

Acquaintance Sexual Assault

Sexual assault is any form of sexual contact without voluntary consent, and **acquaintance sexual assault** is sexual assault where the survivor knows the person who committed the sexual assault. The offending acquaintance may be someone the survivor hardly knows (e.g. a friend of a friend) or someone the survivor is close with (e.g. his or her partner.)

Acquaintance sexual assault is just as serious and harmful as all other forms of sexual assault, and it is similar to all other forms of sexual assault in that it is motivated by power and control, not sex. Unfortunately, because the media typically portrays sexual assault as being committed by strangers, survivors who were assaulted by someone they know often find it difficult to define their experience as a sexual assault.

In acquaintance sexual assault, coercion is one of the primary tools used to force sexual contact. In fact, coercion was used in more than 40% of the sexual assaults that were reported to the U of A Sexual Assault Centre in 2010, while physical violence was used in 25% of reported assaults. Coercion is using pressure, threats or intimidation to force another person to act a certain way. Because coercion is a less clear form of violence, many people dismiss it as less serious, but it is not. Verbal and emotional threats or tactics are just as damaging and controlling as physical threats. The following are examples of the many different forms of coercion:

- ⇒ Constantly putting pressure on someone
- ⇒ Making someone feel guilty for not complying
- ⇒ Refusing to take “no” for an answer
- ⇒ Threatening to withhold something or to do something to make someone comply
- ⇒ Being emotionally manipulative
- ⇒ Using body position or physical size to threaten someone into submitting or complying

Reactions to Acquaintance Sexual Assault vary for each individual, yet there are some common reactions many survivors have. For instance, many survivors of acquaintance sexual assault blame themselves for their assault(s). This is especially true when the perpetrator is someone who the survivor trusted, and thus, she/he may question why she/he trusted that person. However, someone who has experienced sexual assault is never to blame for what another person chose to do to them.

In some cases, if the survivor was under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time of the assault, this can make the survivor feel that they are to blame because they chose to get drunk or stoned. However, choosing to get drunk or stoned is *not* choosing to be sexually assaulted. Section 273.1 of the Criminal Code of Canada clearly states that one cannot consent to sexual activity if she/he is “blacked out, impaired by alcohol or narcotics, unconscious, [or] sleeping.”

Other common reactions to sexual assault are changes in everyday behaviours such as eating or sleeping. Some people react by eating more than usual, and others decrease their food intake, even drastically. Some survivors start sleeping a lot more than before,

others are unable to sleep well at all, and still others find it difficult to sleep at certain times of the day or are not able to get out of bed in the morning. Some survivors use alcohol and drugs to numb the emotional pain they feel.

The emotions many survivors experience after a sexual assault can at times feel overwhelming. It is very common for a survivor to feel unsafe or afraid more often than before. This can affect how much they go out, whom they socialize with, if they go to work or school, and so on. A heightened sense of anxiety is also common and can lead to experiencing panicky feelings or panic attacks. For some survivors it is not uncommon to feel depressed or even go into a depression. Overall, being sexually assaulted not only affects how people feel, it also affects their actions and their life choices.

Recovery from acquaintance sexual assault involves a complex and multifaceted healing process. Some issues that a survivor may deal with during her/his recovery include:

- ⇒ **Safety.** It is difficult to feel safe after the betrayal of an acquaintance sexual assault. If the assault was perpetrated by a stranger, the survivor could just dismiss all strangers as dangerous, but when the perpetrator is an acquaintance, survivors can feel unsafe even with people close to them. One aspect of recovery involves finding ways to regain a sense of personal safety. This process is different for each individual.

- ⇒ **Trust.** In an acquaintance sexual assault, the perpetrator abused the trust of the survivor and thus, it is normal for the survivor to feel unsure about who is worthy of their trust now or in the future. They may have a difficult time opening up to people or establishing new relationships, whether they are intimate ones or friendships.

- ⇒ **Sexual Intimacy.** Survivors of sexual assault may experience difficulties with, or uneasiness about, sexual intimacy right after the assault or even years after. Two common adjustments that can be seen after an acquaintance sexual assault are:
 - * **Abundant Sex**
If an individual feels that their own sexuality has been devalued, or if they have tried to say “no” (verbally or otherwise) to sexual contact in the past and it was not respected, they may have learned not to say “no” in future sexual situations. The result may be an increase in number of sexual partners in the period of time following the assault. The survivor may use future sexual experiences to regain a sense of control in her/his sex life.
 - * **Isolation**
The survivor may withdraw from having any sexual relationships, and any opportunities toward establishing relationships. They may feel too frightened at the thought of an assault happening again. They may isolate themselves from social activities for fear of making a ‘wrong decision’. Survivors may feel that they can no longer trust others, or trust their own judgments.

- ⇒ **Defining the Experience.** Our culture and our media portray almost all sexual assaults as being committed by a stranger. Because of this, people often think of

sexual assault only as forced intercourse by a stranger. Survivors of sexual assault are not immune to this way of thinking, and therefore can sometimes struggle to define their own experience. The further the experience was from the stranger scenario, the harder it can be to define. For example, if the assault involved alcohol, was committed by a partner or close friend, involved unwanted sexual touch and not forced intercourse, it could be more difficult to define the experience, even though it was acquaintance sexual assault. Not defining the sexual assault as such can cause further confusion in the survivor's life because it leads her/him to feel as though she/he is "going crazy" or should be "over it". Once a survivor has defined their experience, they can begin to allow themselves the space they need to heal. If defining their experience is something that the survivor would like to do, the U of A Sexual Assault Centre can provide definitions and talk with the survivor about what that means for them.

- ⇒ **Minimizing and Denial.** Some survivors of sexual assault deny or minimize their experience by passing it off as "just a bad sexual experience." This can be a useful temporary coping mechanism, in that it allows the survivor's life to return to some kind of normalcy. Although it is a normal part of the recovery process, denying or minimizing the experience often leads to frustration later on when establishing new relationships, as issues of trust and safety often resurface.

- ⇒ **Disclosing.** It is hard to know who to trust to tell about a sexual assault. Unfortunately, many people hold attitudes and beliefs about sexual assault that are misguided and potentially damaging to a survivor, and there is no guarantee that the person the survivor chooses to disclose to will be supportive. This is most often true when the person receiving the disclosure knows the person who committed the sexual assault. Many people are not willing to hear that people they know and trust could do something like commit sexual assault, so they may be less likely to believe a survivor or they may blame them for what happened. Since acquaintance sexual assault does not fit the stereotypical stranger sexual assault situation, many potential supporters have a difficult time seeing it as sexual assault. On the other hand, many people make wonderful supporters, as being a great supporter only involves listening to the survivor, believing what they say, exploring options with them and then letting them make their own choices. When choosing who to disclose to it can be as simple as using intuition and choosing someone who seems good to talk to. Speaking with someone at the Sexual Assault Centre can help survivors to identify supportive people in their life.

Recovering from Acquaintance Sexual Assault is a process as unique as each individual. Many survivors find it helpful to speak to someone at a Sexual Assault Centre who can work with the survivor as they go through their own recovery process, and with time, a survivor can learn to work through the issues they may find themselves facing as a result of their experience. Recovering or healing from a sexual assault does not mean never thinking about the sexual assault again or not having strong feelings about it. Recovery is a process by which survivors learn to integrate the experience into the rest of their lives, make deep and lasting changes, and reconnect to themselves and those around them.