

The Traumatic Effects of Sexual Assault: A literature review of the effects of sexual assault on  
college students

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## The Traumatic Effects of Sexual Assault: A literature review of the effects of sexual assault on college students

Sexual assault is a phrase many people associate with meaning rape; while it can include rape, it can also include any unwanted sexual experience, such as sexual comments. Sexual assault is a problem that plagues people of all ages, genders, and cultures. However, individuals aged 18-24 are more likely to be assaulted than any other age group and also constitute the age group that is most likely to commit a violent crime, such as sexual assault or murder (Perkins, 1997). This group also happens to be the age of most conventional college students. Roughly 1 in 5 females and 1 in 71 males will experience sexual assault while in college (McCauley, 2015) and of these assaults roughly 20% will actually be reported to police (Sinozich, 2014). Also, of the assaults that do occur, many will never be disclosed to anyone for reasons such as believing it is a personal matter or not important enough to report. Sexual assault can have negative effects on a victim's mental health, relationships, and functioning. It is extremely important that colleges learn how to prevent assaults and properly support and treat individuals who may be assaulted.

The majority of individuals who suffer from a sexual assault will be able to cope with it and move on with life in an effective manner due to resilience. However, for a small portion of the population this situation will have devastating consequences and may manifest itself into a mental health disorder such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression. Significant research has gone into determining what may cause PTSD and depression, how to identify each of them, and how best to go about treatment. Post-traumatic stress disorder is a disorder that would never manifest unless a traumatic event, like a sexual assault, was to occur. Depression may be comorbid with PTSD, or stand alone, and further complicate the healing and treatment

process for the victim. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) has criteria specifically mentioning sexual violence as a predictor for post-traumatic stress disorder that can lead to recurrent and intrusive memories or dreams, dissociation, avoidance, distress, and persistent negative emotional state to name a few (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). While investigating these topics, it was found that many articles targeted how assaults affect females, but there was a lack of information on males. Few articles dealt with the issue of how sexual assaults affect males specifically (Aosved, Long, & Voller, 2011). More research should be conducted into this area to completely understand how these situations may affect gender differently and to better treat victims. One of the few studies, regarding college males, found that those who had experienced sexual assault had greater prevalence of PTSD, depression, and other disorders in comparison to their non-victimized counterparts (Aosved, Long, & Voller, 2011). The research regarding female victims of sexual assault found this to be consistent as well. A study conducted in 2016 found that college females who had experienced sexual assault reported significant depressive and PTSD symptoms as well as reporting higher rates of victim shaming (DeCou, Cole, Lynch, Wong, & Matthews, 2016).

College campuses offer an environment that aids victim shaming in developing and to gain a hold over people's perceptions of victims that should be very carefully considered. One of the most prevalent reasons used during victim shaming is "you shouldn't have drunk so much" or some version of this phrase. Unfortunately, many cases of sexual assault go unreported and untreated due to this victim shaming mentality. It has been shown in several studies that supportive social reactions to admittance of sexual assault leads to less psychological distress on the victims part (e.g., Jonzon & Linblad, 2004; Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014). In contrast, when victims are met with negative social reactions they are less likely to disclose their assault in the

future and often have more severe symptoms of trauma related disorders. More research is needed to examine whether those who face negative social reactions but decide to seek treatment have corresponding success rates to those who seek treatment after positive social reactions. Fortunately, large amounts of information is available to provide the steps needed to facilitate positive environments for victims and positive treatment strategies, but psychology could benefit from more specialized looks into the topic of how sexual assault effects each gender, how victim shaming specifically predicts treatment success, and how to encourage more reporting of assaults so that the proper steps can be taken to prevent these tragedies in the future.

Individuals who suffer from trauma related disorders often have strained relationships as well. This can be due to how their disclosure was accepted, depression, and/or many other things. Victims of sexual assault who have been diagnosed with PTSD often have flashbacks of the experience when they are around environments that trigger those memories (American Psychological Association, 2013). These triggers can lead to an individual not wanting to partake in the events that led up to their sexual assault post trauma because of the fear it evokes within them. Also, relationships that have produced a negative social reaction to the disclosure of an assault can cause the individual to close themselves off from other people in fear of being rejected again (DeCou et. al., 2016). This can cause a circular process affecting worsening depressive symptoms of feeling worthless and thus causing the individual to remove themselves from existing relationships or stop himself/herself from attempting to form new ones. Little research has investigated into how sexual assaults directly impact existing and potential relationships. It would be interesting to see if individuals who do not develop PTSD have similar issues with their intimate and non-intimate relationships compared to those with PTSD. While research explored how sexual assault may affect sexual functioning, this idea could benefit from

being further expanded into how this affect on sexual functioning may impact the ability to keep an intimate relationship going. Also, research could investigate whether close, intimate relationships or friendly relationships end up being affected more by sexual assault.

While relationships may be difficult after sexual assault, everyday functioning can be impaired too. Tasks as mundane as leaving one's bedroom, can become difficult for someone who has suffered trauma. Some people may encourage the victim to continue in daily living while not recognizing sexual assault. One aspect that college sexual assault victims may have impaired functioning in is academics. Sexual assault can lead to decreased academic performance in college students because they may have difficulty in attending class, focusing on subject matter, attending study groups, or even wanting to do well in their courses. Students who reported some form of sexual assault had lower cumulative grade point averages than projected scores showed if an assaulted had not occurred (Baker et. al, 2016). This study accounted for antecedents such as known academic predictors (e.g. SAT), ethnicity, and personality traits such as conscientiousness in order to determine if the lower GPA was correlated with the assault or other outlying factors (Baker et. al, 2016). This study also found that students who experienced sexual assault had lower GPAs after four years than would have been predicted had sexual assault not occurred based on the comparison to the projected scores. Another find was that individuals who left college after a sexual assault gave the assault as the reason for their dropping out (Baker et. al, 2016). Jordan and associates (2014) looked at how varying types of sexual assault affected GPA and how it can be a predictor for lack of commitment to education. While these two articles (Baker et. al, 2016; Jordan, Combs, & Smith, 2014) do make an attempt at better understanding how sexual assault plays into academic performance, those who have not reported are not considered. Ideally, further research needs to be conducted to determine if non-

reporting victims suffer the same, or even potentially worse, effects on their academic career; however, doing research on victims who do not report is virtually impossible.

Function may also be affected by individuals who self-medicate to cope with the traumatic experience of assault. Research done by Turchik (2012) found that males and females who were victimized had an increased likelihood to engage in risky behaviors such as increased consumption of alcohol, drug use, and risky sexual behaviors like unprotected sex, sex with multiple partners, or anal sex. Also, partaking in these risky behaviors can lead to detrimental physical effects and even potentially death. It is extremely critical that research is conducted on interventions. Also, this research seems to conflict with the prior research stating that victims often will not attend events such as parties where these copious amounts of alcohol or drug consumption typically occur. These discrepancies make it difficult to recognize mediating variables related to sexual assault and reporting. Uncharacteristic drinking behaviors, while not conclusively indicate sexual assault, may warrant attention or indication of sexual assault. Research should explore the two paths that victims might partake in to further understand trauma resulting from sexual assault. As others who suffer from psychological disorders such as depression and PTSD, some victims of sexual assault often have trouble engaging in various situations so they may refrain from these engagements or self medicate to get through them, suffer from increased anxiety, and partake in escape behaviors. All of these symptoms as well as many others can affect the daily functioning that is often overlooked until a traumatic experience occurs.

With all of these factors in mind, it is important to address the issue of whether or not research has contributed to preventative measures of sexual assault needs to be addressed. After the research that had been done in regards to college sexual assaults began being published, all

public colleges were required to provide sexual assault prevention programs to students in hopes to lower the risk of sexual assault on their campus and foster a cultural change (Dills, Fowler, & Payne, 2016). Lower sexual assault rates could be used as incentives for students to attend that college, political gains, and even promotional statistics for programs that may be in place. For example, some institutions use a program called Haven that is required for all incoming freshman to complete through an online course to help administer information on sexual assault and alcohol awareness. The purpose behind these programs is to teach students how to detect signs and situations that could potentially result in some form of sexual assault against them or a peer and how to intervene appropriately and effectively. However, males and females often answered differently on willingness to intervene due to how they viewed what was going on in the situation. A study found that males were more likely to use bystander behaviors in regards to perpetration, such as advising a friend his actions may be under the sexual assault definition, while females were more likely to use bystander behaviors to combat sexual assault, such as remaining in groups (Amar, Sutherland & Laughon, 2014). Females were also more likely to report partaking in bystander intervention behaviors regardless of the gender of the victim. However, males and females alike reported they were less likely to intervene if the victim was a stranger rather than a close friend. This information is important to note because it could be potentially beneficial to provide gender specific prevention programs in order to increase likelihood of intervening. These programs could also focus on how gender roles play into rape myths and increasing efficacy towards victims that are strangers. Another consideration that needs further research is how effectively Haven actually works. This specific program is used across many campuses, 650 to be exact, so one may assume that it would be effective due to its large acceptance and use. However, it would likely be found that it is not as effective as it is

thought to be. This conclusion is drawn from the idea that Haven is set up in a way that students can just click through the simulation without ever actually reading or comprehending the information that is presented to them. It was found through talking with other students at ASU that many sophomores did not remember even taking the Haven course. This begs the question if they learned anything from it or just clicked through.

A solution that could be proposed to the potential lack of effectiveness of these online campaigns is to implement a program where a select group of students are educated and trained on how to identify risky situations and how to appropriately intervene. The members of this program would be able to cover a wide variety of social situations because they would be pulled from various social backgrounds such as honors students, Greek life, athletes, and campus leaders. They could be trained on how to detect situations that may promote sexual assault behaviors and intervene for those who may not receive help otherwise. This group could also provide education on where sexual assault victims can receive help, such as campus counseling centers, if it is desired. While this may not solve the problem completely, it is an avenue that research could be taken to see if it could help reduce the assault rate at all. The overarching problem that is causing unsuccessful prevention programs is a lack of desire to participate on the students' part. It would be beneficial to further look into what form of incentives or desired presentation of the data students are looking for in order to promote more engagement and thus better success in preventing assaults.

In summary, sexual assault is a topic that has been gaining more research in recent years. While this is a step in the right direction, more emphasis needs to be put onto specific aspects of the trauma that results from sexual assault. Having a broad understanding is a good starting point but can leave too many unanswered questions that result in missing key signs that could

potentially help a victim mentally and physically. Major Depressive Disorder and PTSD have been researched and give a good idea of what the struggles a victim might be facing. However, the interplay of how these disorders affect people after being assaulted in college settings needs to be investigated further in order to provide the best strategies to promote an environment that supports reporting these assaults, helps individuals cope with their attack in a positive manner, decreases likelihood for victim shaming behaviors, and ultimately decrease the chances of assaults happening in the future. More evidence is needed to create and grow a successful prevention program on university and college campuses. Overall, it was a pleasant surprise to see how much interest sexual assault specifically to college students is gaining; yet males are still being left out of the picture. Research how assaults affect males more thoroughly could potentially open up doors to discovering if these assaults could predict likelihood to intervene in an assault situation or to even be the person that attempts to victimize another individual.

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