

Myths about Sex and Sexual Assault - The Aurora Center for Advocacy and Education

Myth: “Sexual assault happens because of miscommunication.”

Truth: Someone who commits rape does so because of an unhealthy and/or illegal attitude about sex. A person with an *unhealthy* view of sex assumes access to another person’s body until that person says “no.” A person with an unhealthy view of sex may also believe that “no” or “I’m not sure about this” is a signal to try harder to get sex from their partner, rather than a signal to stop. An *illegal* view of sex is when one person ignores the other person even if “no” is said or other signs of non consent (such as turning or pushing away) are expressed. Sexual assault occurs when one person indicates (verbally or non-verbally) that there is no consent, yet the other person proceeds with the unwanted sexual activity. This is rape because one person made the choice to initiate or continue sexual activity despite the other person having communicated non consent.

Myth: “Rape victims lie”

Truth: False reporting of rape is no greater than false reporting of other major crimes such as burglary, kidnapping, and murder. There is no need to dispel myths that victims of those other crimes are lying, yet people assume that rape victims are making up a story. Rape victims in our society face undue scrutiny and blame while the perpetrator is given sympathy or at least left unexamined. While it is hard to imagine someone you know as being accused of rape, 90% of rapes in college are committed by rapists who are acquaintances with their victim.¹ Believing this myth, or at least questioning the validity of a victim’s experience, contributes to the fact that rape is one of the most underreported crimes in the U.S.² It silences victims from coming forward for fear of being accused of lying.

Myth: “The more I drink, the more likely I am to get sex from someone”

Truth: Having alcohol expectancies about sex is a risk factor for committing sexual assault. This is because if someone expects sex to happen, and they have an unhealthy view of sex, that person is less likely to stop when their partner says “no.” Perpetrators sometimes use alcohol as “liquid courage” for themselves or as a way to render their victims less resistant to sex.

Myth: “He was drunk, he’s not to blame” // “She was drinking, she’s somewhat responsible”

Truth: As is the case with all other crimes, the perpetrator is to blame, not the victim. For the perpetrator, being drunk is not a legal defense; much like you’re still responsible for committing robbery or beating someone up even if you were drunk when you did it.

On the flip side, no matter how much you drink, you still have the right to say ‘no’ or show you are not interested in having sex. If someone is incapacitated by alcohol or other drugs, most state laws make clear that such incapacitation renders her or him unable to give consent to sexual contact. Therefore, if someone has drank to the point where they are drunk (legal term is incapacitated), there cannot be consent.³

Myth: “Men can’t be victims of sexual assault”

Truth: One out of six males in the U.S. has experienced some form of sexual abuse in his lifetime⁴ and the age at which the sexual assault of a male is most likely to occur is four years old.⁵ Most perpetrators of child sexual abuse against boys are men who identify as straight. Some rapists target men, either as a hate crime against someone they think or know is gay or as abuse in a same-sex relationship. When sexual assault happens to men they face greater barriers to coming forward due to homophobia and the myth that men can’t be victims. Part of this myth stems from the attitude that men always want sex, therefore they can’t be raped. This false belief causes many men to be silent about their abuse/assault.

Myth: “Women want to be dominated and controlled by men” // “Women do things/dress in certain ways that invite someone to rape them.”

Truth: This attitude justifies the violence which some men do against women. Just like anyone else, outside of consensual S&M encounters, women do not want to be treated aggressively. Such behavior often instills fear and anxiety in those being controlled or degraded. Women want to be treated fairly, with respect. In their intimate relationships, women want to feel safe and good about themselves. Assault is **never** caused by what the victim did or said and there is **no** research shows that women who dress “sexy” are raped more often than those who dress conservatively.

Myth: “Emotions and meaningful relationships make men weak”

Truth: Men have emotions and feelings that are complex, varied, and can be expressed as much as anyone else. Yet, the constraints of narrow gender expectations of what it means to “be a man” limit the full range of humanity for men. Some men even use threats or name calling to pressure their friends to not show emotion, for example calling them “gay” or “a pussy,” if they exhibit behavior that doesn’t fit the masculine ideal. This pressure to conform decreases the quality of life and makes for pretty lousy relationships with women as well as with other men. It takes real courage for men to ignore cultural pressures and to express their emotions. This true courage is very different than the bravado that is sometimes displayed, which is essentially doing whatever it takes to avoid being called a wimp.

Myth: “Men have a one-track mind: sex”

Truth: To assume men have a one track mind is to write them off as being “animals” or at least not responsible for their actions. It is not fair to men. The expectation of men to be on a constant search for sex with women has even further implications. First, it leads to the expectation that women will be sexually available. Second, it reinforces homophobia for it assumes that men are only attracted to women.

Myth: “Women should protect themselves more”

Truth: Sure, there are things people can do to reduce their risk of getting raped. But individual avoidance of rape does not prevent sexual assault. Most suggestions for reducing sexual assault deal with stranger situations, like carry mace, don’t walk alone at night, don’t take rides home from strangers. Such tips ignore the fact that over 90% of rapes on a college campus are committed by someone known to the victim – often someone s/he trusts. These tips imply that women should be the ones responsible for avoiding rape, rather than demanding that the perpetrator be responsible for choosing not to rape.

“I’m a guy. I don’t rape. Why should I care?”

Most men don’t rape, in fact 90 – 94% of men don’t rape and never will.⁶ Men have a great deal of opportunity to make change so that the men who do rape can be affected by positive peer pressure. Good men have the responsibility to show respect for women and disapproval for beliefs and attitudes that contribute to rape. **It’s not enough just to not be a rapist.** It will take everyone coming together to intervene and make positive changes in a culture that tolerates, reinforces, and normalizes sexual violence.

¹ National Institute of Justice, 2001. “Sexual Victimization of College Women” by Fisher et al.

² U.S. Department of Justice’s National Crime Victimization Survey

³ University of Minnesota Sexual Assault/Relationship Violence Policy - Academic/Administrative Policy 2.3.6

⁴ Dr. James Hopper, PhD, Harvard Medical School

⁵ U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, “Sexual Assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement.” Synder, 2000.

⁶ Lisak, David “Repeated Rape and Multiple Offending Among Undetected Rapists,” in Violence and Victims, February 2002