

Sexual Assault Myths and Facts

Sexual Assault is a term referring to a spectrum of assault-rape, attempted rape, incest indecent exposure, child molestation, acquaintance/date rape, and forced sexual contact. All are against the law. When you have experienced sexual assault, it is normal to have many fears and anxieties about what happened. Knowing the facts about sexual assault may enable you to deal more effectively with your concerns. “Myths” are false beliefs that society holds about sexual assault.

MYTH: *It will not happen to me*

FACT: Anyone can be a victim of rape. This crime knows no boundaries. People hold strongly to this myth because it offers them a false sense of security. The truth is, people of all ages, races, socioeconomic groups, and religious affiliations have been victims of rape.

MYTH: *Only women can be raped.*

FACT: Men can also be victims of rape. Faced with a gun or knife, most people will think only of surviving and not of the actual sexual assault. Men have been victimized by individual male assailants, gang raped by a group of male assailants, or in rare instances, by a woman.

MYTH: *Rape is a sexual crime, where the attacker is seeking sexual gratification.*

FACT: Rape is a crime of violence in which sex is used as the weapon. The rapist attacks the victim seeking power and control. Satisfaction is gained from dominating, humiliating, and degrading the victim. Rape is never a crime of passion.

MYTH: *Rape happens in dark alleys, by strange men who jump out of bushes.*

FACT: Although some rapes do happen in dark, secluded areas, the majority of rapes happen in and around your home. Statistics also show that “stranger rapes” are few in number. It is much more likely that you will know your assailant. A rapist can be anybody.

MYTH: *Rapists are usually outcasts from our society.*

FACT: Most rapists appear to be “normal” men in our society. Most rapists are young and are either married or having ongoing, “normal” sexual relationships. Rapists come from all races, religions, and socioeconomic groups.

MYTH: *Rapists are easily identifiable by their physical appearance, actions, or words.*

FACT: There is no standard mental or physical profile that defines a rapist. A rapist can be someone of any age, race, economic background, belief system, or culture. Although the stereotype of the deranged stranger rapist abounds in our society, stranger rapes only make up around 20% of all sexual assaults, and even then the stranger may not be a mentally disturbed person. The vast majority of rapists are people the victim/survivor knows, people she/he sees in day to day life.

MYTH: *If a woman dresses sexy, she is asking for “it”.*

FACT: Again, people believe this myth so that they do not have to admit they, too, could become a victim. The thought process being, “I do not dress sexy, so I will never be raped.” The fact is that a woman has the right to dress in any way she chooses. Her choice of clothing in NO WAY grants permission or invites rape. This thought process can also be applied to other myths, such as “She was raped because of the places she goes, the people she hangs out with, or the amount of makeup that she wears.” No victim has ever asked to be raped. It is important to remember that rape is the responsibility of the rapist, not the victim.

MYTH: *Most rapes are interracial.*

FACT: Statistics show that you are much more likely to be raped by a person of the same racial background.

MYTH: *Women fantasize about being raped.*

FACT: It is true that we all fantasize. Fantasies are situations in which we have control to continue or end at any given moment. Rape, on the other hand, is a situation in which we are not in control. It is important to remember that rape is an undesirable, aggressive act with a person with whom we are not in a consenting sexual relationship.

MYTH: *If women would just fight, they could avoid being raped.*

FACT: When faced with fear, people react in a variety of ways. Rapists often mentally overpower a victim by using threats of violence, death, or injury to the victim’s children or loved ones. When faced with a gun or knife, most people freeze. ALL victims do the best they can to live through and survive the attack. Fighting vs. not fighting is an individual decision that must be made in a split second. It does not help to second guess any actions made at the time of the attack. No one plans to be raped.

Many rapes that do not involve weapons often involve some type of coercion, either subtle or blatant. If an assailant were to threaten a family member or loved one, most people would consent to save the lives of those they love. Whatever the situation, if a person lives through a victimization, she or he did the right thing.

MYTH: *If a woman does not look like a rape victim, she really has not been raped.*

FACT: This myth goes hand in hand with “If a woman would fight, she could not be victimized.” Many people want to think that most victims look like the actresses on TV who have multiple cuts and bruises: women who have had their clothes ripped off and who have been beaten. In reality, people who have been victimized do not fit any visual stereotype. People react differently. This myth helps foster the false sense of security people have when they believe that they could have avoided the same situation by doing something differently. The fact is a woman who resists can be raped and that a woman can be a rape victim and not have any outward signs of victimization.

MYTH: *A person who has been drinking alcohol, using drugs, or dancing seductively is asking to be raped.*

FACT: No one ever asks to be raped. For sex to be legal, both parties must be of age and consenting. Both parties must be able to mentally, emotionally, physically, and verbally choose to engage in the sexual activity. Vulnerable behaviors do not excuse the criminal behaviors of another person. The sexual appearance and/or seductive behaviors of a person DO NOT equal consent.

MYTH: *I know about rape, because I once heard a talk about it. Now I am sure that it will never happen to me.*

FACT: People hold strongly to this myth because it gives them a sense of false security. Rape is a crime of power and control. Victims come from every walk of life. Statistics vary, but some have indicated that one rape occurs every 66 seconds across the United States, and that one woman in four will be sexually assaulted during her life. The rapist can be a:

- stranger,
- acquaintance,
- coworker,
- friend,
- spouse, or
- a relative.

Rape can happen at any time and in any place. Maybe someday these facts will be better understood and the myths will no longer prevail. Hopefully, someday people will understand and accept the reality that we are all potential victims.

MYTH: *If a man has forced sex with a woman on a date, it is not legally considered rape.*

FACT: Sex without consent is legally defined as rape. Dating does not give a man the right to force his sexual desires onto another person. A woman may choose to go out on a blind date, go to a man's house/apartment for dinner, or enter into a long-term relationship with one person (including marriage); however, none of these situations allow a man to demand or force sex.

One additional point, a woman may have had other sexual experiences or may have previously had sex with a man whom she is dating, but every experience is different and saying yes on one date does not mean that you need to say yes on every date. "No" means "No": and any form of force equals rape.

MYTH: *Rape is an impulsive, uncontrollable act of sexual gratification.*

FACT: This myth is sustained by those who argue that most rapes are spontaneous – that is, a sexually frustrated man sees an attractive woman and just can't control himself. In fact, the majority of rapes are planned rather than being spontaneous. The rapist does not choose the victim because she is young, pretty, or provocatively dressed; he chooses a woman who is vulnerable. He may select a woman who is smaller or weaker than he is, who is alone, who is handicapped in some way, or who does not suspect what is about to happen. All evidence indicates that rape is a brutal act of violence and a display of power, rather than an act of passion or sexual gratification.

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

MYTH: *Child sexual abuse is a rare occurrence.*

FACT: Child sexual abuse is, unfortunately, not a rare occurrence. It is estimated that approximately 1 of every 4 females and 1 of every 6 males experience some form of sexual exploitation as children.

MYTH: *Children are usually molested by strangers.*

FACT: 85% of children are molested by someone they know, i.e., family members, relatives, neighbors and/or family friends. Offenders look for opportunity and access to children.

MYTH: *The child will always feel negatively toward the offender.*

FACT: The role the offender plays in the child's life may be vital, that is, they may be a close family member or someone in a position of trust. The abuse occurring will be very confusing to the child because of secrecy, shame, lies, and isolation that follows. The child wants the abusive behavior to stop; they do not want to lose the hope for protection and caring that is their right. It is important to be aware of the many different feelings that the victim may be experiencing and to recognize the loss the child faced because of the offender's exploitation of trust.

MYTH: *Sexual abuse is non-violent, and therefore non-damaging.*

FACT: Sexual abuse of children is an act of violence, even if there are no physical injuries.

Children who are child sexual abuse victims are:

- Denied a childhood,
- Denied a loving, nurturing relationship of trust,
- Exploited and betrayed by a person who is in a position of authority and trust.

MYTH: *Children lie about child sexual abuse.*

FACT: Children do not have the explicit sexual knowledge necessary to describe phenomena they have not experienced. Children do not have the cognitive capacities to make up stories of sexual abuse. If children lie about sexual abuse it is most often to say that it did not occur, in order to protect the offender and/or the family unit.

MYTH: *Children are seductive.*

FACT: No. Humans are born sexual beings and children have a natural curiosity about their bodies. They need and seek safe, appropriate and healthy physical affection. Sexual offenders exploit children's curiosity and their need for affection. Children who are sexually abused learn, usually at a very young age, that the price they have to pay for attention and affection is sexual activity. This learned sexually reactive behavior is interpreted by adults as seductive.

MYTH: *Child sexual abuse is a one or two time occurrence, involving a single child.*

FACT: Child sexual abuse typically goes on for quite some time before discovery. It is not confined to one child, but usually involves several children. In incestuous families the abuse often affects more than one child, but may affect each in different ways.

MYTH: *It is better not to talk about child sexual abuse – the child will forget.*

FACT: Child sexual abuse victims may temporarily block memories of what has happened but the effects will surface as they grow. Not talking about what happened will not make it go away, but encourages it to fester. Adults often do not talk about child sexual abuse because of their own discomfort with the topic. If adults are not willing to talk about the abuse, the child will probably feel there is something to be ashamed of, that it is dirty and just too awful to talk about. This attitude will only serve to increase the child's feelings of guilt, shame, and feelings of being abnormal and will compound their problems.

MALE SURVIVORS

MYTH: *Males who are sexually abused do not suffer to the same extent as female victims.*

FACT: Sexual abuse is a crime of violence and all victims suffer. Male victims experience the same reactions to the crime as female victims do. Some of these reactions include:

- Self-blame,
- Fear,
- Anger,
- Relationship problems,
- Questions about sexuality,
- Addictions, and
- Trust issues.

Not everyone will experience all of these reactions, nor will they experience them to the same extent.

MYTH: *Males assaulted by another male are, or become, homosexuals.*

FACT: Sexual abuse is not an act of sex, passion, or desire; it is a crime of violence. The sexual orientation of the victim is not changed by such an attack.

MYTH: *Males are only abused by homosexual men.*

FACT: The majority of sexual offenders are heterosexual males. Females can also assault males, most often as young children and teens and/or in dating relationships using coercion or threats to enforce compliance.

MYTH: *A strong man can't be raped. He must have consented.*

FACT: Being strong is not defense against rape and just because a man did not fight off his attacker does not mean he consented. Surprise, a weapon, threats, being outnumbered, or frozen by fear make fighting back impossible for most victims.

MYTH: *Men do not usually know their assailant.*

FACT: Although men are sometimes sexually assaulted by strangers, it is more common for them to know their attacker. Men have been raped by strangers, acquaintances, family members, teachers, colleagues, youth leaders, and others.