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More than One Definition for Sexual Assault

By Ben Atherton-Zeman/ Local Columnist

When I was a college student, my primary goal was to “hook up.” I never saw myself as a bad guy, certainly not a rapist. However, in retrospect, I am ashamed and embarrassed by some of my behavior. I’m writing this partly to warn other young men – don’t do what I did!

Anyone can be a victim or perpetrator of sexual violence. But the vast majority of perpetrators are heterosexual men, and as a man, I feel a responsibility to work to guide men away from rape and sexual assault.

Most young men believe that sexual assault is wrong, but they define sexual assault as using physical force. While many reported sexual assaults involve physical force, most sexual assaults involve verbal or emotional force, manipulation or the threat of physical force. Many victim/survivors blame themselves for their own rape, and most may find reporting the assault more difficult in instances where no physical force was used.

Many in the rape prevention movement speak of a “rape culture.” I’d like to suggest some “Cs” that I believe belong on the continuum of rape culture.

Constraint: Some victim/survivors are raped and assaulted with the use of force, the threat of force, weapons, etc. Some are forcibly drugged by so-called “date rape” drugs such as Rohypnol. Some are raped by a stranger, but most rape victims know their attacker.

Coercion: Some victim/survivors are coerced into having sex or being sexual. The guy cares about the person he’s with, but cares about the sex more. Her saying “no” is ignored – he continues to ask and ask until her defenses crumble – she might even say, “yes,” just to get it over with. Her “consent” is therefore coerced and “manufactured” by him.

Convincing/cajoling: The guy wants the sex or the “fooling around” to be consensual, but edits out all her responses that don’t sound like consent. He manufactures her consent by giving her a massage, kissing her, putting his arm around her – all towards the goal of “getting her to relax” and agree to become sexual. She may “consent” in the end, but may regret it afterward – having no outward “rape” to point to, she blames herself and dismisses her feelings that something was wrong about the whole situation.

Charm: Using playful humor, her response of “no” is changed to a “yes” by his charm. Some of what we know as “romance” comes to play here – he buys her dinner, compliments her on

how she looks, gives her alcohol or drugs which she freely accepts. She is attracted to him, and may want to kiss him initially – using this charm, he successfully increases her arousal until she agrees to have sex or be sexual.

When I was in college, I never constrained anyone I wanted to be with. But, sadly, I did all four other things: I charmed, cajoled, convinced and even coerced occasionally. I cared about the women I was with, but I also cared about being with them sexually. I never would have fooled around with anyone without their consent, so where the consent wasn't immediately present, I manufactured it as best I could.

Guys! Don't make the same mistakes I did. These five "Cs" are dangerous for you and damaging for the women and/or men you're with. Choose instead some other "Cs":

Communication: Find out what your partner's desires, preferences, moods are. You can be romantic and sexy while also being communicative. Learn her/his bodily responses – when is s/he turned on Turned off Tense Check out your assumptions.

Consent: If you've been kissing and you want to fool around, ask if it's OK. If you've been fooling around and you want to have sex, ask if it's OK. Better still, make the decision together as a couple, "should we?" Watch for body language, tensing up, closing eyes, etc.

Choice: Even young men sometimes choose not to have sex! It's important that we check in with ourselves, our desires, and not simply go for sex when what we might want is intimacy, closeness, or nothing at all. And, of course, respect our partner's choice to do the same.

In 1988, noted linguist and activist Noam Chomsky authored the book, "Manufacturing Consent," about the mass media's ability to manipulate the public's response to an authoritarian government. As the fall college semester approaches, many young men will seek to "manufacture consent" when they return to campus. I urge you to resist this impulse to put physical gratification over morality, over responsibility, over accountability. Sexual assault is about power and control – we may not intend to exert that power, but the effect is that we do exert it.

Guys, we may not have ever committed a sexual assault, but respectful behavior on our parts will help create a climate where true communication becomes the norm in relationships. This will certainly reduce the harm done to women and men on our campuses, and in our communities. And we'll be better men because of it.

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Anyone who thinks they may have been sexually assaulted can call the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE.