

## Misconceptions and Myths

There are many misconceptions and myths about sexualized violence. They inform the way we think, and how we respond to sexualized violence. These myths deeply affect survivors, and are a barrier to people seeking support and justice. Many of us who have experienced sexualized violence have internalized these ideas, and this can lead to feelings of shame and guilt.

**Sexualized violence is never a survivor's fault.  
Believe survivors.**

**Myth: Sexualized violence is about sex.**

**Reality:** Sexualized violence is about one person exercising power and control over another person. We know some individuals and groups experience sexualized violence at higher rates, due to intersecting forms of oppression including colonialism, racism, ableism, ageism, classism, homophobia, etc.

**Myth: Sexualized violence is a physical, violent assault.**

**Reality:** Sexualized violence is any unwanted actual, attempted, or threatened act of behaviour. It includes a continuum of behavior from unwanted sexual jokes or sexualized “compliments,” to sharing sexualized images without consent, to indecent exposure, sexual harassment, and sexual assault.

**Myth: It is not sexualized violence if there was no intent to cause harm.**

**Reality:** Saying, “I didn’t mean to cause harm” or “I didn’t realize I’d caused harm” is not a valid excuse or defense in relation to sexualized violence. Similarly, not feeling that your behaviour was sexual in nature, or that you were incapacitated at the time, are not valid excuses or defenses. It is each of our responsibility to seek and establish consent.

**Myth: Strangers in parks and unlit alleyways commit sexualized violence.**

**Reality:** The majority of the time, the survivor knows the person assaulting them. According to statistics in Canada, 87% of survivors who report to police know their assailant (Statistics Canada, 2017). Over two thirds (62%) of reported incidences of sexualized violence occurs in a home (Statistics Canada, 2017).

**Myth: If a person agrees to go to someone’s room, leave a bar together, or engage in some form of sexual activity with a person, they should assume the risk of sexual assault.**

**Reality:** A person can consent to some sexual activity and not others. Consent must be



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given at the outset and at all stages of the physical contact or activity; it can be withdrawn at any time by any participant. Importantly, past consent does not imply future consent.

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**Myth: It is not sexual assault if it happens after drinking or taking drugs.**

**Reality:** A person who is incapacitated cannot consent. A person under the influence of drugs or alcohol does not cause others to assault them.

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**Myth: Sexualized violence can't be committed by a family member or spouse.**

**Reality:** Any person, regardless of the relationship to the survivor, can commit sexualized violence. Past consent does not imply future consent to sexual activity, no matter the relationship.

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**Myth: People who are sexually assaulted "ask for it" either in the way they dress or the "lifestyle" they lead.**

**Reality:** People should be free to act and dress however they want without fear of being assaulted. Neither provocative attire nor behavior is an invitation for unwanted sexual activity.

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**Myth: Sexual assaults are only committed by men against women.**

**Reality:** Anyone can commit sexualized violence and anyone can experience sexualized violence. While over 90% of sexual assaults are committed by men, the reality is most men do not commit sexualized violence (Statistics Canada, 2017). Survivors are disproportionately made up of women and trans, 2spirit, gendervariant and gender non-conforming people.

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**Myth: A person who has been sexually assaulted will want to report the crime to the police.**

**Reality:** There are many reasons why people don't want to report sexualized violence to police. Some fear they will be blamed or not believed or that they will get in trouble (e.g. if substance use is involved). Others want to avoid reliving a traumatic experience, especially if they believe the respondent won't be held accountable.

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**Myth: Sexualized violence only happened if a survivor actively fought back.**

**Reality:** There are many reasons why people don't actively resist. They may avoid fighting back to prevent more serious injury and to keep themselves as safe as possible. In some cases a person's physiological response to attack or injury is to freeze. In instances



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where the person committing sexualized violence holds or is perceived to hold power over the survivor (e.g., employer, supervisor, mentor, teacher) they may feel unable to say no or resist for fear of the consequences.

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**Myth: People who have experienced sexualized violence will be visibly upset.**

**Reality:** People respond to trauma in a wide range of ways including calm detachment, anger, avoidance, even laughter. According to research, they do so for a range of biological, environmental, and social reasons (Randall and Haskell, 2013).

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**Myth: Many people make false reports of sexualized violence. They do so because they regret their earlier choices or out of revenge.**

**Reality:** We do not have confirmed statistics on the number of people who make false reports in Canada due to significant challenges in data collection. Police-reported crimes in Canada exclude incidents deemed “unfounded” and do not currently collect statistics on false reports due to data quality concerns (Statistics Canada, 2017). A study that provides a meta-analysis of the available research indicates that false reporting is low, between 2–10% (Ferguson and Malouff, 2016). The persistent rumor of false reporting undermines efforts to create safe spaces for people to report and get the support they need. The university has fair and transparent reporting and investigation procedures in place.



### References:

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