Enough Is Enough

Even One Victim of Sexual Assault Is Too Many

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Sexual assault has been in the media a great deal over the past couple of years. In fact, it's everywhere. The term sexual assault is thrown around a lot, but what is it, exactly? Sexual assault is any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the consent of the recipient. A person cannot consent to an activity if they are under the legal age of consent, asleep, unconscious or mentally or physically impaired (including through the effects of alcohol). Any type of coercion, manipulation, threat, physical restraint or violence used to obtain sex is illegal and considered sexual assault.
The Risk Can't Be Ignored

While sexual assault can happen to anyone, the overwhelming majority of survivors are women. One out of every six American women has been the victim of attempted or completed rape in her lifetime. The numbers are even higher for collegiate women, where one in four report surviving rape. This is attributed to sorority women's greater interaction with fraternity men, who are disproportionately represented in sexual assault statistics. It is also attributed to findings that women tend to be less vigilant in the identification of certain danger cues when in a familiar environment populated by acquaintances (such as a fraternity party) as opposed to a new environment with strangers.

Of the 22 substances commonly used in drug-facilitated rapes, did you know alcohol is the most common? A 2002 study found that 72 to 81 percent of cases in which a male rapes a female college student, the female is intoxicated. It's an unfortunate ratio—as the rate of alcohol consumption on college campuses increases, so does the occurrence of sexual assault.

When someone is a victim of sexual assault, it has life-changing effects. The most common emotional responses of a victim are guilt, fear, powerlessness, shame, betrayal, anger and denial.

Additionally, survivors often blame themselves for what happened—a coping skill that inhibits the healing process. Survivors can feel as if they should have done something differently to not “invite” the attack or to have stopped it once it occurred, or that there is something inherently wrong with them that caused them to “deserve” to be assaulted. Due to these feelings, survivors of sexual assault are three times more likely to suffer from depression, six times more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, 13 times more likely to abuse alcohol, 26 times more likely to abuse drugs and four times more likely to contemplate suicide than non-victims.

When the Victim Shoulders the Blame

Working through the feelings that occur as a result of sexual assault can be incredibly difficult, especially when friends and family may not only invalidate claims but blame a victim for being raped.

Unfortunately, experiencing rape or sexual assault is often something others refuse to validate. This is especially true in the case of acquaintance rape, like by a current partner, an ex, a family member or a close friend. Although a common myth is that a perpetrator is usually a “stranger hiding in the bushes,” the fact is in 8 out of 10 rape cases, the victim knows the perpetrator. On college campuses in particular, 60 percent of rapes occur with a perpetrator who is an acquaintance of the survivor, 32 percent are romantic partners and only 8 percent are unknown strangers.

Many people are quick to scoff at these types of claims and brush them off as false accusations. However, research has shown that false accusations of rape happen no more often than false reports of other types of crimes—about 2 to 4 percent. If this is the case, why are some so quick to assume a sister who claims sexual assault is exaggerating or making it up altogether?

If you haven’t been in this situation, it may be hard to imagine blaming or not believing a sister for being sexually assaulted. However, victim blaming is a huge part of our culture. You’ve probably heard these all-too-familiar lines:

• “She had on a provocative outfit.”
• “She had too much to drink.”
• “She had a bad reputation.”

Is there a reason that as women we are so quick to place at least partial blame on our sisters and friends who have been victimized instead of supporting one another?

One theory is that our entire lives we’ve been told not to participate in risky behaviors like drinking too much, dressing provocatively and hanging out with someone we don’t know very well. When we see someone else doing something we perceive as unsafe, we believe the victim is partially to blame and think we can keep ourselves safe by not exhibiting these same behaviors. But reports show there is a great deal of diversity in the way women who are assaulted act and dress. Any woman of any age and physical type, in almost any situation can be sexually assaulted—the common thread is found in the perpetrator, not the victim. The problem here is
conversations are around the expectation that people should act responsibly in order to “not get raped,” instead of around the expectations and attitudes of others to “not rape.”

Currently, our culture puts much of the blame on the woman because she is expected to be solely responsible for her own safety, rather than focusing on the criminal act of the perpetrator. Should we be mindful of our surroundings and the situations around us? Sure. That’s part of prioritizing our health and dignity. But that doesn’t mean we’re to blame if we experience sexual assault. That would be like telling someone who walked down a dark street at night that it’s their fault they were robbed. They were robbed because someone decided to rob them, not because of anything they did or didn’t do. The same goes for victims of sexual assault.

So, What Can You Do to Help?

First, it is important to know what you can do if you are ever faced with a sister, friend or loved one telling you he/she has been sexually assaulted. It can be difficult to hear, but the reaction of the first people a survivor tells can significantly impact the decision to move forward and get help. You can have a profoundly positive impact just by the language you use, so consider the following responses:

- “I’m sorry this happened.” Acknowledge his/her experience and how it affected his/her life. Use words to show you empathize like, “This must be really tough for you,” and “I’m so glad you felt comfortable enough to share this with me.”
- “It’s not your fault.” Survivors may blame themselves— especially if they knew the perpetrator personally. Remind your friend, as often as needed, that he/she is NOT to blame for what happened.
- “I believe you.” It can be extremely difficult for people to share their story. They may feel ashamed or may fear being blamed for the assault. So when someone shares his/her experience with you, the best thing you can do is believe him/her.
- “I’m here to listen.” Remind your friend that you are there to listen. The wake of an assault can be incredibly challenging, as he/she might be making difficult decisions such as deciding whether or not to go through the judicial process. Listen without pressuring to share more or to make any decisions.
- “You can trust me.” If a survivor opens up to you, it means he/she trusts you. Reassure him/her that you won’t judge and will respect his/her privacy. Remember, though, that trust and confidentiality don’t necessarily equate with secrecy. If you are worried that he/she may harm him/herself or others, you should reach out to a trusted advisor, friend, professional or hotline.
- “Are you open to receiving medical attention?” Your friend might need medical attention, even if the assault happened a while ago. You can ask if he/she is open to receiving medical care or offer to send him/her information about health resources on campus or in the community.

But what can you do if you are not faced with a survivor telling you his/her story and you just want to be part of the cause? Plenty:

- If you see someone in a situation that doesn’t feel right, find a non-confrontational way to
step in. A 2002 study showed the presence of a bystander makes a completed rape 44 percent less likely.\(^{15}\)

- Take the pledge at ItsOnUs.org and commit to ending sexual violence on college campuses.\(^{16}\)
- Visit the Programs with Purpose section of the Resource Center on alphachiomega.org for programs that address the dynamics of sexual assault and how to intervene in a questionable situation.
- Speak up and say “it’s not okay” when your friends make a joke about rape or sexual assault. Because chances are, someone in your (and their) life has been affected by it.

**Let’s Talk**

While these are important steps to take, the most important thing you can do to help in the fight against sexual assault is talk. Sexual assault is most common on college campuses, and while you may not be in college now, you likely know someone who is. Talk with the younger people in your life about the risk that alcohol brings to a situation and the fact that sexual assault is most commonly perpetrated by an acquaintance. Talk to them about what consent sounds like, and what it means to give and get consent. And, overall, talk about the importance of respecting the health and dignity of yourself and of others. Through these conversations we can make a change in our culture, creating a safer environment for both men and women in the fight to eliminate sexual assault.

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11. Scholarly article: Zinzow & Thompson, 2011
14. [https://rainn.org/get-information/sexual-assault-recovery/respond-to-a-survivor](https://rainn.org/get-information/sexual-assault-recovery/respond-to-a-survivor)
15. Scholarly article: Clay-Warner, 2002
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