

Sexual Assault

Unfortunately, non-consensual sexual contact occurs all too frequently during the college years. Sexual assault can happen to both males and females. However, over 90% of people who are sexually assaulted are female. Statistics suggest that 1 in 8 college women have been sexually assaulted. However, it is difficult to determine with certainty the actual incidence of sexual assault because most women do not report what happened to campus security, school administrators, or police. In fact, many women never tell anyone about the assault, and are left to cope with the emotional consequences alone. Unfortunately, avoiding seeking help from others limits recovery and healing from the trauma of a sexual assault.

Acquaintance or date rape, in which a woman is assaulted by someone known to her, is by far the most common kind of sexual assault for both college-aged women and women in general. It is estimated that 85% of women who have been sexually assaulted know their assailant. For college women, a potential assailant may be a man she meets on campus or through friends, someone she encountered at a bar or party, or a current or ex-boyfriend. In many cases, substance use, especially alcohol, plays a role in sexual assault. Estimates are that 3 out of 4 men who assault women and 1 in 4 women who are assaulted were drinking or using drugs at the time of the assault. Alcohol use increases the likelihood of assault in part because intoxication contributes to poor communication about sexual intention and expectations. A man may also wrongly assume that a woman is automatically sexually “available” when there is alcohol involved. Sexual assault also may result from an assailant taking advantage of a woman’s diminished capacity to set limits or protect herself when she has been drinking.

There are some men who purposefully intend to assault women who are in vulnerable situations. However, many men who commit sexual assault do not see their actions as wrong, and do not think that they have caused harm or injury. A man may be encouraged by a college social environment in which men are supposed “to score.” He may think women need to be persuaded to have sex, or believe that her body language gave him the green light. He may view her style of dress, flirtatiousness, or his own sexual arousal as justification for the assault. Or he may believe that her initial willingness to kiss or touch meant it was ok to keep going without her consent. For a woman who has been sexually assaulted, these kinds of justifications can be confusing and difficult to reconcile with her own experience of violation, betrayal, and serious emotional and physical pain. To recover, she must recognize that situational circumstances (e.g. being drunk, losing one’s friends, going off alone or getting a ride from him, having her dinner paid, having had previous consensual sex with him) do not mean she asked for or deserved to be sexually assaulted.

Emotional Consequences of Sexual Assault

Women who have been sexually assaulted typically experience symptoms of emotional trauma. Each woman’s response to sexual assault will differ depending on individual circumstances, prior history of sexual assault or other types of trauma, and her typical style of coping. The following emotional consequences of sexual assault are common, and are expected reactions to a traumatic event:

Shock or Numbness

After being sexually assaulted, many women initially experience emotional shock and numbness. Common reactions to sexual assault include feeling emotionally detached, feeling confused and in a state of disbelief. A woman is likely to feel that something very wrong has happened, but does not yet know how to understand or make sense of what occurred. It is also common to experience difficulty keeping track of time, making it to class and keeping appointments.

Fear and Anxiety

Feelings of fear and anxiety typically occur after a sexual assault. A woman who is sexually assaulted may fear encountering her assailant, and may experience intense distress at reminders of the assault. She may also have more general fears, such as fearing men, being afraid of being alone, or just feeling afraid much of the time without obvious cause. It is also common to feel keyed up and nervous, to experience panic attacks, or to be unable to sit through class or interact with others. Some women may cope by appearing outwardly calm and controlled, but underneath feel very distressed.

Reliving the Memory of What Happened

A woman who has been sexually assaulted typically relives the event in some way. She may feel upset and distressed in an ongoing way, experience nightmares or “flashbacks,” or have unexpected, intrusive thoughts or feelings about the assault.

Minimizing or Not Believing What Happened

A woman who is sexually assaulted may want to just forget what happened, and may avoid thinking about it. She may be reluctant to label the experience as an assault or rape. She may insist she’s fine. She may even feel that it is behind her initially, but then experience difficulty later. Abuse of alcohol or drugs may result from trying to forget. A woman who has been sexually assaulted often fears not being believed, and she is likely to avoid going to friends and family who could provide support and legitimize her experience.

Self-blame and Guilt

Many women who have been sexually assaulted feel that they are to blame for what happened. Self-reproach about incidents leading up to the assault, or not doing enough to prevent it is common. It is important for her to recognize that freezing or emotionally shutting down during a sexual assault is a common way that the mind deals with serious threat. Women who do not tell friends or family what happened are forced to deal with the emotional aftermath alone. This can lead to long term psychological difficulties. It is important to remember that she is not responsible for his actions.

Shame

Many women who have been sexually assaulted feel deeply ashamed. This shame contributes to feeling isolated and different from others. It is common to feel degraded or damaged, and these feelings may translate in to a sense of being “dirty” or “ugly.” Many women want to shower or bathe immediately after the assault, and there may be an ongoing concern with cleanliness.

Depression

A woman who has been sexually assaulted may struggle with symptoms of depression, including sleep problems, fatigue and difficulty concentrating.

Loss of Trust and Relationship Difficulties

A woman who has been sexually assaulted often loses her natural ability to trust and rely on others. She may also lose faith in her own ability to discern danger, and to accurately judge the character and trustworthiness of others. Isolation, withdrawal and interpersonal conflicts in friendships and family relationships are also common after sexual assault. Women who have been sexually assaulted may fear dating situations, experience difficulty in relationship with males and have sexual difficulties.

Anger

Women who are sexually assaulted may feel angry. Anger may be directed toward the assailant, themselves, the assault itself, or the way others reacted. Anger may also generalize to daily irritations in life that ordinarily would be experienced as minor.

A Sense of Loss of Control

A woman who has been sexually assaulted is likely to feel that her personal control over her life and her privacy have been taken away from her. She may feel powerless and helpless as a result of the assault.

Academic Difficulty and Disorganization

College women who have been sexually assaulted may have academic difficulty, due to missing classes, deadlines and appointments. Confusion, sleeplessness at night, depression, anxiety and withdrawal can lead to academic crisis.

Physical Problems

Emotional consequences of the assault may emerge as physical symptoms, such as stomach distress, headaches, or muscle tension.

What to Do if You Have Been Sexually Assaulted

If you have been sexually assaulted, it is important to get yourself to a safe place. Remember, you are not to blame. Consider telling someone you trust who can give you comfort and emotional support, and try not to isolate yourself. Seek medical attention to address the possibility of injury, pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease. Although it may go against your instincts, it is best to initially not shower, or discard clothes you were wearing. This limits your ability to take legal action if you decide to do so.

The Union College Counseling Center can help give you confidential guidance and support. Your appointments are confidential, and you are not required to report the assault as a result of seeking counseling. Your counselor will help you to talk about and manage your feelings. The counselor is also available to help you consider your options and decide what will be most conducive to your healing in your individual situation. The Counseling Center is also available to help if your assault occurred in the past. It is not too late to seek help for a sexual assault, even if it happened a long time ago. Appointments may be scheduled by calling (518) 388-6161 or stopping by the front desk at the Wicker Wellness Center.

For medical questions, please consider consulting Union College Health Services.