

What can you do to prevent sexual assault?

Talk about sex.

Many of us grow up with unrealistic beliefs about sex: that we should instinctively know what to do; that we should be ready to achieve an erection instantly and maintain it for hours; and that it is unmasculine to have to talk about what gives us (or our partner) pleasure. These beliefs and others keep us from knowing our own sexuality and from enjoying sexual relationships. Sex without discussion does not allow consent, or even minimal expectations, to be communicated. Without mutual agreement, sex becomes rape. Sex is healthy when it reflects the free and mutual sharing of one another. When we discuss what makes us comfortable and uncomfortable and try new ways to express ourselves, we also greatly reduce the risk of sexual assault.

Take “No” for an answer.

We have been taught that it is a routine part of seduction to ignore a woman’s saying “no” and to assume she means “maybe” or even “yes.” But without clearly established consent, what we call seduction is actually rape. Decisions and wishes about sexuality must be respected because they are critical to a person’s identity. We must accept that women mean what they say, especially when it comes to their right to control their own bodies. No one has the right to deny another person the freedom to choose it, when, or with whom to be sexual. This freedom is a constant, regardless of previous sexual relations or marital status. Even after a person has given consent, he or she still has the right to change his or her mind. Unless we are willing to accept “no” from our partner, “yes” has no meaning.

Discuss your expectations.

Expectations are hopes crystallized by silence. Acting on our expectations without sufficient information can cause serious misunderstandings and lead to rape. There are serious misunderstandings and lead to rape. There is nothing wrong with feeling sexual desire, but all too often, we do not communicate our desires, find out our partner’s feelings, or establish consent. Instead, we project our interest in sex onto our partner: we assume she or he feels as we do, and we misinterpret any friendliness as an invitation. Establishing consent for sexual (or physical) contact at one point does not reduce the need to re-establish consent later. A person’s consent to come to your apartment, to kiss you, or to touch you is not the same as consent to any other sexual acts. Neither do so-called nonverbal cues such as someone’s winking at you, drinking with you, or starting to undress you imply consent for sexual intercourse. Even if we think our partner is sending us “mixed messages,” it is up to us to get clarification. Acting on our assumptions may seem more spontaneous but often leads us to be dishonest, manipulative, or to use physical force to get what we want.

Most of us have grown up with the bias that talking about sex is “just not done.” But without communication, gender stereotypes are our only guide to behavior: men are encouraged to push for as much sex as possible. Women are forced to take all responsibility for deciding where to stop. This double standard is unfair and destructive to all of us. Discussing sexual expectations, especially in new relationships, is the best way of confirming mutual agreement, and the only way that we as men can take responsibility for the consequences of our sexual behavior. Share your hopes, feelings, fears, and fantasies with friends, dates, and lovers. Such sharing creates possibilities for freer, more honest, more mutually satisfying relationships.

Recognize and share your feelings

All men and women experience a wide range of feelings: pride and compassion, sensitivity and competitiveness, fear and acceptance, vulnerability and hate, just to name a few. These emotions are natural reactions to events in our lives. However, we have learned to divide feelings into masculine and feminine, with very little overlap. The range of feelings acceptable to men is very narrow. We pretend that men can only be aggressive and strong, logical and unemotional. In fact, we are also at times confused, nurturing, intuitive, and sad. Our adherence to traditional gender roles distorts our sense of ourselves and prevents us from seeing others as they really are. Because we have learned that our own reactions are unacceptable, we deny having them. We project them onto women—and onto other men—to build ourselves up at their expense. We avoid making emotional connections. Our discomfort with our own feelings makes it harder for us to be ourselves with others, and our intolerance makes it harder for others to feel comfortable with us. On the other hand, exploring how we feel helps us decide whether we are comfortable with our own behavior and with the behavior of others. Letting others know how we feel helps us understand and sort out conflicts when they do occur, instead of running from conflict and pretending that everything is “fine.” If we are willing to risk changing the ways we relate to men and women, we can begin to develop trust in our ability to relate to people as people. As we learn to be aware of our feelings and to express them honestly, we develop more confidence in ourselves and find it easier to form and maintain deeper, more rewarding relationships.

Respect other's feelings

Have you ever tried to express yourself to someone who refused to listen to you or said you had no right to feel the way you did? Frustration and hurt are understandable responses to such emotional abuse. Being discounted like this also makes it harder than it already is to share feelings. In the extreme, our disregard for others' feelings is at the heart of rape. On the other hand, if we treat others the way we would like to be treated, they will be more likely to communicate with us honestly and directly. It is not necessary to agree with or even fully understand what someone says in order to respect their feelings as real and true.

Encourage women's efforts to empower themselves.

Men who have never experienced what it is like to be singled out as the victim of a crime based on their gender often have difficulty understanding women's fear, and they may discount it as paranoia or man-hating. Supporting Chimera and other self-defense training for the women in your life—relatives, classmates, friends, and mothers—is not promoting division between the sexes, but rather a more powerful, intimate relationship based on equality and mutual respect.

Ask women what makes them feel unsafe

Over 80% of rapes are committed by someone the victim knows. Women have cause to fear not only the stranger in the bushes, but also their classmate, their co-worker, their friend, or a member of their family. What makes you feel unsafe may be very different from what frightens the women you know. Actions which seem harmless but may increase a woman's fear include standing too close or touching any part of her body without asking. Don't try to bully a woman into not trusting her own sense for when she is safe or in danger. There is no reason why a woman should know that you are "one of the good ones" without evidence. Find out how your behavior affects the women in your life. Once you know, it will be easier to act in ways that help them feel more secure and to avoid doing things that they find threatening.

Develop full relationships with both men and women

Many of us grow up learning that we are supposed to find one special person of the opposite sex who will fulfill all our physical and emotional needs. This sort of conditioning drastically limits our relationships with other men and women and puts unnecessary and dangerous pressure on us and our sexual partners to be each other's "everything." In reality, there are many people with whom we can enjoy satisfying relationships when we are open to the ways in which we can share ourselves. Sexuality is only one possible aspect of such relationships. We can also share our hopes and fears, enjoy each other's special qualities and unique perspectives, take time to play, and give each other support. The more emotional connections we develop with caring male and female friends, the less pressure will fall on our sexual partners as our only emotional and physical outlet.

Give women space

Sexual assault is an ever-present threat for women. On the street, in lines, and in crowded situations, leave space between yourself and the women around you. Consider that many women aren't comfortable with a male stranger this near. If you are approaching a woman walking alone at night, try crossing to the other side of the street. The difference it makes in your life may be only a few seconds but for her, it may be the difference between walking in comfort and walking in fear.

Confront woman-hating attitudes in ourselves and others

Misogyny is often disguised yet widespread fear or hatred of women, including the attributes in ourselves which are traditionally labeled feminine. Think of the power we give to the accusation “sissy” or “fag” when our fear of not fitting in drives us to act out the most extreme macho behaviors, including rape. We all have the potential to listen, accept, and nurture. Realize that developing emotional strengths and skills is something all men need to do.

Recognize and interrupt sexual assault

Assault can occur anywhere: on the street, at a party, a football game, or the workplace—any time, day or night. It ranges from touching, and also includes verbal abuse. Many actions learned as normal, such as a “friendly” pat on the behind, are in fact assaultive if they don’t involve the consent of all parties. Be aware of women being assaulted physically or verbally. Notice what is happening and who is involved. Intervene with comments, questions, disruptive noises, or physically if necessary. Asking if a woman wants help is important. Responding to a call for help is essential. Getting involved makes the violence visible and may stop a rape. Acknowledging a responsibility to interrupt assaults does not imply that women need male protection. The belief that women need men as protectors from other men only reinforces the myth that women are powerless, and puts an unhealthy burden on men. Do not expect a woman you assist to trust you any more than her assailant.

Support anti-rape organizations

There are many people working against rape: Central Minnesota Sexual Assault Center; St. Cloud State Woman’s Center; Men Stopping Rape; Rape Crisis Center, Inc.; Take Back the Night Coalition; Task Force on Prostitution and Pornography. These organizations deserve your support.

Stop using pornography

Pornography and advertising use images of violence and subjugation to turn us on. They portray women (and children) in subordinate roles, as objects available to us and at our disposal, enjoying rape and abuse. When we buy pornography, we buy a limited perception of women as nothing more than bodies. The damage done by this male institution vastly outweighs any damage done by the handful of women’s sex magazines. Consider how images of rape and domination have shaped our attitudes about women and sexuality.

Men Stopping Rape is not against the egalitarian depiction of nudity or sexual activity; we are against main stream and hardcore material that presents only one gender, in unrealistic and dehumanizing ways. The assumptions pornography creates are degrading to all of us and destructive to maintaining equal relationships.

Stop pretending submission is consent

Men often assume that if a woman doesn't say "no" she means "yes." There are many situations in which women have submitted to men's demands when they did not truly consent. Women may feel pressure to submit because of the legitimate fear of physical violence, abandonment, withdrawal of monetary support, damage to reputation through malicious gossip, and social rejection. These fears can make submission seem like the only alternative. On the other hand, communication opens new possibilities for satisfying each person and is the only way mutual consent is ever confirmed. Consent requires understanding respect and agreement between equal partners.

Stop telling sexist jokes

Many sexist jokes trivialize the hurt and pain women and some men suffer from male violence. Others perpetuate myths about rape and what women and men are really like, or reduce us to the functions of our genitals. Men who tell sexist jokes are usually trying to build themselves up at the expense of women; or with heterosexist jokes, at the expense of gay people. These jokes divide us into factions and stifle communications. When we laugh at these jokes, we laugh nervously, trying to fit in with "the boys." Such male bonding at the expense of women promotes rape. We don't need a laugh at that cost.

Stop fantasizing about rape

Sexual fantasies can provide us with a rich outlet for feelings and desires that we cannot always gratify in life. However, rape fantasy is rape in your head. When we construct rape fantasies, we write detailed scripts for every step of a sexual assault, although we often pretend it is a seduction. In fact, most actual rapes consist of the acting out of pre-planned rape fantasies. Such fantasies are dangerous, because they eroticize violence and encourage us to become excited by a woman's struggling against us. They blur the distinction between sex and sexual assault and numb us to the reality of rape.

Stop withdrawing emotionally

As men, we are taught to fear exposure of our feelings. We learn to deny them to ourselves and others. Our fear of vulnerability often leads us to take a position of dominance and control. In order to remain "strong," we deal with frustration and hurt by withdrawing emotionally and refusing to communicate, sometimes without realizing what we are doing. In the end we never learn how to work out our feelings with others, and our attempts to maintain a position of "strength" only isolate us. We may try to force others to guess what's wrong or to give in to what we want. If this doesn't work, we sulk, bluster, or even threaten violence. However, if we can trust that there is a reason for our feeling the way we do, we can learn to express our feelings directly and find non-assaultive ways of communicating.

Stop being violent

No disagreement requires a violent response. There are many alternatives: Talk it over. Think again. Develop and accept a compromise. Take 'time out.' Talk to someone else. Turn it over to a third party. Making threats and hitting people are power-plays that freeze our differences at the most dangerous level. Violence makes communication and fair resolution of conflict impossible.

Rape hurts all women

Whether a woman has been assaulted or not, she lives in a rape culture, one which limits her freedom. Women cannot walk where they want to, when they want. They are restricted in how they express themselves physically. This includes limitations on the type and amount of make-up, style of dress, and even how they can walk. Too many men assume that women are available merely by being in public. We construe any communication from a woman as a sexual invitation. They must remain silent, and even avoid eye contact to be 'safe.' Women are not permitted to express a sexuality of their own choice. Fear of rape is used to control women who dare to create their own rules of behavior. Rape is the punishment for those who enjoy a spontaneous, vibrant sexuality which does not fit into societies definition.

Statistics show that 75% to 90% of rapes are committed by male acquaintances: family members, co-workers, classmates, dates, boyfriends, and husbands. A woman is told she needs a good man to protect her from the bad men. Accepting this message sets a woman up to be victimized by acquaintance rape. Assuming her date is a 'good' man is what makes acquaintance rape so devastating. When a woman feels forced to depend on men for safety, her relationships are not freely chosen. Seeking a protector can lead her to accept a man lacking other important qualities, and she might still be raped—by her 'protector.'

Finally, since women are targeted for rape as women, rape plays a part in maintaining women's subordination and inequality. Nowhere is this so clear as in the institution of marriage. A woman gives up her ability to fend for herself in return for being protected and supported. The sexist assumptions inherent in this unbalanced relationship are used to justify such indignities as 'woman's work' being paid sixty cents for every dollar paid to men. This system is very profitable, and as long as rape is used to enforce women's second-class status, the threat of rape will continue to be a part of every woman's life.

Rape hurts all men

1 in 6 boys are victims of incest or other sexual assault before their eighteenth birthday. Many of these boys grown up to commit rape, continuing a tragic cycle. Other men are raped on the streets, and in prisons rape is used as a means of control and domination. The inability of men who have been assaulted to reconcile their experience with society's definition of masculinity increases their sense of isolation from other men, causes them to doubt their own

masculinity and self-worth, and discourages them from seeking help. These men usually experience rape as a total disruption of their lives. Support from other men can help them heal their trauma.

Many men learn of the consequences of rape as family members, lovers, or friends of women who are assaulted. These men experience some of the anger, powerlessness, vulnerability, and shame that victims of rape feel in such a situation. We are unsure how we should react and even how we should feel. Our confusion is complicated by the feeling that our masculinity has been treated by our failure to fix a situation out of our control. Many men pride themselves on being able to take charge in an emergency. In the aftermath of rape, this taking charge can be a source of further abuse to the victim. We may express anger through verbal attacks on our wife, lover, or friend or through violent, self-destructive behavior that only makes things worse for everyone. Many relationships do not survive rape. A majority of marriages end in divorce with a year of a rape.

Most of us believe that our lives are untouched by rape. Even if we are not aware of the people in our lives who have been sexually assaulted, we live in a rape culture. In this kind of culture, forming and maintain relationships is difficult for all of us. The different realities experienced by women and men are a serious obstacle to communication. We are surprised by a women's caution or fear of us. We may feel that we are being treated unfairly, because we fail to recognize that no woman is completely safe from the possibility of rape.

We must respect women's legitimate distrust. Women deserve to feel as powerful in their relationships with us as we want to feel in our relationships with them. Accepting our responsibility to respect and support this right will allow us to form relationships based on equality.