

SEXUAL ASSAULT

Sexual assault is any type of sexual contact without voluntary consent. This includes forced oral contact ("kissing"), grabbing, groping, genital contact, oral-genital contact ("oral sex"), vaginal penetration, and anal penetration. In the Criminal Code of Canada, "consent is defined as a voluntary agreement of the complainant to engage in the sexual activity in question" (Section 273.1).

Consent is not given if:

- ~ Someone else has given the agreement
- ~ The accused is abusing a position of power, trust, or authority (parent, relative, babysitter, teacher, coach, religious leader, police officer, doctor, etc.)
- ~ The person is incapable of giving consent (unconscious, impaired by alcohol or drugs, sleeping, heavily medicated, etc.)
- ~ The individual says or implies "NO" through their words or actions
- ~ One party changes their mind at any time before or during sexual activity

ACQUAINTANCE SEXUAL ASSAULT

Acquaintance sexual assault occurs when the survivor and the offender know each other. The offender may be someone the survivor hardly knows, such as a friend of a friend, or someone they are close with such as a friend, coworker or partner. Acquaintance sexual assault is the most common form of sexual assault and is just as serious and harmful as all other types of sexual assault. As with all sexual assaults, acquaintance sexual assault is motivated by power and control, not sex and desire.

COERCION

Coercion is when someone uses manipulation, pressure, force, or threats of force to make someone do something they don't want to do.

Some examples of coercion used in sexual assault include:

- ~ constantly putting pressure on someone to have sex
- ~ making someone feel guilty ("if you loved me...")
- ~ threats of any kind (against the survivor, the survivor's friends or family, or even against themselves)
- ~ using body position or physical size to imply threat

Coercion does not involve physical force. It often leaves the person who was assaulted feeling as though they "gave in" or "allowed" the assault to happen. However, for sexual contact to be consensual, it must be voluntary. This means it has to be something the person wants to do, willingly and freely, without the use of any kind of force (physical or non-physical). Using coercive tactics to force someone else into sexual contact is sexual assault because there is not voluntary consent.

COMMON RESPONSES TO SEXUAL ASSAULT

It is common for those who have experienced sexual violence to blame themselves for what happened. For example, if the offender is someone the survivor knows (which is usually the case), the survivor may blame themselves for trusting that person. When drugs or alcohol are involved, the survivor may feel guilty for getting drunk or stoned or high.

While feeling responsible is common, the only person to blame is the perpetrator of the assault. This can be difficult to grasp because it is true that we are responsible for our

own actions. However, we cannot be responsible for the actions of others. Sexual assault is a unilateral act, meaning it happens when one person violates another. What the survivor did or didn't do doesn't matter.

As well as self-blame, people who have been sexually assaulted may also:

- ~ Develop addictions (drugs, alcohol, gambling, food, etc.)
- ~ Sleep more or less than usual
- ~ Feel unsafe or afraid
- ~ Have difficulty trusting others
- ~ Use alcohol and/or drugs to numb the emotional pain
- ~ Feel like they're reliving the event (flashbacks)
- ~ Change the amount and type of sexual activity they engage in (have sex much more or much less than before)
- ~ Change perceptions of themselves (they may feel as if they're "only good for sex")
- ~ Engage in self-harming behaviours (cutting, shoplifting, scratching, suicide attempts, increased risk-taking behaviours)

MYTHS ABOUT ACQUAINTANCE SEXUAL ASSAULT

Myths about acquaintance sexual assault often cause survivors to blame themselves for what happened or to feel isolated from others. Some of the most common misconceptions include:

Myth: Most sexual assaults are committed by strangers. 85% of sexual assaults across Canada are committed by someone the survivor knows, such as a partner, spouse, family friend, co-worker, etc.

Myth: If the survivor had said "NO", or fought back, they wouldn't have been assaulted.

We often hear that sexual assault happens because of a misunderstanding, but studies show that survivors always communicated some form of "no". Turning away, trying to keep clothes on, trying to stay with friends, making excuses, crying, freezing, nervous laughter, and the inability to make eye contact are some ways of saying "no".. While some people think body language can be misinterpreted, these signs are clear in sexual situations. Someone who is not a perpetrator will see those signs

and check in with their partner. They may ask, "Is everything okay?" "Are you still enjoying this?" "How does that feel?" Sexual assault does not happen because the survivor did not communicate clearly enough. Sexual assault happens because the perpetrator sees those clear signs and carries on anyway.

OPTIONS IN SEXUAL ASSAULT SITUATIONS

Talk to someone: Talking to a friend or another support person may be helpful. The Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton has a 24-Hour Sexual Assault Crisis Line (780-423-4121) that provides confidential information and support to both those who have been sexually assaulted, as well as people looking for information and referrals.

Medical Attention: If someone has experienced unwanted sexual contact, they should consider seeking medical attention to treat wounds and to test for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and/or pregnancy if this is a concern. A physical exam after a sexual assault can be difficult. Fortunately, there are services in the Edmonton area that make the process less difficult.

SART (Sexual Assault Response Team): A team of nurses who examine and treat survivors age 14 and over (of any gender) who have been sexually assaulted within the last 7 days. Services can be accessed at any time through hospital emergency departments in the Capital Health Region.

STD Clinic: The STD Clinic in Edmonton provides free, confidential, and anonymous sexually transmitted disease testing. Call 780-413-5156 for information on hours and location.

Reporting to the Police: A survivor may choose to report to the police. An officer will be dispatched to take the report. A survivor can also go to their local police station and report in person. There is no time limit on reporting a sexual assault to the police.

