



YOU CAN HELP END THE CYCLE OF SILENCE IN THE MILITARY

Most victims of sexual assault do not tell a friend, family member, or the police about the assault. Many never tell anyone. Then because so few assaults are reported – most perpetrators walk free – and survivors don't get the help and support they need.

When I was 18 years old, I was newly in the military and stationed in Frankfurt, Germany. A male friend I had met six months before at training in the US offered to take me out and show me around. He got me drunk, and helped himself to my passed-out body. My roommates didn't know me and assumed I was okay with it. When I reported it, word got out. My rapist told everyone that he had broken up with me and that I said he raped me for vengeance. Because I was so new and no one knew me, they believed it. The case was dropped. I was mocked, ridiculed, and became a social outcast. I had not made friends before this happened, and definitely didn't make any after. It was the loneliest three years of my life. After everything had died down, another woman approached me and told me that he had done the same to her but she wasn't brave enough to stand up to him. She thanked me for trying, and that made it all worth it for me.

It's time to end this cycle. You can take the lead.

WHAT IS START BY BELIEVING?

Start by Believing is a public awareness campaign designed to end the cycle of silence and change the way we respond to sexual assault. It was first launched in April 2011. Since then, thousands of professionals across the country have made their own personal commitment:

My name is Neo. I am a member of the United States Air Force, a victim advocate and a friend. I will always be there to support victims of sexual violence. When someone tells me they were raped or sexually assaulted, I Start by Believing.

My name is Kathy Miller. I am sexual assault victim advocate, an Air Force veteran, wife, mother, grandmother, sister, daughter; a survivor. When someone tells me they were raped or sexually assaulted, I Start by Believing.

My name is Kayla Mendoza. I am the Sexual Assault Response Coordinator for Naval Hospital Beaufort. When someone tells me they were raped or sexually assaulted, I Start by Believing.

My name is Susan Holt, Ph.D. I am a psychologist who treats Military Sexual Trauma. I pledge to inform my Department of Veterans Affairs officials about Start by Believing. When someone tells me they were raped or sexually assaulted, I Start by Believing.



But it's more than just a personal pledge. By transforming personal and professional responses to sexual assault, we can help victims pursue justice and healing.

Failed responses... additional victims.

Stop the cycle and make our communities safer.

WHY IS THE PLEDGE IMPORTANT?

Decades of research demonstrates that sexual assault victims are often doubted or blamed, and these negative responses have a number of harmful effects. They also decrease the chance that victims will report the crime and reach out for help.

I was 20 years old, a male in the Army National Guard. Three men held me down as a woman assaulted me. They got me drunk and drugged with a special drink they gave me. I trusted them. They were part of my unit. I had to live with this for four years until I got out due to anxiety. No one believed me when I told my story.

This is why the message of Start by Believing is so vital - outcomes will only change when sexual assault reports are investigated from an initial presumption of merit.

WHAT DOES START BY BELIEVING MEAN IN THE MILITARY?

Many military members experience the trauma of sexual assault victimization without ever speaking a word about it to anyone. They may not know where to turn, who will believe them, or how to get help. Headlines point a dramatic increase in sexual assault reporting in the U.S. military. For some, this might be seen as cause for alarm, but it is more likely a positive sign that most victims feel comfortable coming forward as a result of the reforms and outreach by the Department of Defense.

These reforms are helping to create an environment where victims feel safe reporting the assault, and this shift sets victims on a whole different path toward recovery. If we envision the opposite – victims who have the courage to tell someone about the assault are doubted or blamed for their behavior – victims are likely to shut down before they have a chance to consider their reporting options. Unfortunately, the perception that a victim is lying is often the starting point for many people's reactions.

If we assume a victim is lying, we risk causing additional harm. This can also reduce any chance of properly responding to and investigating a report, because the victim is likely to recant.



When we Start by Believing, we create an atmosphere where victims receive the support they need in order to participate in an investigation. When victims fully participate, there is an increased likelihood that a thorough investigation can be conducted. The choice is ours, and the risks are clear. We have far more to gain, and far less to lose, by approaching victims with a perspective of Start by Believing. It is the right thing to do for victims, and best for our nation's military.

TAKE THE PLEDGE

Start by making your own personal commitment to Start by Believing.

- I pledge to Start by Believing when someone tells me about their sexual assault.
- I pledge to help survivors on the road to justice and healing.
- I pledge to end the cycle of silence.

[Pledge now](#)



SPREAD THE WORD

Then share the message with others. We have all the tools you need. Check out our [personal action kit](#) and [community action kit](#) to learn how to get started.

Encourage leaders to make the pledge: When the message comes from the top, it trickles down into daily actions that have a powerful impact on the military. You can encourage strong leadership within your unit or base.



Create a video to remind victims that they are not alone, such as this excellent example from [Naval Station Norfolk](#). Many Sailors experience the trauma of sexual assault victimization without ever speaking a word about it to anyone, and this video was designed to change that reality.

Use social media: Let your virtual audience know about your commitment to Start by Believing. And don't forget to use #StartbyBelieving.

Set up a display at a local event, such as a 5K fun run/walk, like the Arizona National Guard event held in April 2016. You can provide the opportunity for people to make the pledge and create positive change in your community.

Arizona national
Guard Respect
5K run



Conduct a presentation on sexual assault in the military, and show the [Start by Believing slideshow](#).

Need more support? Give us a call or send an email to info@startbybelieving.org. We're here to help your community join the thousands of others transforming our response to sexual assault. Thank you for becoming a Start by Believing ally!

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