

DISPELLING THE MYTHS ABOUT SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION

Society’s understanding of sexual violence can be influenced by misconceptions and false beliefs (commonly referred to as ‘rape myths’). Separating myths from facts is critical to stopping sexual violence.

MYTH	Sexual victimization can’t happen to me or anyone I know.
FACT	Sexual victimization can and does happen to anyone. People of all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds are victims of sexual victimization. Identified gender in childhood doesn’t seem to differ in statistics of the crime however in adulthood more persons who identify female report sexually victimization than persons who identify male, noting that those who identify male do get victimized not just females.
MYTH	Sexual victimization is most often committed by strangers.
FACT	Most sexual victimizations are committed by someone the victim knows. Among victims aged 18 to 29, two-thirds had a prior relationship with the offender. Of sexual crimes reported, about 82% of victims stated the offender was an intimate partner, other relative, a friend or an acquaintance. A study of sexual victimization of college women showed that most victims knew the person who sexually victimized them. For both completed and attempted sexual assaults, about 90% of offenders were known to the victim. Most often, a dating partner, ex-partner, classmate, friend, acquaintance, or co-worker sexually victimized the victim. Sexual victimization can be committed within any type of relationship, including in marriage, in dating relationships, or by friends, acquaintances or co-workers. Sexual victimization can occur in heterosexual or same-gender relationships. It does not matter whether there is a current or past relationship between the victim and offender; unwanted sexual activity is still sexual victimization and is a serious crime.
MYTH	Sexual victimization is most likely to happen outside in dark, dangerous places.
FACT	The majority of sexual victimizations happen in private spaces like a residence or private home.
MYTH	If a victim doesn’t report to the police, it wasn’t sexual victimization.
FACT	Just because a victim does not report, the victimization does not mean it did not happen. Fewer than one in ten victims report the crime to the police. There are many reasons for this including fear of retaliation from the abuser, fear of disclosure, fear of the justice system etc.
MYTH	All sexual victimization victims will report the crime immediately to the police. If they do not report it or delay in reporting it, then they must have changed their minds after it happened, wanted revenge, or didn’t want to look like they were sexually active
FACT	There are many reasons why a sexual victimization victim may not report the victimization to the police. It is not easy to talk about being sexually victimized. The experience of re-telling what happened may cause the person to relive the trauma. Reasons for not immediately reporting the victimization or not reporting it at all include: fear of retaliation by the offender, fear of not being believed, fear of being blamed for the victimization, and fear of being “revictimized” if the case goes through the criminal justice system. Other reasons may also include belief that the offender will not be held accountable, wanting to forget the victimization ever happened, not recognizing that what happened was sexual victimization, shame, and/or shock. There is no time limit when the crime of sexual victimization is reported—it can be immediately; it can be years.
MYTH	It’s not a big deal to have sex with someone while they are drunk, stoned or passed out.
FACT	If someone is unconscious or incapable of consenting due to the use of alcohol or drugs, they cannot legally give consent. Without consent, it is sexual victimization.

MYTH	It's not sexual victimization if it happens after drinking or taking drugs.
FACT	Being under the influence of alcohol or drugs is not an invitation for non-consensual sexual activity. A person under the influence of drugs or alcohol does not cause others to victimize them; others choose to take advantage of the situation and sexually victimize them. The person who is cognitively impaired due to the influence of drugs or alcohol is not able to consent to sexual activity. If both are impaired, the aggressor is held responsible. The act of an offender who deliberately uses alcohol to subdue someone in order to engage in non-consensual sexual activity is also criminal.
MYTH	If someone didn't scream or fight back, it probably wasn't sexual victimization.
FACT	Victims of sexual violence exhibit a spectrum of responses to the victimization which can include calm, hysteria, withdrawal, anger, apathy, denial, and shock. Being sexually victimized is a very traumatic experience. Reactions to the victimization and the length of time needed to process through the experience vary with each person. There is no "right way" to react to being sexually victimized. Assumptions about a way a victim "should act" may be detrimental to the victim because each victim copes with the trauma of the victimization in different ways that can also vary over time.
MYTH	If someone does not have obvious physical injuries, like cuts or bruises, they probably were not sexually victimized.
FACT	Lack of physical injury does not mean that a victim was not sexually victimized. An offender may use threats, weapons, or other coercive actions that do not leave physical marks. They may have been unconscious or been otherwise incapacitated.
MYTH	If it really happened, the victim would be able to easily recount all the facts in the proper order.
FACT	Shock, fear, embarrassment and distress can all impair memory. Many survivors attempt to minimize or forget the details of the victimization as a way of coping with trauma. Memory loss is common when alcohol and/or drugs are involved.
MYTH	People lie and make up stories about being sexually victimized.
FACT	The number of false reports for sexual victimization is very low, consistent with the number of false reports for other crimes in Canada. Sexual victimization carries such a stigma that many victims prefer not to report.
MYTH	It wasn't penetration, so it wasn't sexual violence.
FACT	Any unwanted sexual contact is considered to be sexual violence. A survivor can be severely affected by all forms of sexual violence, including unwanted fondling, rubbing, kissing, or other sexual acts. Many forms of sexual violence involve no physical contact, such as stalking or distributing intimate visual recordings. All these acts are serious and can be damaging.
MYTH	Persons with disabilities don't get sexually victimized.
FACT	Persons with disabilities are at a high risk of experiencing sexual violence or victimization. Those who live with activity limitations are over two times more likely to be victims of sexual victimization than those who are able-bodied.
MYTH	Intimate partners cannot sexually victimization their partner.
FACT	Sexual victimization can occur in a married or other intimate partner relationship. In the law, any sexual activity requires consent despite who the partner is.
MYTH	Victims provoke sexual victimizations when they dress provocatively or act in a promiscuous manner.
FACT	Sexual victimization are crimes of violence and control that stem from a person's determination to exercise power over another. Neither provocative dress nor promiscuous behavior are invitations for unwanted sexual activity. Forcing someone to engage in non-consensual sexual activity is sexual victimization, regardless of the way that person dresses or acts.

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MYTH	If a person goes to someone’s room, house, or goes to a bar, they assume the risk of sexual victimization. If something happens later, they can’t claim that they were sexually victimized because they should have known not to go to those places.
FACT	This “assumption of risk” wrongfully places the responsibility of the offender’s actions with the victim. Even if a person went voluntarily to someone’s residence or room and consented to engage in some sexual activity, it does not serve as a blanket consent for all sexual activity. If a person is unsure about whether the other person is comfortable with an elevated level of sexual activity, the person should stop and ask. When someone says “No” or “Stop”, that means STOP. Sexual activity forced upon another without consent is sexual victimization.
MYTH	Only young, pretty females are victimized.
FACT	The belief that only young, pretty females are sexually victimized stems from the myth that sexual victimization is based on sex and physical attraction. Sexual victimization is a crime of power and control, and offenders often choose people whom they perceive as most vulnerable to attack or over whom they believe they can assert power. Victims come from all walks of life. They can range in age from the very old to the very young. Men and boys are sexually victimized too. Persons with disabilities are also sexually victimized. Assumptions about the “typical” sexual victimization victim may further isolate those victimized because they may feel they will not be believed if they do not share the characteristics of the stereotypical sexual victimization victim.
MYTH	If someone has agreed to ‘hook up’, this means they consented to any sexual act.
FACT	All sexual activity requires consent. In order to have consent, specific conditions need to be met: the type of sexual activity must be specified in clear language (not everyone uses ‘hook-up’ to refer to the same sexual act) and all parties must be enthusiastic and free to give consent. This means you need to clearly and verbally communicate—what you want to do and ensure you’ve got consent—a pressure free, competent, spoken YES . Even if you got consent in the past, doesn’t mean you have consent now. Every act, every time, needs enthusiastic and competent consent—this means no pressure or influence on the person’s ability to give consent.



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