

Acquaintance Rape: A Matter of Consent

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Rape. It is a powerful word for a power hungry act. It breeds fear and in many cases, it breeds silence. It is important that this silence be broken, and survivors be heard. By doing so, we break the grasp that rape has upon so many. The aftermath can be immense. The journey to heal may be terrifying; the steps, long and tedious. By building a bridge of awareness and empowerment, woman and men who have experienced rape can be healed and heard.

The journey to recovery starts with awareness. Awareness not only of what rape is, but the repercussions that grow deep into the soil of someone's soul. Rape may have the roots of power, control, and fear. Yet cultivating the earth, empowerment grows. It is amazing what survivors can do under nurturing conditions. It is our responsibility to cultivate the innate wisdom that so many survivors have. It is equally important that we develop our own. Rape is not an issue solely for survivors. It is an issue for everyone.

When someone takes something without someone's consent it is theft. When someone crosses sexual boundaries without consent, it is rape. Rape recovery starts with awareness of the problem including the nature of the definition. In defining rape, we can deepen our awareness of what is happening in our community and around the world. The definition of rape is the beginning of healing; and the beginning of the definition is consent.

Consent:

1. To give approval
2. Capable, deliberate, and voluntary agreement

Sexual contact without consent is rape. It doesn't matter what you're doing, wearing, or what has happened in the past. It is rape when someone disregards your will and violates your sexual and physical boundaries. It is about assault, it is about power, and it needs to be spoken about.

The term *Date Rape* was coined to describe non-consensual sexual contact between two or more people on a "date." This term, however, does not encompass what many women and men experience. In fact, over 80% of survivors know their assailant and may or may not be on a date. As such, this article will not only refer to date rape, but will also include *acquaintance rape*. Doing so broadens the scope of violence and more adequately portrays the problem.

Hannah was a freshman in college when she joined a sorority. Being in a sorority meant she went to parties at the fraternities. One night, the fraternity had a party with her sorority. She had a couple drinks but was certainly not drunk as she was careful to not "let loose" in front of such a big audience.

Chris was a junior and belonged to the fraternity. He and Hannah have known each other for a while and even flirted on some occasions. That night, he was paying her

a great deal of attention. She thought nothing of it. Although he was a nice guy, she wasn't that attracted to him. Around midnight the party was still going and Chris had asked Hannah if she would come back to his room because he wanted to "show her something." Out of curiosity, Hannah agreed.

As they entered the room, Chris leaned over to kiss her. At first she was surprised, and tentatively responded. For a brief moment she kissed him before pulling away and suggesting that they go back to the party. At that point he tried to kiss her again. She said "no" but he pushed her on the bed anyway. He then proceeded to rip off her underwear and rape her.

After he was done, he threw her underwear back at her and said "I'll see you downstairs." After about an hour, Hannah got up, went downstairs and walked straight out of the party. Everyone was so caught up in a drinking game so they didn't even notice her leave.

She went back to her dorm room. After a few hours, the physical pain between her legs didn't go away. She finally realized she needed to go to the hospital. While there, she denied rape counseling, a rape kit, or any involvement with the police.

Hannah was raped so violently that she was still bleeding. In fact, they had to use forceps to get the tampon out which was lodged inside of her. After a few hours at the hospital, she went back to her dorm room.

The next day, she contemplated telling someone but was afraid no one would believe her or they would blame her because she had a couple drinks. Chris was well known and liked as he was the president of the fraternity. It would be her word against his.

After a few days, she began to wonder about "her part" in what happened. She started to tell herself that it wouldn't have happened if she hadn't gone with him. Nor did she think it would have happened if she hadn't entertained his kisses, even if only a few seconds. She then rationalized to herself that it wasn't "that bad" and maybe she was over reacting.

DEFINING YOUR EXPERIENCE

Many survivors, like Hannah, fear that they will not be believed if they say they were raped. In Hannah's case, there was prior sexual contact. However, she had put up the boundary and said "no" numerous times. Sexual violation of boundaries beyond the word "no" is rape. Many survivors believe that they are at fault for going somewhere with the assailant or being intoxicated. All these thoughts clutter the survivor's mind and can ultimately influence her view as to whether or not she had been raped.

Each sexual assault is unique. This is also true about how *rape* or *sexual assault* is defined. There are many differences among survivors and their definition of rape. This leaves many individuals to deny their experience. Many do not "count it" as

rape because it did not fit certain predetermined definitions.

Rape has been defined primarily by lack of consent. However, there are numerous other aspects in defining rape. Some individuals focus on the physical aspect or violation, others focus on the mental anguish that goes along with it. Words associated with it may be different (i.e. power, control, anger, aggression), yet the idea behind them is the same. Rape is an intrusive act upon one's physical and sexual boundaries. Therefore, **any** sexual contact without consent is rape.

Rape is portrayed on television that most [sexual assaults](#) involve a great deal of violence. Some survivors believe that their experience was not rape because it excluded some perceived key elements such as a weapon or further physical abuse. Rape may not include physical violence, a weapon, or a stranger. In fact, many of them do not.

MYTHS ABOUT ACQUAINTANCE RAPE

Hannah had her doubts as to whether or not it was really rape because she had a few drinks, went with him voluntarily, and kissed him. These thoughts lead her away from calling her experience rape and instead just blamed herself for "putting herself" in a dangerous situation.

There are certain myths about acquaintance rape that perpetuate the blame being placed on the survivor. Hannah denied her experience because she believed myths about rape such as she was responsible because she went with him to his room. In addition, she believed that because she kissed him, she must have "led him on." In many cases, to move from victim to survivor one must debunk these myths and attribute the blame where it belongs.

Below are some additional myths about rape.

1. A woman who was raped by an acquaintance should have known better than to agree to go to some secluded place.

FACT: Many rapists portray a "gentleman's demeanor." They may be charming and attentive. As such, rape is unpredictable

2. If a woman or man is under the influence of alcohol, she or he can still give consent.

FACT: If you are under the influence of any drug or alcohol, you are not able to give consent. Alcohol and drug use are never an excuse for someone violating boundaries.

3. Certain behaviors such as dressing a certain way makes someone partially responsible.

FACT: It does not matter what an individual wears or what their behavior was prior to the assault. Lack of consent is lack of consent no matter what someone is doing or wearing.

4. Rape is only committed by strangers in dark alleys and parking lots.

FACT: More than 80 percent of women are raped by someone they know including friends, family, or an acquaintance.

5. It's not rape if you have had sex with the individual before.

FACT: Prior sexual contact is not a substitute for consent. This is often seen in marital rape. Just because there was consent in the past, does not mean there is consent in the present.

6. If an individual agree to "make out" with someone they contributed to the rape.

FACT: At any time, an individual can withdraw from sexual contact and retract consent.

7. Only women are raped.

FACT: About 10% of survivors are male. Males can be raped by either men or woman.

DATE RAPE DRUGS

Maggie was excited to go out with her friends to a rave on Saturday night. They had been there around an hour when a man named George, whom she had never met, offered to buy her a drink. As she was sitting at a table with her friends, George said that he could go to the bar and get it.

George returned with two fruity drinks and handed one to Maggie. At that point, the three people at her table decided they wanted to dance. George asked Maggie to stay with him and finish their drinks. Maggie agreed and took a sip of her drink. A short time later, she felt as if she was drunk. She'd only had one drink prior meeting George, so she blamed the feeling to being drunk on that she had an empty stomach or the bartender making the drinks extra strong.

This is the last memory that Maggie had. The next night, she found herself in her bed with her clothes off. She saw condom wrappers on the night stand. She feared that she must have had sex with someone but she didn't remember anything. She felt sore but couldn't attribute it to anything she remembered.

Maggie attributed her behavior to being drunk and blacking out although she'd never done that before. She called a friend who was with her that night hoping to get some details. Her friend answered the phone in a jovial tone saying that Maggie must have had a "good night." Without wanting to admit what had happened, she allowed her friend to continue. "George seemed like a really nice guy. I didn't know where you went; did he give you a ride home?"

Maggie responded, "yes...I gotta run." It never crossed her mind that she could have been drugged. In reality, George had slipped GHB into her drink.

Date rape with the use of drugs is also known as "drug facilitated sexual assault." It is especially common among college students. Rapes that include "date rape drugs" render an individual incapable of giving consent. Some common date rape drugs are Rohypnol, GHB, and Ketamine. All three of which may erase memories of the events that transpired while under the influences of the drug.

These are also commonly called "club drugs" because they are often used at dance clubs, concerts, and raves. They have little taste or color therefore they are easily slipped into someone's drink. These drugs act quickly (15-30 minutes) and can render an individual either totally unconscious or even immobile without any memory. When one is drugged, a person may act as if she or he is drunk. This allows the assailant to lure the individual into the car, out of the club, etc. As there may be no memories, some sexual assaults are only recognized due to physical trauma. It is common for survivors to believe that they "blacked out" without knowing they were under the influence of a drug.

Alcohol is commonly used to help commit sexual assault. Often it brings up the question of consent. When someone is intoxicated, just as the with the other date rape drugs, they are unable to give consent.

EFFECTS OF DATE RAPE

A month after the party, Hannah continued to feel extremely anxious. What made matters worse is that Chris was in several of her classes so she saw him regularly. He actually went out of his way to smile at her and chat with her as if nothing happened. When she was in his class, she would "check out." Her mind would wander and at one point, she was sitting in her class and missed the entire lecture. The only thing that brought her back to the room was the moment people began getting out of their seats and leaving.

Hannah became very depressed and couldn't stop thinking about what had happened. She continued to have flashbacks to that night and her body felt like it was happening again. Her anxiety was out of control. She was barely able to concentrate on her school work and her grades were dropping rapidly. She had dropped out of her sorority using the excuse that she had to focus more on school. In reality, she felt she could not trust them as she thought on some level that they knew what happened. In addition, she was embarrassed because she was sure that Chris had told his fraternity brothers that he had sex with her. Hannah assumed that her sorority sisters knew what had happened and now considered herself to be

a "slut."

After another month, Hannah's anxiety was so bad that she dropped out of school. Reality was that in addition to the poor grades, it was too much for her to walk by the fraternity house and see Chris on a regular basis. After she left school, she never talked to her sorority sisters again.

The effects of date rape include a broad range of symptoms including leaving the survivor feeling "tainted" or "bad" in some way. As in Hannah's case, she felt dirty and assumed everyone thought she was a "slut." Rape hits survivors at their core and instills a belief that they are somehow to blame. They feel as if the rape had something to do with their own behaviors. Without putting the responsibility on the assailant, survivors continue to blame themselves.

One symptom in particular is shaken trust. Having known their assailant, many survivors have great difficulty with trusting others. Survivors feel "on guard" with acquaintances they once trusted.

In addition to trust issues, rape survivors are 3 times more likely to suffer from [depression](#). For many, depression goes untreated or undertreated for years. Because depression is somewhat a common condition, survivors may not make the correlation between the assault and their feelings afterwards. This depression can manifest for years until the survivor is adequately treated for both the depression and the rape.

Survivors are 6 times more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder ([PTSD](#)). PTSD can be recognized with three different categories of symptoms. It starts with *intrusive* symptoms. Intrusive symptoms literally "intrude" a survivor's life. Survivors are often reminded of the rape when they don't intend to think about it. Some say the memories come "out of the blue." [Intrusive symptoms](#) may take the form of flashbacks, dreams, smells, or other bodily sensations.

These intrusive symptoms produce a great deal of anxiety as survivors never know when the next flashback or sensation will occur. This anticipation and discomfort leads to *arousal symptoms*. These symptoms keep the survivor in a continuous state of high alert for potential danger. Hypervigilance is fueled by the feeling that the world is not safe both externally and internally. Survivor's bodies often respond to reminders of the rape as if it is happening in the present. This is to ensure that the acts or feelings associated with the rape alert the survivor of danger. Survivors may know in their "mind" that the rape was in the past, but the body, having no sense of time, responds as if it is happening in the present.

This heightened state of arousal leads to *avoidance symptoms*. In Hannah's case, she "checked out" when reminded of the rape. This is known as dissociation. Survivors go to great lengths to protect themselves against flashbacks and other intrusive symptoms. For some, withdrawing all together is the only means of escape.

Maggie had the idea that she had been raped but still blamed herself for drinking too much. She was afraid to tell anyone because she thought they too would blame

her for what happened. Maggie had always been a light drinker but soon after the rape, she began drinking a few glasses of wine at night just to "wind down" and to sleep without having nightmares.

Alcohol helped reduce her anxiety. This anxiety, however, would not subside. A month later she went to a psychiatrist who said that she probably had an anxiety disorder and prescribed her Xanax (a prescription to help her relax). Maggie didn't tell the psychiatrist that she was drinking or about the rape. Soon after seeing the psychiatrist, she began abusing the Xanax and drinking.

Maggie only drank wine since mixed drinks created flashbacks to that night she was with George. It wasn't long before she developed an addiction which progressed quickly. She was drinking numerous drinks at night and it was getting to the point where she was drinking earlier in the day. She was missing work constantly and often stayed in bed all day taking four Xanax instead of the prescribed two. When she was extremely intoxicated, she even contemplated ending her life.

One way survivors try and avoid symptoms is by drinking or taking drugs. Survivors are 13 times more likely to [abuse alcohol](#) and 26 times more likely to abuse drugs. They may find that drugs and alcohol are an escape from symptoms associated with the rape. It may be the one thing that allows them to relax. This misuse of substances often leads to addiction.

A world full of fear and feelings of being unsafe may cause survivors to contemplate ending their life. Survivors are 4 times more likely to contemplate suicide. Suicide may seem the only way to escape the symptoms of PTSD, alcohol/drug dependence, or other symptoms associated with rape. In addition, some survivors experience "passive suicidality." For example, individuals may not necessarily want to die, but may welcome an accident or something else that would put them out of their misery.

RECOVERING FROM RAPE

After a year, Hannah's mother suggested she go to counseling for her depression. Hannah agreed and proceeded to find a counselor and tell her about her anxiety and depression. She did not mention the rape. Hannah did not talk about the rape. After all, the counselor never asked.

Hannah spent a few sessions getting to know the counselor. It was going relatively well but Hannah continued to have flashbacks. Finally, Hannah took the initiative and told her counselor of her symptoms and that she had been raped. From this, the counselor explained how her present symptoms could be related to the rape. Hannah talked a great deal about the rape. Shortly thereafter they started talking about it, Hannah's flashbacks started to go away.

Healing starts with talking about the assault. Without disclosing their struggles, survivors limit the amount of help they can receive. Talking about the experience is the recommendation of virtually every survivor. Without shedding light on their experience, many survivors feel as if they remain isolated in the darkness of their

pain.

The suggestions below are not linear. They are about validating the experience of rape and working through the symptoms associated with it. When Hannah began talking about her experience, her counselor validated the fact that it was not her fault.

These are just a few steps toward [recovery](#). Undoubtedly there will be other steps survivors will uncover as they continue on the journey. It is important that a survivor is issued unconditional positive regard and that she is gentle with herself in recovery. Remember it is progress, not perfection.

It may be an extremely difficult path; one survivor's may not want to take alone. It is recommended that survivors have assistance in their recovery. It can be friends, family, a trained counselor, or any other person whom the survivor deems to be safe, trustworthy, and understanding. Although survivors may feel a great deal of isolation, it is important to know that they are not alone. Remember that this is a process where the survivor needs support and guidance.

Take these experiences as suggestions instead of demands set in stone. This may be a messy process, survivors may feel better at times, and worse at other times. This may be an introduction to recovery or enhancing the progress of recovery survivors have achieved in the past.

1. [Get a support system in place](#). Survivor's need a strong support system in order to work through rape. However, they should be selective in the process. Survivors need someone who is understanding and nonjudgmental. The idea here is to feel safe. Support can also come from Internet support groups and different websites available to assist survivors of rape.
2. [Get a counselor](#). Although this may not be feasible, it is important that survivors have professional support. There are at least two litmus tests to see if the counselor is a good match. The two components are training and "chemistry." The counselor should have experience treating trauma. If a survivor is somewhat comfortable, she may want to make an appointment. Survivors shouldn't be afraid to ask questions either on the phone or in the session. It may take a few sessions, and they may not be 100% comfortable with any counselor.
3. [Identify strengths to build on](#): It important to know what the survivor is doing right or she will focus on what she's doing wrong. Survivors should be mindful of their assets. It is helpful to write them down and place them on the mirror, refrigerator, anywhere they can be seen on a regular basis. Knowing the strengths to build upon will create the very foundation needed to work through the experience with rape.

4. [Identify ways to self-sooth](#). Anxiety and depression may be side effects of working through the ramifications of rape. Part of the foundation of recovery is to be able to soothe yourself when you are feeling anxious or just "out of sorts." This can be difficult for survivors as they may feel that they are amidst a life under fire. This may not be easy, but it is important that they cultivate skills that are calming and can bring them back to center. Without these, the anxiety may pile up and the depression may become greater.

It is important that they are able to find relief in something healthy. Drugs and alcohol will only complicate matters. Self-soothing can involve journaling, talking to a friend, going for a walk, meditating, or anything else that is not hurtful to the survivor or anyone else. Remember that the goal is to have a healthy outlet which calms anxiety, depression, and fear.

5. [Finding your story](#). When survivors keep things to themselves, they deny themselves help. This suggestion is difficult as survivors have to face their fear and have what may be the hardest conversation they will ever have. Many survivors think that if they don't talk about it, it didn't really happen. Suffering in silence is a struggle. "I was raped" may be the most difficult sentence they can utter. By voicing and validating their experience, they can open up to what is ahead. Although there may be things that they cannot remember; memories may come as they continue on this journey. Some may never come back. This is normal.
6. [Educate yourself on the topic of rape and related issues](#). Knowledge is power. It allows survivors to identify what happened and how it is affecting them. By educating themselves on topics such as "[Rape Trauma Syndrome](#)" or "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder," they will be empowered and will better understand their symptoms. There are many excellent resources regarding recovery. It is important that they know the symptoms and aftermath of rape. Although every survivor's recovery is individual, finding common ground may enhance their recovery as they realize they are not alone.
7. [Identifying the impact of the rape](#). Before and after the rape, survivors may have certain thoughts, behaviors, or feelings. These may have changed as a result of the

rape. For example, survivors may have had higher self-esteem prior to the rape and now they struggle with positive feelings about themselves. Survivors may be more depressed, anxious, or fearful. Painting the "before and after picture" will validate the impact of the rape. In addition, it shows survivors areas they want to strengthen.

8. [Assign responsibility](#). Rape is the responsibility of the assailant. It doesn't matter what the survivor was doing, wearing, drinking or what has transpired in the past. Rape happens as a result of the behavior of the assailant. It is NEVER the survivor's fault. Being angry with themselves is a difficult place to be. Survivors need to listen to people when they validate them and their experience. Survivors need to hear those words and take them to heart.
9. [Identify triggers](#). There are triggers that may remind survivors of the rape and creates feelings as if it is happening all over again. Getting triggered is typically a result of intrusive symptoms. We saw this in Hannah as she saw the fraternity house where the rape happened. This step may also be difficult as it asks survivors to look at components of the rape. It does not have to be an exhaustive list. In looking at where survivors "buttons" are they can be prepared and stay in the here and now. When survivors get triggered, typically they move through the symptoms of PTSD. Survivors may have anxiety, intrusive thoughts, or they may feel as if they need to retreat by leaving the room either physically or psychologically. Remember that to get triggered is normal.
10. [Get help with other concerns](#). It is not uncommon for survivors to have problems that are not associated with the assault. These include physical problems, yearly check-ups, dentist, etc. It is very common for women to neglect going to the gynecologist as it may be too traumatic. It is important that survivors have a "well-rounded" recovery. In taking care of their health, they may be better equipped to deal with additional stress.
11. Empower yourself. It is important that survivors cultivate and regain their power. They may do so by reaching out to others whom have had the same experience, taking a self-defense class, or doing something they have always wanted to do. Realize that some fear is normal. It is important to lean into the resistance and move through life intentionally.

ASSISTING RAPE SURVIVORS

Listen. It is the most important thing that a loved one can do with a survivor. [Helping others](#) does not include having all the answers. Family and friends can help a survivor by educating themselves and increasing their own awareness. We can all learn how to be effective helpers.

It is beneficial to bear witness to their healing process. It may be tough to know or hear difficult things, but remember, the survivor is looking for safety. Create a non-judgmental environment where the survivor is welcome to speak about any and all aspects of the rape. It would also help to ask the survivor directly about what they need.

Playing a part in finding resources is also helpful but it is important to let the survivor lead. If they are not ready for these resources, let them know what is available when they are. Suggesting counseling is important when helping rape survivors. Many communities have rape crisis organizations and services that cater to rape survivors. Remember that stepping out of their comfort zone may be necessary but it may take time. Please be gentle and supportive since it is important that a survivor maintain a feeling of safety. If the survivor is a student there are counseling and psychological services available in most colleges and universities. There are also groups and clubs on campus that can help the survivor feel supportive on their healing journey.

CONCLUSION

Cultivating awareness is the first step in eradicating the heinous crime of rape. In doing so, we offer support to survivors and construct a wall of prevention. In bringing rape to light, we can end the darkness so many feel. Silence crumbles and voices build. May the expressions of survivors be heard. May the people who love them stand up. May the world respond to this growing problem. To wage a war is easy, to win it takes perseverance.

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HELPFUL RESOURCES

Websites:

[Survivors of Rape- Reflections of Hope](#)

[Gift From Within- nonprofit organization for survivors of trauma](#) - articles on sexual assault, PTSD, recovery, Q&A on PTSD, poetry, art, inspirational stories, peer support.

[RAINN | Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network](#)

[Rape Treatment Center](#) -911rape.org

[SOAR Speaking Out Against Rape](#)

[Male sexual abuse, men with unwanted sexual experiences as boys - 1in6 Sidran Traumatic](#)

[Stress Foundation](#)

[Security On Campus, Inc.](#)

[Trauma Information Pages](#)

[Dart Center on Journalism and Trauma- Sexual Assault](#)

[Mental Health Links - Women, Violence and Trauma](#)

Books:

[I Never Called It Rape: The Ms. Report on Recognizing, Fighting, and Surviving Date and Acquaintance Rape](#) by Robin Warshaw

[After Silence: Rape and My Journey Back](#) by Nancy Venable Raine

[Color Me Butterfly](#) L. Y. Marlow

[Controlling People: How to Recognize, Understand, and Deal with People Who Try to Control You.](#) Patricia Evans

[Surviving The Silence: Black Women's Stories of Rape](#) Charlotte Pierce-Baker

[The PTSD Workbook: Simple, Effective Techniques for Overcoming Traumatic Stress Symptoms](#) Dr. Mary Beth Williams

[Trauma & Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror.](#)
Dr. Judith Herman

Additional Resources:

[Book Reviews by Gift From Within Members on Trauma](#)

Articles:

[Rape Trauma Syndrome: The Journey to Healing Belongs to Everyone](#)

[Peaceful Heart: A Woman's Journey of Healing After Rape](#)

[Posttraumatic Therapy](#)

[Partners with PTSD](#)

[How to Choose a Trauma Therapist: Therapy for Post-Traumatic Stress \(PTSD\) and Dissociative Conditions](#)

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