

“Start by believing” is a well-known term in the world of sexual violence. We encourage you to visit End Violence Against Women International’s website and learn about the concept and the over 600 current SBB campaigns worldwide. The unfortunate truth is that most incidents of sexual assault are not reported. What do those three simple words mean though? That depends on your position/discipline as it relates to sexual violence, but the simplest explanation is that it is a paradigm.

Plainly defined, a “paradigm” is a model or way of doing or thinking about something. Paradigms can be simple, like if you put beans in chili, or complex like our concept of freedom. Some people (the author included) think that if you don’t put beans in chili, it’s just hot dog sauce but most in our American society accept that we have inalienable rights that can only be taken away with specific, just cause. SBB requires a paradigm shift from typical skepticism. It’s natural to question if we believe something but because we know the statistics on reporting our paradigm should shift to belief until unbelief.

For some, this is easy. It’s only a mindset and doesn’t require any or much action. Laypersons, advocates, etc. only need to say the words “I believe you” to emulate the SBB paradigm. However, for law enforcement, this is drastically different. When you are tasked with responding to investigate a report of sexual violence, the SBB paradigm typically requires action even when you’re skeptical. Here are just a few examples of the actions SBB requires of law enforcement:

-Responding to a report of sexual assault every time and responding in a trauma-informed manner every time. Never ever turn a possible victim away.

-Activating on-call resources even when it's inconvenient. This can be advocacy, as SANE, a special investigator, or a forensic interviewer.

-Collecting evidence even when you're skeptical. This could require obtaining legal process and utilizing significant resources.

Remember, not believing is almost always easier in these types of incidents. It's important to question our biases and motivations when we say, "I don't believe." Are we saying that because we truly don't or are we saying that because our shift will be easier and end on time? Are we saying that because we don't want to wake someone up during the night on a weekend? Are we saying that because we are uncomfortable taking someone's clothes, phone, or DNA sample?

It's also important to understand that SBB does not require unconditional belief. If a thorough investigation leads to the conclusion that something didn't happen, it's ok to say, "I don't believe." However, we would caution that "I don't believe you" and, "I think you're a liar" are two very different statements. One allows you to retract that statement later if you were wrong. The other doesn't.

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