

Acquaintance Sexual Assault

Acquaintance Sexual Assault is any sexual assault that takes place where the person who experiences the assault knows the person who exhibited the sexually violent behaviours. This can be someone they know well (like a partner, family member, or friend) or someone that they hardly know (like someone they have recently met).

According to Statistics Canada, Acquaintance Sexual Assault accounts for about 87% of all sexual assaults in which a charge was laid by police¹. Despite this, when sexual assault is depicted in the media it is typically a stranger sexual assault. This can make it very difficult for someone who has experienced an acquaintance sexual assault to define their experience as such.

When someone hasn't been able to name what happened to them as a sexual assault, they might find themselves wondering why they've been impacted so strongly and, as a result, may feel as though they're "going crazy" or overreacting. It can be helpful to understand that if this comes up for you, you are not crazy—and if you are supporting someone in your life, it can be helpful to walk them through the definition of acquaintance sexual assault. In acquaintance sexual assault, coercion is one of the primary tools used to force sexual contact. In fact, coercion was used in more than 40% of the sexual assaults that were disclosed to the U of A Sexual Assault Centre in 2010. **Coercion** is

the use of pressure, threats, or intimidation to force another person to 'give in' or 'submit' to sexual activity. According to the Criminal Code of Canada (s. 273.1(2)), consent must be voluntary. If an agreement to engage in sexual touch is obtained through coercive techniques it is not voluntary, and therefore not valid.

Because coercion is a less obvious form of violence compared to physical force, many people dismiss it as less serious, **but it is not**. Verbal and emotional threats or tactics are just as damaging and controlling as physical threats.

The following are some examples of the many different forms of coercion:

- Constantly putting pressure on someone (eg. Asking again and again until the other person submits)
- Making someone feel guilty, or being otherwise emotionally manipulative (eg. Saying something like "if you really loved me, you would do this")
- Refusing to take "no" for an answer
- Threatening to withhold something or to do something to make someone comply (eg. Threatening to withhold access to finances)
- Using body position or physical size to threaten someone into submitting or complying, or physically harming something in the other person's vicinity (eg. Punching a wall)

¹Rotenberg, Cristine (2017). Police-reported sexual assaults in Canada, 2009 to 2014: A statistical profile
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2017001/article/54866-eng.htm>

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Common Reactions to Acquaintance Sexual Assault

Self Blame

Many people who experience acquaintance sexual assault will blame themselves for their experience. This is especially true when the person who assaulted them is someone who they knew and/or trusted. This often results in the individual who experienced the violence questioning why they trusted that person to begin with. When this comes up, it is important to recognize that someone who has experienced sexual assault is **never to blame for what another person chose to do to them.**

In some cases, if the individual who was sexually assaulted was under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time of the assault, this can make them feel that they are to blame because they chose to drink or use substances. However, **choosing to drink or use substances is not choosing to be sexually assaulted.** Drinking in social situations is a normal and culturally accepted behaviour—and we should all be able to drink with others without our boundaries being violated. In Canadian Law, consent cannot be given if a person is highly intoxicated or high. This might look like passing in and out of consciousness, not being able to carry a conversation, or not being able to fully comprehend the situation.²

Struggles with Trust

In an acquaintance sexual assault, the person who committed the sexual assault abused the trust of another person. As a result of this, it is normal for someone who experienced an acquaintance sexual assault to feel unsure about who is worthy of their

trust—both now and in the future. This can result in difficulty establishing new relationships or maintaining established ones. They may also have a difficult time disclosing to other people in their lives about their experience, especially if the person who committed the assault is known to the people in their life. If you are supporting someone in your life who has experienced an acquaintance sexual assault, it is important to provide them with the space that they may need to process their experience, and know that rebuilding trust may take time.

Personal Safety Concerns

It is difficult to feel safe after the betrayal of an acquaintance sexual assault, and this can often leave folks feeling unsafe with the people who are closest to them. A large part of recovery will involve reestablishing a sense of personal safety.

While there are many different ways this can look for folks, some may avoid situations or locations similar to where the assault took place—for example, they may avoid social gatherings, first dates, or bars. It is important to be gentle with yourself if this comes up for you, or for someone you are supporting.

Disclosure

It is hard to know who to trust to tell about a sexual assault. Unfortunately, many people hold attitudes and beliefs about sexual assault that are misguided and potentially damaging to individuals who have experienced it. There is no guarantee that the person

²Doolittle, Robyn (2017) Unfounded: How Alcohol Complicates Sex-Assault Cases
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/investigations/unfounded-too-drunk-to-consent-how-alcohol-complicates-sex-assault-cases/article34338370/>

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one chooses to disclose to will be supportive. This is most often true when the person receiving the disclosure knows the person who committed the sexual assault. Many people struggle to accept that people they know and trust could do something like commit sexual assault, so they may be less likely to believe the person who experienced the sexual assault, or they may blame them for what happened. Further, since acquaintance sexual assault does not fit the stereotypical stranger sexual assault situation, many potential supporters have a difficult time seeing it as sexual assault.

That being said, many people make wonderful supporters, as being a great supporter involves listening to the person who has been harmed, believing what they say, exploring options with them, and then letting them make their own choices. Choosing who to disclose to can be as simple as using intuition and choosing someone who seems good to talk to. It could also be helpful for someone to think about who they've had tough conversations with in the past and how each person handled those conversations. Speaking with someone at the Sexual Assault Centre can also help folks to identify supportive people in their life.

Recovery

Recovering from Acquaintance Sexual Assault is a process as unique as each individual. Many people find it helpful to speak to someone at a Sexual Assault Centre who can work with them as they go through their own recovery process. With time, one can learn to work through the issues they may find themselves facing as a result of their experience.

Recovering or healing from a sexual assault does not mean never thinking about the sexual assault again or not having strong feelings about it; rather, recovery is a process by which one learns to integrate their sexual assault experience into the rest of their lives, make deep and lasting changes, and reconnect to themselves and those around them.