

Love & Limits

Romance has always been something of a battlefield, but it's never created more casualties than it does today. Still, there's good news from the front: Peace is possible, if we all do what we have it in our power to do. Here are some places to start:

■ **If you're a woman:** Be clear about your sexual feelings and expectations, and be careful about who you share those feelings with. Realize that some men interpret casual talk and body language as sexual come-ons and respond accordingly. And don't drink too much or do drugs on a date.

■ **If you're a man:** Know that "no" means no. Respect a woman's right to turn you down, and don't let your self-esteem hinge on whether you score or not. And don't overdo it, drinking- and drug-wise, on a date, either.

Because ultimately, breaking the link between the words "date" and "rape" may require a little more involvement than just learning to say "when" and "no."

For some of us, it may require a transformation of some of our favorite illusions about love and sex, and how and when we allow sexual impulses to extend into reality.

That process starts with self-awareness and honest communication, and it really should include respect for a date's feelings and expectations as well as our own.

It might take some getting used to, but sharing ourselves the way we *are* is what dating is supposed to be about.

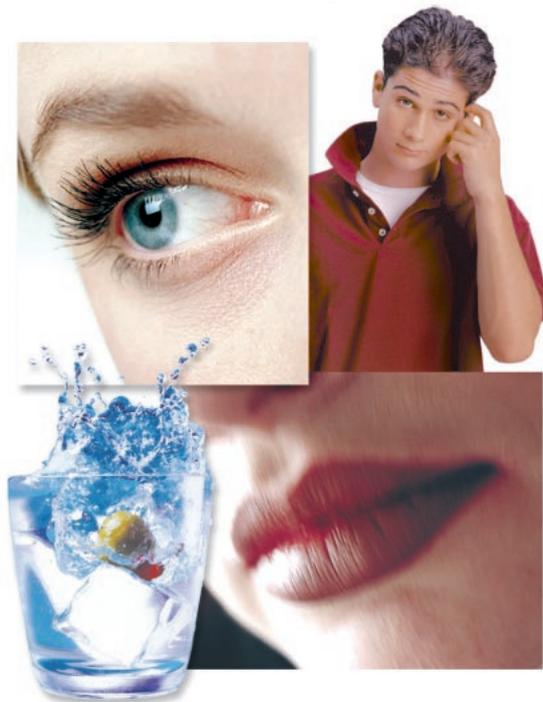
And it sure beats the alternative. ■



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Date Rape



Unmixing Messages

A Do It Now Foundation Publication by Susan Mercie

Love & Loss

Some words just seem to go together: *Salt and pepper, high noon, sticks and stones, cherry cobbler, pumpkin pie.*

Other words don't fit together as well. Still, few ever seem to clash more than the words "date" and "rape."

Maybe that's why even the idea of date rape was resisted for so long. And maybe that's why it's become the serious issue it is today.

Public awareness didn't come a moment too soon.

In fact, it was only the controversy surrounding the trial and imprisonment of heavyweight champion Mike Tyson and the acquittal of William Kennedy Smith that brought the topic to national attention in the 1990's.



Love hurts. Anger and bruised self-esteem are common among victims of date rape.

More recently, allegations of a drug/date-rape connection fueled the federal bans of two drugs, GHB and Rohypnol, and inspired passage of new legislation making the use of any drug in a date rape a federal crime.

Public awareness *was* a long time coming. But it wasn't for lack of incidents reported by women who claimed they'd been assaulted. Just consider some recent numbers:

- ▶ About 200,000 women are raped or sexually assaulted each year, according to a recent report by the U.S. Justice Department. Of these, 81,000 are actual rapes, 61,000 attempted rapes.
- ▶ 20% of women questioned in a study at Cornell University claimed they'd had sex forced on them.
- ▶ One in seven college women nationally has been raped. Four out of five knew their attackers.

The numbers only hint at some of the deeper issues involved, and the pain a woman can go through when she's assaulted by someone she knows.



Polls apart. In one survey, two-thirds of the women polled said men often misinterpret how intimate they want to be.

Drinking and drug use are common factors in the date-rape equation, often involving both partners.



Because date rape is a violation of trust, pure and simple. And the emotional bruises it causes *are* real.

But with understanding, the pain it causes doesn't have to last a lifetime.

And by increasing our sensitivity to its causes and prevention, we may be able to help it not happen at all.

■ How is date rape defined?

Date rape is the act of forcing sex on a date.

The key word in the definition is *force*, since it's the legal line that separates rape from romance.

Acquaintance rape is a broader category, and can involve a sexual assault by a friend, co-worker, or the boy next door. In most cases, victim and attacker have known each other for a year or longer.

Both types can take many forms—from a surprise attack by a family friend to a date who expects sex as payment for a night on the town.

Unlike rapes involving strangers, date and acquaintance rapists typically use psychological pressure or physical strength to press for sex, rather than weapons or threats of violence.

Date rape is different than stranger rape in other ways, too. Assaults by unknown rapists occur at any time, day or night, and most often in the victim's home.

Date rapes usually take place in late-night hours on weekends, and an estimated 80 percent happen in the man's home.

Drinking and drug use are also common factors in the date-rape equation, often involving both partners.

■ How common is date rape?

Estimates vary, but researchers say acquaintance rape may account for 70 percent of all sexual assaults.

The problem is most visible on college campuses, where as many as one in five women may experience some type of physical or psychological sexual coercion.

But date rape isn't limited to campuses, even though it's most commonly reported by young women between the ages of 15 and 24. Still, guessing its actual incidence is difficult since so many date rapes go *un*reported.

Some experts estimate that only about 10 percent of all rapes are reported to police. Fewer still make it to court.

■ Why isn't it reported more often?

Because of fear and shame, mostly.

Like any other painful experience, most women who have experienced a sexual assault prefer to put the incident behind them as quickly and with as little fanfare as possible.

▶ Crisis Control

Date rape can often be stopped if a woman asserts her right to say no. And that right still stands no matter how long or how deeply you may be involved.

Rape counselors offer a range of suggestions for getting that message across—and for dealing with a date who doesn't stop.

▶ **Before:** Don't put yourself at risk by drinking too much or spending time in his home. Talk honestly about your personal limits. Then stick to them.

▶ **During:** A loud, forceful "no" can be all it takes to defuse an explosive situation. If you don't want to have sex, say so. If he presses, get away—fast.

▶ **After:** If you can't prevent a rape, get help as soon as possible. Call a rape crisis center or a supportive friend. They can help you sort through your options and begin the process of repairing your battered self esteem. ■



Setting limits. Straight talk and sober thinking can help prevent trouble.

Confusion and uncertainty also plays a role.

It's easy to blame an unknown attacker, more difficult to accuse a romantic partner or an acquaintance.

And many young women are unskilled in sexual relationships and uncertain of their own right to say "no" to an aggressive date.

■ What causes date rape?

Often, it's a mix of misread signals and misplaced expectations, fueled by alcohol and drug use.

The crossed communications can start with basic differences in male-female sexual conditioning, according to researchers.

In a study at Kent State University, men who forced sex were found to be more likely to see a certain amount of aggression as normal in sexual relationships. They're also less inclined to believe that women *really* mean it when they say "no."

And in a culture whose feminine icons are alternately passive and coy, demure and seductive, it's probably not surprising that men can assume that "no" means "yes."

In a survey of college-aged men, one in 13 admitted using force in a sexual encounter at least once. Only a few considered the act rape or saw themselves as rapists.

Responses from women were no less surprising. Of those who claimed they'd been forced into sex, more than half said the episodes involved dates or boyfriends. But 73 percent *didn't* consider the incident rape.

Conclusion? Traditional stereotypes of pushy males and passive females are still alive and kicking today.

Then again, so are the problems created by stereotyped sexual behavior and crossed communications.

■ How can you reduce your risk?

Be aware that sex is tricky territory. Most of us have little training in sorting out our own sexual feelings, let alone those of others. And talking about limits—particularly on a date with a new partner—can be difficult.



Sign of the times. Pi Kappa Phi poster warns: That was then, this is now.

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Still, it's important to try, because it's this issue—communicating sexual intentions and boundaries—which lies at the heart of the date rape dilemma and offers the clearest means of ending the confusion.

Because when we aren't clear about how close we'd like to get, our partner can only guess about our intentions—or pretend to know.

It's not as uncommon as you might think.

In fact, researchers say that almost all couples misread sexual signals at least part of the time.

In the Kent State survey, two-thirds of the women polled said men often misinterpreted how intimate they wanted to be.

A full 25 percent reported they gave in to their dates' demands because of verbal pressure, while 13 percent said they were physically forced into sex.



It's also worth bearing in mind that some men *are* too aggressive and some women *do* send mixed signals.

But many—perhaps most—incidents of sexual pressure on dates, from kissing to intercourse, involve ordinary men and women doing what ordinary men and women have always done.

And while that doesn't begin to excuse date rape, it does suggest a solution:

If we speak honestly about what we want—and what we *don't* want—and if we respect our partner's right to feel differently, our relationships may never be put to the test over sex.

And that way, when questions about how far is too far *do* come up, we'll have an easier time finding an honest answer.

▶ Sexual Signals: Mixed Messages

At the heart of questions about date rape lie basic differences in the ways in which males and females interpret behavioral signals by the other sex.

For their part, men can be misled by teasing rejections from their dates. Many view such reactions as sexual come-ons, rather than turn-downs. And, ironically, sometimes they're right.

In a study at Texas A&M University, 39 percent of the 610 college women polled admitted that they'd said no to sex they really wanted. Reasons centered around not wanting to seem promiscuous, but included such motives as "I was angry with him" and "I wanted him to beg."

In another study by the same researchers, sexual aggressiveness was found to be more likely when a man initiates, pays for, and drives to and from a date—particularly when both partners get drunk and park or end up in his dorm or apartment.

Other factors that can lead to mixed messages: Body language and behavior by a woman that can be misconstrued, including dress, posture, physical closeness, touching, etc.

Experts suggest that women can reduce the risk by being clear about their sexual limits early on and communicating them directly, rather than waiting until a painful moment of truth—or consequences.

Men can help by getting used to the idea that most women today mean what they say when they say "no" to sex. ■



Gender gap. Men and women can interpret body language and gestures very differently.