

Some Major Myths about Sexual Violence

By Ben Atherton-Zeman, 2007 (www.voicesofmen.org)

Myth 1: It's the victim / survivor's fault. Because she wore a short skirt, went up to his room, was attracted to him, she deserved to be raped.

Reality Check 1: Rape is never the victim / survivor's fault. Girls and women get to wear anything they want to – it is never an excuse to rape them. Girls and women get to be attracted to someone, get to go to someone's room – she should be safe there. Many victims of rape blame themselves for the rape – it's up to the rest of us to say clearly that it's never their fault, they're not alone and that help is available.

Myth 2: Victim / survivors are all beautiful young women, who respond to being raped by crying.

Reality Check 2: Rape and sexual assault can happen to women, men, and children. It can happen to straight people, lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender folks. Most rapists are men – but most men do not rape, and can become part of the movement to end sexual violence. Every rape victim / survivor will respond in different ways to their rape – some will seem traumatized, some will seem numb, many will blame themselves. Some will pass judgment on victim / survivors, but we must support them.

Myth 3: Rapists are all ugly, leering men on a dark street corner.

Reality Check 3: Rapists, like batterers, can be charming, convincing and “model citizens.” Most rapists' parents and friends will defend the rapist, and might attack the survivor – challenging “her version” of the story. This myth of rapists helps charming rapists garner sympathy and collusion – any rapist should be held accountable, even if he is a “good guy.”

Myth 4: A stranger jumping out from behind a bush using physical force is the worst form of rape.

Reality Check 4: Most rapists know their victim – many are trusted friends and family members. Certainly stranger rape is very difficult for the survivor, but when the rapist is someone they know, the trauma can be as bad, or even worse. Many rapists do not use physical force – they use coercion and cajoling, alcohol and drugs. Survivors who succumbed to coercion often blame themselves for letting the person in the door, for drinking, for not saying no more strenuously – again, it is the rapist's fault, not the survivor's.

Myth 5: Sexual assault and rape are usually “he said / she said” communication problems.

Reality Check 5: There are many ways to say “No,” both verbal and nonverbal. Rapists choose to continue despite receiving clear messages that the person they are with is uncomfortable – they choose to try to “make them relax” rather than backing off. Many rapists will testify that the sex was consensual – usually this is the rapist minimizing the extent that they pressured or cajoled the victim/survivor.

Myth 6: Men can’t be expected to stop when they are aroused.

Reality Check 6: Guys – imagine yourself in high school. You have a girlfriend and you’re at her house, kissing. Her parents suddenly come home. You would stop then! So you can stop when she wants you to.

Myth 7: Anti-rape advocates are also anti-male.

Reality Check 7: Holding men accountable to our behavior is not anti-male – it is anti-rape. Since most rapists are men, it is our responsibility as a gender to support survivors and speak out against rape. We need to make these issues “men’s issues” and support women who have been taking leadership in this movement for so many years. We need to interrupt rape-supportive behavior such as sexist jokes, pornography, degrading and objectifying images of women, sexism, racism, homophobia, etc. We need to support our local rape crisis center, and groups like Men Can Stop Rape www.mencanstoprape.org. We need to keep raising our voices until this violence stops.

If you or someone you know might be the victim of rape, call 1-800-656-HOPE to be connected to the rape crisis center closest to you. Or visit www.rainn.org to text an online advocate.

Until the violence stops, Ben.

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