



Research Participants Needed - Helping Women Who Have Experienced Sexual Assault

University of South Florida Department of Mental Health Law and Policy and Department of Criminology Assistant Professor Amy Cohn is using innovative technology to identify barriers to help-seeking among women who have experienced sexual assault.

The study, called the Women's Health Project, is an observational study that provides women with monetary incentives to report on their every day behaviors, like mood, social events or problems, and trauma symptoms using new telephone survey. The purpose of the study is to identify specific everyday factors that promote or inhibit female sexual assault victims from seeking treatment, attending rape crisis counseling and improving their overall wellbeing. The study, supported from the National Institute on Drug Abuse and from USF, began in May 2011.

It is estimated that nearly 1 out of 4 women will experience an unwanted sexual event in their lifetime; and the vast majority of these women, between 5-7% will never report the event to police or seek medical or mental health services for the event. This can carry significant consequences for the women, possibly resulting in major depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, such as irritability, anger, difficulty sleeping, nightmares, and being very emotional. Further, unreported sexual assaults inhibit criminal justices from apprehending offenders.

Cohn said "Very few women know that they are entitled to free health care services following an unwanted sexual assault. This means that many women who may benefit from medical attention or counseling who do not report an unwanted sexual experience are not receiving the care they may need or have access to. We are hoping that, by having women track their everyday experiences through our daily telephone survey, we will know more about the particular barriers that inhibit women from seeking the care they need following a sexual assault, and to what degree these barriers may impact their longer term psychological well-being. We also hope to identify resilience and protective factors that help women recover from unwanted sexual experiences, such as having support from others in their network and engaging in pro-health behaviors.

Dr. Cohn recognizes that while some women may need to seek treatment if they are struggling with depression or anxiety, others may benefit from being able to talk to their friends or loved ones about the event without needing to seek care.

"Regardless, we know that very few women who have experienced an unwanted sexual event disclose the event to other people, which can be beneficial to them in the long run. We are hoping that our study will shed some light on how to reduce some of these barriers in the future."

For more information or to participate in the study, call (813) 974-6133. This has been approved by USF IRB #: Pro00002561



Amy Cohn, PhD