my body and what happens to it. It was like he had stabbed me and pierced my very soul with the blade. Yet instead of helping me, everyone just twisted the knife in deeper until I shattered like a piece of fine china smashed onto the concrete ground. For so long it felt like I couldn't breathe. I tried to just forget about it. Bite my tongue while those around me happily carried on the tradition of victim blaming and slut shaming. I sat through every snide remark for what felt like an eternity. And then something inside me snapped. All of that in consolable sadness, self hatred, and numbness transformed. It was fire meeting gasoline. Every cell inside of me lit up like a supernova. I could finally breathe again. No more boys will be boys or it's just locker room talk. It's was done. Because it's so much more than just that. It's fuel for a society that would rather silence victims and push them until they break than acknowledge that one in five women will be raped. That one in three will experience sexual violence. It's a president who says that when you're a star you can do anything. You can grab them by the pussy and nothing will happen to you. So to whoever is reading this, I believe you. They didn't steal your light. You are not alone, because me too.

11. "no one deserves all that"

how my sexual assault has
~~also~~ affected me

Right after:

- ~~Scratching my skin off in
the shower~~

After I was assaulted, there was a time where I got involved with some really toxic & manipulative relationships. My trauma was used against me by my exs, and I was told to not be so dramatic. I was displaying symptoms of PTSD, and I felt so alone. I lost a lot of friends during this time and stopped talking about it.

It became obvious to me that I had very little support and no one but other survivors wanted to help. I have shared so many horror stories with other survivors and one thing that is ~~always a constant~~ is that I know many survivors who have put themselves in uncomfortable situations to stop other people from being assaulted, because ~~know~~ ~~one~~ ~~deserves~~ ~~all~~ that comes with sexual assault.

12. "find myself again"

You never think you are going to end up here. How did I end up here? I never thought I would have people in my life that would treat me like that. The disrespect, the hurt, the need to have power over me, the manipulation. I was in an abusive relationship and I was raped by one of my friends. I will live with that forever. Some days it fuels my strength, some days I am not directly phased by what happened, and other days... I feel like I am back in those moments. Frozen in time, unable to speak, in complete shock. I lived in complete silence for months. Still unable to speak. No one knew what was going on behind closed doors. Since then, I am grateful for the incredible women who have helped me get through those terrible days, weeks, months, and now a year after.

I used to be the girl that was relentlessly optimistic, finding the silver lining in any situation. I used to be the girl that smiled contagiously. I was happy. I lost sight of her for a long time. Those boys took that from me. They broke me, twisted me up to be the perfect puppet, and stole my very being and shattered my soul. I did not smile for a long time. I missed the girl I was before. Over time, and with the help of amazing women, I was able to find myself again. I rebuilt what those boys broke. I mended the pieces of me that were empty. I filled the spaces where pieces of me were missing. Not everyday is easy. I continuously have to advocate for myself. It is exhausting. I am so glad I have made it out of those dark times. Now, I try to use my experience in a positive way for myself and others.

To the "friend,"

I am hyperaware of the overly drunk guys that get aggressive and belligerent. They remind me of you. I can't believe you did that to me. You took advantage of me. You took advantage of our friendship, my kindness and my trust. I was your friend. And just to think I tried to stick up for you for the longest time after the fact. You are the reason I keep all of my male friends at a good distance away from me.

To the "boyfriend,"

You had your hands around me so tight that the bruises you left feel like they are still there. A permanent mark of your ownership. I hope that one day I can shake that feeling forever. The manipulative cycle you created was the perfect way for me to fall in love. I fell in love with you. I always tried to see the good in you. Even after every bad night. But you never loved me, did you? If you cared, if you loved me, then why did you hurt me? I was so afraid of you and so attached to you at the same time. The color ran from my face when I would see you after a terrible night. No one noticed but you. You liked to see the pain and the hurt in my eyes. "Silence is screaming for help. Silence is being scared to say anything. Silence is to avoid losing any other pieces of me." You took those pieces of me effortlessly. It took me a long time to heal my broken heart. It has taken even longer to mend my soul. My perception of relationships has been changed by your revolver of manipulation, empty words, hurt, and abuse. May God bless anyone who has faced this. May God bless anyone who has faced this because of you.

The most manly part about you is the one you forced on me. The one you made me worship. The one that took the breath from my lungs... and you liked it. Your biology is the only manly thing about you.