

Sexual Coercion Awareness and Prevention

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From the time we reach high school, parents, teachers and the media are warning us of the prevalence and severity of date rape. We learn that date rape occurs much more frequently than stranger rape, and even our friends can perpetrate date rape against us. While date rape is a very serious issue and can cause much emotional distress, it is not the only type of harmful and inappropriate sexual behavior many college students are currently facing. Sexual coercion is rampant on college campuses across the country, yet does not receive as much attention as date rape because in a way the understanding of sexual coercion is cloaked in mystery. Keep reading to learn more about what sexual coercion is and how to defend yourself against sexual coercion.

What is Sexual Coercion?

Sexual coercion lies on the continuum of sexually aggressive behavior. This continuum includes many harmful and aggressive acts we hear frequently, such as rape, sexual abuse and sexual assault. We all know the definitions of the other behaviors on the sexual aggression continuum because the behaviors are very overt. Sexual coercion is different than the others on the continuum because of its subtleties. In fact, experts are still trying to figure out exactly how best to define sexual coercion because it encompasses so many behaviors and situations and includes a perceived unwillingness to get involved in sexual acts by the victim. The best definition of sexual coercion offered at this time is: *“the act of using pressure, alcohol or drugs, or force to have sexual contact with someone against his or her will; ... tactics of postrefusal sexual persistence [used are] defined as persistent attempts to have sexual contact with someone who has already refused”* (Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson & Anderson, 2003, p. 76).

I know what you're wondering ... what does this definition actually mean? Let's break the definition down into its parts so you can get a strong understanding of what sexual coercion is.

- **The act of using pressure ... to have sexual contact:**

Pressure in this case can mean physical pressure, verbal pressure or emotional pressure. Physical pressure can include hitting, kicking and slapping the victim; holding the victim down; continuing with the sexual behavior after the victim has been told to stop; and even

continuing to kiss the victim as he/she tries to pull away. Verbal pressure includes behaviors like threatening to use physical force against the victim, yelling at the victim, name calling, tricking, lying, blackmailing and badgering the victim. Emotional pressure is used much more frequently than physical and verbal pressure and is the most subtle of all the sexual coercion tactics. Using emotional pressure includes the perpetrator convincing the victim that he/she cares more for the victim than he/she actually does, threatening a break-up, wearing the victim down by using the same tactic over and over again, making the victim feel obligated to participate in sexual acts, guilt-tripping the victim participating, utilizing peer pressure and even the perpetrator using his/her position of authority over the victim.

- **Alcohol or drugs ... to have sexual contact:**

Using drugs and/or alcohol is one of the most frequently used sexual coercion tactics by men and is the number one sexual coercion tactic utilized by women. Using club drugs like rohypnol and GHB to obtain sex is not sexual coercion ... that is rape. Drugs and alcohol in the context of sexual coercion, on the other hand, focuses more on providing an abundance of alcohol to “loosen” somebody's inhibitions or taking advantage of someone's drunkenness. While perpetrators might view providing alcohol as a way to open a window where the door might be shut, getting someone drunk to get sex (or sexual contact) is sexual coercion. While perpetrators may see someone really intoxicated as a perfect opportunity, it is sexual coercion.

- **Sexual contact:**

We all learned long ago that rape involves a perpetrator physically forcing vaginal or anal intercourse on a victim after the victim has communicated clearly that intercourse is undesired. Rape is one aspect of sexual coercion, but sexual coercion includes so many more sexual acts than merely intercourse. Sexual coercion includes kissing, caressing, petting, oral sex, genital touching and any other sexually laden behavior that makes the victim feel uncomfortable.

- **Against his or her will:**

Being against the will of the victim taps into all we have discussed thus far with physical, verbal and emotional pressure and using drugs and alcohol so the victim cannot dissent. Against the will of the victim is the coercion part of sexual coercion—making the victim participate in sexual acts when he/she does not want to. Against the will of the victim addresses the internal experiences of the victim when

the sexual acts are occurring and after. Words commonly associated with being against someone's will are compelled, coerced, unable to refuse, imposed upon and pressured.

- **Tactics of postrefusal sexual persistence [used are] defined as persistent attempts to have sexual contact with someone who has already refused:**

This is a convoluted way of saying that the perpetrator continued with the sexual acts after the victim has already said no either before the act occurred, hence the emotional and verbal pressure, or while the act is occurring, hence the physical and verbal pressure.

The Prevalence of Sexual Coercion

Researchers have started to take a good look into the where, when and how of sexual coercion. They discovered that sexual coercion occurs leaps and bounds more frequently with college students than any other cohort because of the college lifestyle. Fun as it may be at times, the college lifestyle provides the perfect setting for sexual coercion to happen.

Researchers found that both men and women are perpetrators and victims of sexual coercion. And shockingly, approximately 70% of college students surveyed reported they have been sexually coerced and 33% of college students surveyed admitted to having used sexually coercive behaviors against their partners. Of the college students who have been sexually coerced, roughly 70% stated they knew their perpetrators, further clarifying the perpetrators were either a boyfriend/girlfriend, a friend or an acquaintance. This indicates the vast majority of those who experienced victimization of sexual coercion knew their perpetrator. To make the prevalence statistics even scarier, in 59% of the instances, the victim had previously consented to sexual activity with their perpetrators, 40% of which consented on the day of the coercive incident.

The sexual acts reported by victims of sexual coercion that were most frequently used included kissing and vaginal intercourse. The tactics that perpetrators reported utilizing most frequently were alcohol and drugs, emotional manipulation, and lying. The perpetrators also claimed their main reason for committing sexual coercion was their extreme sexual arousal. These first-hand reports indicate that sexual coercion is not about power, but about sex.

Sexual Coercion Prevention

Now that you have more information about what sexual coercion is, our focus switches to what you can do to remain safe.

Learning to recognize sexual coercion

The following are common comments/situations that someone might use to get you participate in sexual acts with them:

- *"Everybody's doing it."*
- *"Sex is the way to prove your love for me."*
- *"We've had sex before, so you can't say no now."*
- *Giving compliments that sound extreme or insincere.*
- *Put-downs or guilt trips*
- *Buying gifts or spending money to make you feel you "owe" sex.*

If you can answer yes to any of these questions, you may be experiencing sexual coercion:

- *Do you feel pressure from your date, partner or friends?*
- *Are there times you don't want to have sex, but feel like you can't say no?*
- *Have you ever had a sexual experience that left you frightened, angry or feeling guilty?*
- *Have you ever had sex without using a condom because your partner didn't want to use one?*

Learning to avoid unwanted sex

Trust your feelings and follow your instincts if you:

- *Feel uncomfortable with a situation in any way*
- *Recognize signs of possible sexual coercion. Say no firmly and then leave immediately. And, seek help if needed.*

Learn ways to respond to sexual pressure. You could say:

- *"I really like you. I'm just not ready to have sex."*
- *"If you really care about me, you'll respect my decision."*
- *"I said no. I don't owe you an explanation."*

Avoid alcohol and other drugs. Drugs and alcohol can:

- *Harm your judgment.*
- *Make it harder to resist a sexual situation.*
- *Make your partner more aggressive.*
- *Make you black out—especially if a date rape drug has been slipped in your drink.*

Seek help if needed

CAPS is here for you if you are having a difficult time adjusting after being sexually coerced. CAPS is also here for you if you recognize you use sexual coercion tactics with your partners and you want to learn more adaptive ways to experience sexual intimacy with your boyfriend/girlfriend, dates and friends.

References

O'Sullivan, Byers, & Finkelman (1998). A comparison of male and female college students' experiences of sexual coercion.

Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, & Anderson (2003). Tactics of sexual coercion: When men and women won't take no for an answer.

Florida Department of Health (2002). Avoiding sexual coercion.

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

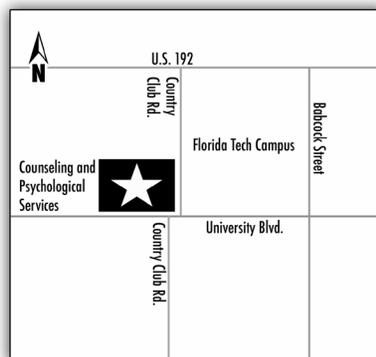
CAPS is a counseling facility operated by Florida Institute of Technology's School of Psychology. Its goals are to promote the best possible academic, vocational and emotional health. Our services are available to students and their immediate families. Counseling services are available on campus at CAPS (674-8050), off campus at the Women's Center (727-2200) or through your private health care provider.

Center Hours

Monday–Thursday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. • Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Location

Intersection of Country Club Road and University Boulevard, west of Babcock Street



For additional counseling and academic success resources and helpful articles, visit www.fit.edu/caps or call 674-8050.

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**Knowing the Facts
and Protecting Yourself**

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