

What is sexual assault?

Sexual assault and abuse is any type of sexual activity that you do not agree to, including:

- Inappropriate touching
- Vaginal, anal, or oral penetration
- Sexual intercourse that you say no to
- Rape
- Attempted rape
- Child molestation

Sexual assault can be verbal, visual, or anything that forces a person to join in unwanted sexual contact or attention. Examples of this are voyeurism (when someone watches private sexual acts), exhibitionism (when someone exposes him/herself in public), incest (sexual contact between family members), and sexual harassment. It can happen in different situations: in the home by someone you know, on a date, or by a stranger in an isolated place.

Rape is a common form of sexual assault. It is committed in many situations — on a date, by a friend or an acquaintance, or when you think you are alone. Educate yourself on “date rape” drugs. They can be slipped into a drink when a victim is not looking. Never leave your drink unattended — no matter where you are. Attackers use date rape drugs to make a person unable to resist assault. These drugs can also cause memory loss so the victim doesn’t know what happened.

Rape and sexual assault are never the victim’s fault — no matter where or how it happens.

You'd think it would be easy to draw a line between pleasurable, healthy sex and the destructive violence of sexual abuse and sexual assault. One involves two willing and enthusiastic partners. The other shatters a human being's soul, leaving them struggling to cope and to heal. How can that be so confusing?

The reality is that the boundary between sex and sexual abuse has never really been easy to see. In fact, our hyperactive world of popular culture and remote-control social networking has made the line fuzzier than ever.

Everyone can benefit from a clearer understanding of the differences. To figure out where the real lines are drawn, let's start with a few factual definitions:

Consent: Today's culture conditions us to believe that the line of sexual consent is conveniently blurry. When a woman happens to drink too much at a party, accepts a ride home with a guy, or even winds up on his sofa or in his bed, her consent to have sex is often assumed or taken for granted.

The Criminal Code of Canada defines consent as a "voluntary agreement" to engage in sexual activity. If a woman says 'no' to sex verbally or shows it through her conduct, consent doesn't exist. If she's asleep, drunk or passed out, she's incapable of consenting to sex. And if YOU'RE drunk, that's not an excuse for

believing she's consented to having sex with you. 'NO' is always the where line gets drawn, no matter how she communicates it.

Even if a woman does initially agree to engage in sexual activity, that consent instantly disappears if she changes her mind AT ANY POINT.

Whether it's expressed through words or actions, 'NO' IS THE LINE, period. If BOTH people in a sexual encounter haven't knowingly, willingly and clearly agreed to be involved, it's likely that sexual assault has occurred. And that's a crime.

Sexual assault: If you engage in ANY form of sexual activity, up to and including actual intercourse, without a person's consent, you're committing sexual assault according to the Criminal Code of Canada. This definitely includes:

- Kissing, fondling, touching, oral/anal sex or sexual intercourse without consent
- Not stopping sexual contact when requested
- Compelling or physically forcing someone to engage in any sexual act, including intercourse

Sexual harassment: Sexual harassment involves any unwelcome behavior that's sexual in nature which negatively affects, or threatens to affect, directly or indirectly, someone's job security, working conditions or their prospects for promotion or earnings, or prevents someone from getting a job, a place to live or obtaining any kind of public service.

These activities are all considered to be sexual harassment:

- Suggestive remarks, sexual jokes or compromising invitations
- Verbal abuse
- Visual display of suggestive images
- Leering or whistling
- Patting, rubbing or other unwanted physical contact
- Outright demands for sexual favors

Now, look beyond these legalistic definitions. They really don't capture what good sex is all about: mutual enthusiasm, enjoyment and fulfillment. The better you and your prospective partner communicate, which means listening, stating your desires clearly and asking if the situation is unclear, the more you'll both ensure a safe and healthy sexual experience. These are the Rules of Engagement to remember, especially in highly-charged social situations:

- 1) Watch your partner's alcohol or drug intake so that you're aware of their ability to consent. Someone who is drunk, passed out, high or stoned cannot legally give their consent to have sex. If they aren't able to consent with full awareness, it just doesn't count. And if YOU'RE under the influence of alcohol or drugs, your own awareness and judgment are also greatly reduced. You need to back off until both of you are in a sober state of mind to clearly and enthusiastically say yes to sex. If you can't do that, why would anyone want to share sex with you?
- 2) Don't misinterpret body language. Does kissing mean that both people want to have sex? Does flirting or dancing, or even close physical contact? How do you know for sure? Ask before you act. Remember: consent is always critical, and 'NO' IS THE LINE.

- 3) If consent is withdrawn, accept it. Sexual situations are usually emotionally charged. They're also sometimes confusing and maybe even stressful. Even after someone has given their consent to sex, it can be withdrawn at any time and for any reason. If it happens, you may feel frustrated or resentful. Get over it. We all deserve the right to change our minds.
- 4) Understand the consequences. The aftermath of sexual abuse and sexual assault only starts with the unwilling survivor. The impacts expand outward like ripples on water, affecting the lives of more and more people: partners, family members, friends, co-workers and many others.

Survivors of sexual assault frequently suffer some or all of these physical and emotional effects:

- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Stomachache
- Headache
- Loss of memory or concentration
- Depression
- Mood swings
- Disrupted sleep patterns
- Denial, shame or humiliation
- Fear or anxiety
- Feelings of lost control or self-respect
- Flashbacks
- Anger
- Retaliation fantasies
- Nervous or compulsive behavior
- Increased substance use/abuse
- Withdrawal from human contact
- Difficulty trusting self and others
- Sexual dysfunction

Human relationships are incredibly delicate and often bewildering. None of us can claim to have mastered the art of interacting with the many complex people who wander in and out of our lives. Add the element (or even the possibility) of sexual contact, and things get even more complicated.

If you remember that 'NO' IS THE LINE, plus these simple Rules of Engagement, you'll have a useful guide to navigating in the social arena without damaging someone's life and potentially doing something you'll regret for the rest of your life.