Acquaintance Rape and Sexual Assault

What is Acquaintance Rape and Sexual Assault?

Acquaintance Rape is nonconsensual sexual intercourse between people who know each other. Sexual assault between acquaintances consists of nonconsensual sexual activity that does not include intercourse. "Nonconsensual" means that there is some use of force, intimidation or manipulation, or that one of the parties is unable to give consent.

Inability to give consent would be likely, for example, if one of the parties is drunk or unconscious. Guns, knives or other forms of violence do not have to be used for the sexual activity to be considered nonconsensual. The victim does not have to resist for the sexual activity to be considered nonconsensual. Often the person is afraid to say no, and will not resist in the face of threats or overpowering.

Consent must be given each time people engage in sexual activity, and cannot be assumed by previous consensual sexual activity with the same person. It also cannot be assumed by consensual kissing or petting on the same occasion.

Anyone has the right to stop sexual activity at any time, regardless of whether they consented or seemed to enjoy what was happening even a few moments before. Acquaintance rape can happen at any stage of a relationship, from the first meeting to several years into a long-term relationship that included consensual sex.

How Common is Acquaintance Rape?

One survey of college campuses found that the risk of being raped by someone you know is four times greater than the risk of being raped by a stranger. It also found that one in four women surveyed were victims of attempted or completed sexual assaults, and that 84% of women who reported having been raped knew their attacker, and 57% happened on dates. The risk of rape for women ages 16-24, prime dating age, is four times higher than for any other population group. For college women, the risk of acquaintance rape is highest during their freshman year. It is also important to remember that men can also be victims of rape and sexual assault.

The Role of Alcohol and Drugs

In a survey of college students on many campuses, 75% of men were drinking at the time of an acquaintance rape and 55% of the women were drinking at the time of the assault. In another survey of women on one campus, 80% said they were intoxicated at the time they experienced acquaintance rape.

If someone is intoxicated, they may be unable to consent to sexual activity. In addition, alcohol and other drugs distort reality and impair judgment. People may put themselves in riskier situations than they would otherwise, even before they actually feel drunk.
Motor reactions and physical responses are slower, and women are less able to fend off an attack. Alcohol may reduce male inhibitions against violence, and lessen the ability to hear expressions of resistance.

The Role of Socialization and Miscommunication

Some of the ways in which men, women, and sexuality are viewed in our culture contribute to acquaintance rape because they create false expectations that may be assumed to be true and are then acted upon. For example, movies often portray women as enjoying interactions with aggression, force and sex (i.e., Gone with the Wind). In addition, men have traditionally been taught to try to "get" as far sexually with as many women as possible, and women are taught to "save" themselves for the right man, and to want sexual intimacy in the context of a close relationship that they expect will continue. Often, women are socialized to be evasive about their sexual interest. As a result, men think women say "no" when they mean "yes." This may lead to misinterpretation of body language and resistance.

Indirect or miscommunication also contributes to acquaintance rape when limits and expectations are not clearly stated. Actions and behaviors can be easily misinterpreted according to the expectations only one person brings to the encounter. For example, if a man does not clearly communicate his expectation that a date will lead to sexual intercourse, he may misinterpret his date's friendliness as indicating consent. Finally, participation in athletics may encourage aggression, and reinforce sexist behavior with locker room talk. It may be hard for athletes to leave this mind set on the field.

What Are Some of the Consequences of Acquaintance Rape

Physical Consequences may include sexually transmitted disease, pregnancy, bleeding, bodily tears, bruises, later discomfort during sex.

Psychological consequences may be very much like a response to a traumatic event, and may include a general sense of anxiety or fear, mood swings, isolation, inability to concentrate, feeling "dirty", and difficulty sleeping or eating. Memories of the rape may be triggered by certain other experiences, such as hearing a song that had been playing, and images of the rape may feel very real. Some people deny that the rape occurred, or may blame themselves. There is often a tendency to try to do things that will make one feel more safe, such as moving, changing phone numbers, and limiting activities (jogging, going out at night). The psychological aftermath of an acquaintance rape may lead to difficulties in current or later relationships, especially if it is not comfortable or safe to disclose the rape to the other person.

What To Do If You Experience Acquaintance Rape

- Tell someone. Go to a friend's or any place where you can get emotional support, or call a rape hotline.
• Go to a doctor or hospital for treatment of injuries and for tests that could be important evidence. Do not bathe, shower or change clothes before you go.

• It's your decision about whether to report the rape. You may contact the Dean for Campus Life, the Counseling Center, or the Women's Advocacy group on campus to receive advice or counsel regarding appropriate reporting procedure.

• Seek counseling, either at the Counseling Center, Rape Crisis Center, or with another agency or private therapist.

How to Help Prevent Acquaintance Rape

• Meet at a public place until you know someone well. Do not leave a bar, party, concert or game with someone you just met.

• Do not drink to excess or get high.

• Assume control of the date and take care of yourself. Inquire about plans in advance, pay for part of the date, carry enough money to get home on your own.

• Think about your own sexual limits, decide how far you want to go before you go out on a date. Be aware of the stereotypes that prevent you from acting the way you want to.

• Recognize when someone intrudes on your limits, and communicate clearly that intrusion is not acceptable.

• Act immediately if someone ignores limits you have clearly expressed. It is most desirable to try to get away. If that is not feasible, try to attract attention by yelling "police, fire or help." In general, attempting to reason with the attacker has not been as effective as other strategies. Going along with the attack may, in some cases, be a survival strategy.

• Within your relationships, discuss your sexual attitudes and needs. If your date consults with you about your feelings about whether to have sex, be honest. Some people think that clarifying wants and expectations takes away the romance. Try to find ways of preserving the romance after both people's expectations and needs have been communicated.

What to do if Someone You Know Experiences Acquaintance Rape

• Believe them. If you find it difficult to believe a claim of acquaintance rape, it might be useful to examine your own attitudes about rape.

• Listen. Let the victim express feelings, without offering advice or comments. Don't be critical or judgmental.
Let the victim know how much support you are able to give, and don't promise more than you can give.

Don't assume the victim can get over the experience quickly. Rape takes a long time to work through, and different responses may continue to come up for months.

Encourage the victim to get counseling. Get counseling yourself if you find that dealing with the issues around acquaintance rape brings up feelings that are difficult for you.