

**MYTH Sex workers can't be sexually assaulted.**

**FACT:** Sex workers can, and are, sexually assaulted. One study found that one in five women who require emergency medical attention following a sexual assault are sex workers. The same study found that sex workers are more likely to suffer severe physical injury from their assault.

It doesn't matter what someone does for a living; no one deserves to be sexually assaulted. Sex workers have a right to decide what to do with their bodies, even if they are selling sexual services. For example, they may consent to a particular activity, such as oral sex; that does not, however, mean that they must consent to penetration. As the criminal code states, people have the right to withdraw consent or change their minds at any point.

There is a common belief that, for sex workers, sexual assault is simply an "occupational hazard." This thinking implies that the cause of the assault is the work when the real reason sexual assault occurs is because of the perpetrator. The "occupational hazard" argument is similar to any other myth in that it blames the survivor and excuses the perpetrator.

**Myths Explained**

**Blaming Survivors**

By implying that survivors could have done something differently to prevent the assault from happening, myths blame survivors for something that someone else did to them.

**Blaming Women**

Most myths are aimed at women. When it comes to "tips," these are almost solely directed to women who are constantly told to watch their drinks, not get drunk, walk in pairs, watch what they wear, etc. However, we know that 1 in 6 men in Canada will also experience sexual assault. Rather than preventing sexual assault, tips work to control women's behaviour.

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**Excusing Perpetrators**

When myths blame survivors for what perpetrators do, myths excuse perpetrators for their own behaviour. They work to blame people who are blameless and excuse people who should be held responsible for their actions.

**Perpetuating Sexual Assault**

Since myths blame survivors and excuse perpetrators, myths hide the real reason sexual assault happens: power and control.

Why do people think they can gain power and control over another person through sex? Why is sex used as a weapon? The reason is cultural norms and how many people frame sex as a way of gaining social status. For example, people often brag, "I made it to third base!" or "Look how many notches I have on my bed post!", or "I got laid!" All of these phrases imply that sex is a game, or something to have, something to take, something to gain. In turn, they imply that the more sex someone "has," the more powerful that person is. People learn that forcing sexual activity onto another person is a way of gaining power over that person.

Myths also allow us to ignore our own behaviour in creating a world in which sexual assault is so rampant. Through framing sex as a way of gaining power, and through acting in sexist ways which restrict women's behaviour, we set the stage for sexual assault to occur. This means that myths are not only false, but that they are extremely harmful. If we want sexual assault to stop, we must address, debunk and eradicate myths which blame survivors and excuse perpetrators.

1Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile (2005).  
2Male on Male Rape, Michael Scarce (1994).  
3Canadian Criminal Code, Section C-46  
4 "Stand and Think Tall: 93% of Communication is Non-Verbal," Rosenthal (2006).  
5 "Criminal Victimization in Canada, 2004," Gannon and Mihorean (Statistics Canada 2005)  
6 "Sexual Assault and the Law in Canada", University of Alberta  
7 "Sexual assault in the lives of urban sex workers: A descriptive and comparative analysis", Janice DuMont and Margaret J. McGregor (2004).



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# Myths and Facts About Sexual Assault

To stop sexual assault from happening, we must recognize what it is and why it happens. Unfortunately, many people have some common misconceptions about sexual assault. The following are some myths and facts about sexual assault.

**MYTH: Sexual assault is when a man rapes a woman.**

**FACT:** Sexual assault is any form of sexual contact without voluntary consent. Consent is a voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity. This means that the sexual contact has to be something the person wants. If one person has been manipulated, forced or pressured to give consent, it is not considered voluntary.

Forced "sexual contact" includes forced oral contact ("kissing"), grabbing, groping, oral-genital contact ("oral sex"), vaginal penetration and anal penetration. All genders can experience sexual assault and all genders can perpetrate sexual assault.

**MYTH: People are usually sexually assaulted by strangers.**

**FACT:** Across Canada, 85% of sexual assaults are committed by someone the survivor knows: family members, friends, acquaintances, partners, neighbours, teachers, religious leaders, coaches, etc. This number goes up to 95% in cases of child sexual abuse.

**MYTH: Sexual assault is just a women's issue because men can't be sexually assaulted. If they are, their perpetrators are gay men.**

**FACT:** Many stereotypes about men and masculinity make people believe that men cannot be sexually assaulted.

One belief is that men are "big and strong" and should be able to physically protect themselves. There are two main concerns with this belief. One is that people come in

all different shapes and sizes. A man can be assaulted by someone who is stronger than him and able to physically overpower him. The second problem with this belief is the assumption that sexual assault must involve physical force. However, sexual assault is any form of sexual contact without voluntary consent. This means that people can be (and are) sexually assaulted without the use of any kind of physical force. If someone "consents" to sexual contact because of pressure, manipulation, force, or threats of force, that consent is not considered to be voluntary. Instead, it is more accurately described as "compliance." Any sexual contact that follows compliance is therefore a sexual assault. Physical strength doesn't matter.

Another reason some people believe that men can't be sexually assaulted is because of the stereotype that men always want sex. It is insulting to imply that the only thing men ever think about is sex. Like anyone else, men have all kinds of interests. They eat, sleep, work, go to school and have other activities that do not involve sexual contact. Men, like all other people, have the right to choose what kind of sexual contact they want and who they want it with, as well as where and when they want it.

Some people think that if men are sexually assaulted, it can only be by gay men. Again, this idea assumes that sexual assault is motivated by sexual desire, when it is actually about power and control. While women and gay men do perpetrate sexual violence against men, research violence confirms that most people who sexually assault men are heterosexual men.

**MYTH: Sexual assault happens because perpetrators are so sexually aroused that they can't control themselves.**

**FACT:** The Canadian Criminal Code recognizes that sexual arousal is not an excuse for sexual



assault. Our Criminal Code clearly states that consent can be withdrawn at anytime, either before or during sexual activity. This means that if one person changes their mind and the other continues, it is sexual assault from the moment consent is withdrawn.

Still, some may believe that when people are very aroused, it is impossible to stop sexual activity. This is the belief that people "lose control" in the moment. However, people always have the ability to stop themselves, even when they are very aroused. For example, people are capable of stopping sexual activity when interrupted by parents, fire alarms or children. Therefore, people are also capable of stopping when their partner wants them to.

While sexual contact is involved in sexual assault, the motivation is not sexual pleasure. Instead, the motivation is power and control over another person. For example, if a baseball player uses a baseball bat to attack another person, they are not playing baseball! Instead, the baseball bat is used as a weapon to hurt someone. Sexual assault is similar: sex is used as the weapon to hurt another person, and perpetrators who assault other people are very much in control of themselves and the situation.

**MYTH: Many people who claim to have been sexually assaulted actually enjoyed it.**

**FACT:** Some men who experience sexual assault may have an erection or ejaculate during the assault. Similarly, women may lubricate or orgasm. These are normal, physical reactions to touch. Our bodies are programmed to respond to touch in a certain way, whether or not that touch is wanted. Our physical responses say nothing about whether or not the touch was wanted or enjoyed; instead, it means that the survivor has a normal, healthy body that is responding in a normal, healthy way.

**MYTH: You can tell what a perpetrator looks like.**

**FACT:** Offenders do not fit any one description or stereotype. Many are in relationships and can be of any race, class, gender, religion or ethnicity.

**MYTH: If a person is sexually assaulted when they are drunk, they are at least somewhat responsible because they put themselves in a risky situation.**

**FACT:** Many people think drinking is socially acceptable. This is reinforced when we watch beer commercials over the summer, see advertisements for spirits over the winter holiday season, and drink wine with our meals. Many people drink heavily at parties or camping trips and later tell their friends about how much fun they had. Yet if someone is assaulted at one of these parties, people blame that person for being in a "risky" situation that was not seen as risky before the assault.

The determining factor in a sexual assault is not how much the survivor drank. The only person responsible for sexual assault is the perpetrator.

Some people argue that we all need to be responsible for our behaviour. It is true that people must be responsible for what they do if and when they drink. People are responsible for getting themselves home safely, for getting to work or school on time the next day, and for anything they do. However, people are not responsible for what other people do to them. If someone assaults a drunk person, the only person responsible is the person who committed the assault.

**MYTH: When someone is rape drugged, they are somewhat responsible because they weren't being careful enough.**

**FACT:** Some people give "tips" to others, especially women, on how to watch their drinks to make sure they aren't drugged. These "tips" are based on false assumptions. First, they assume that people are sexually assaulted at parties or clubs, when they are most likely to be assaulted at home. Secondly, they assume that people are assaulted by strangers, when they are usually assaulted by people they know. Statistically, the "riskiest" behaviour is staying at home with a trusted person.

Sexual assault can happen to anyone, anywhere, regardless of how cautious they are being. People are not drugged because they aren't being careful enough; people are drugged because a perpetrator drugs them.

**MYTH: If someone is wearing provocative or revealing clothing, they are asking to be sexually assaulted.**

**FACT:** Sexual assault is about power and control, not sex and desire. This means that what someone wears has nothing to do with whether or not that person will be sexually assaulted. Sexual assaults do not happen more often when people wear "provocative" clothing.

Some people say that women who wear "provocative" clothing should expect to be sexually assaulted, especially if they chose their clothes to "look good." Wanting to be attractive is not the same as wanting to be sexually assaulted. Wanting sex is not the same as wanting to be sexually assaulted. Sexual contact is activity that is mutual; sexual assault, however, is an act of violence that one person inflicts on another. No one asks to be sexually assaulted, regardless of what they do or do not wear.

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

**FACT:** We often hear that sexual assault happens because of a misunderstanding. The perpetrator may say they didn't realize the survivor didn't want the sexual activity and that the survivor wasn't being clear enough in saying no. This is an excuse.

Up to 93% of communication is non-verbal, meaning that tone of voice, facial expressions, hand gestures and other types of body language communicate our thoughts and feelings more than the words that come out of our mouths. Even if survivors do not use the word "no," they are always communicating non-consent. This communication might be verbal, with phrases such as, "stop," "quit," "I'm not enjoying this," or excuses such as, "I'm not feeling well." Survivors may also communicate "no" through their body language by turning away, pushing away, crying, trying to keep their clothes on, freezing, or other actions.

Sexual assault does not happen because the survivor does not communicate clearly enough. Sexual assault occurs because the perpetrator observes all of these signs, chooses to ignore them, and continues forcing sexual contact anyway. Someone who is not a perpetrator would notice these signals, stop and check in to find out what's wrong.

**MYTH: Many people who claim to have been sexually assaulted are actually lying about it.**

**FACT:** Sexual assault is a vastly underreported crime. According to Statistics Canada, only 8% of all sexual assaults are reported to the police. Of these, only 2-3% are found to be false allegations. This is the same percentage as false reports of other crimes such as robbery, theft and break and enters. People don't lie about sexual assault more than they lie about any other type of crime.

Some people point to so-called "inconsistencies" in survivors' stories of assault to "prove" that they are lying. However, it is common for survivors of any kind of trauma to forget or confuse details of what happened. Inconsistencies do not mean the person is lying; they mean the person has experienced trauma and is having a normal reaction to trauma.

Sometimes, people find it hard to believe that their friend is telling the truth about sexual assault if the perpetrator is someone known to them. Since 85% of assaults are committed by someone the survivor knows, it is likely that whoever the survivor chooses to confide in will also know the perpetrator. This does not mean the assault did not happen. What it does mean is that no one can tell what a perpetrator looks like, sounds like, or acts like.

**MYTH: You can tell whether or not someone was assaulted based on how they act. Someone who was sexually assaulted will be quiet, withdrawn and never want to have sex again.**

**FACT:** There are many reactions someone can have to a sexual assault. Some reactions may include feeling angry, sad, lonely, betrayed, violated or numb. In terms of reactions, some people may want to be around their friends all the time, while others will want to withdraw. Some people may decrease the amount of sexual activity they have while others may increase it. Some may abuse drugs and alcohol to numb the pain. Some may change their sleeping patterns. Some will have no outward reaction at all. There is no right or wrong way to respond to a sexual assault. However a person feels, and whatever a person does to cope, is what that person needs to do to survive the experience.