



Sexual Violence: Myths and Victim-Blaming

Jilà V. Rusavage, Psy.D., and Annalise VerBeek, B.S.

If someone came to you and said they were sexually assaulted, what sort of thoughts would come to your mind? What questions would you have? Would you know how to help them? The best way to help people who have been sexually assaulted is to help them feel supported, safe, and believed. Sadly, many myths about sexual assault result in survivors not being believed, and in some cases, even being blamed for what happened to them.

Sexual violence occurs when someone tries to force or pressure another person into some kind of sexual activity, or does something sexual to another person without their consent. It can happen [anywhere](#) and at the hands of anyone, including someone the survivor knows or trusts. [The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) estimates that 45% of women and 17% of men in the United States have experienced some form of sexual violence in their lifetime. However, the actual number is likely even higher, because many people who experience sexual violence never tell anyone.

When someone suggests that a person who experienced sexual violence is in some way responsible for what happened, they are [victim-blaming](#). This often happens as a result of false beliefs about sexual violence and the people affected by it. Here are some common myths that can impact individuals who experience sexual violence and the people they ask for support:

Myth: *If you flirted or fooled around beforehand, wore revealing clothing, or were under the influence of drugs/alcohol, it means you were “asking for it.”*

- **Fact:** Even if you made it seem like you might be interested in sex, you always have the right to say no. Your style of clothing does not mean that you are consenting to sexual activity. Moreover, if you are [incapacitated](#) by alcohol or drug use, you are unable to give consent, and any subsequent sexual activity is a form of sexual violence.

Myth: *If a survivor of sexual assault does not fight back, they must have thought the assault was not that bad, or they wanted it.*

- **Fact:** During a sexual assault, many individuals experience a ["freeze response"](#) where they physically cannot move or speak, or a "fawn response" where they try to appease the perpetrator to minimize harm. Consent is important and ongoing. **Repeat:** If you didn't agree to do something sexual, it's sexual violence.

Myth: *A person cannot sexually assault their partner or spouse.*

- **Fact:** [Nearly 1 in 10 women](#) have been raped by an intimate partner in their lifetime.

Myth: *People with disabilities are at low risk for sexual assault.*

- **Fact:** Sexual assault against people with disabilities happens across the lifespan, and individuals with disabilities experience [higher rates](#) of sexual assault than the general population.

Myth: *A lot of survivors lie about being sexually assaulted.*

- **Fact:** The National Sexual Violence Resource Center indicated that only about 2-10% of sexual assaults are [falsely reported](#), and that the true percentage may actually be even smaller due to inconsistent definitions of sexual assault used in data collection.

Discrediting Survivors, and What We Can Do About It

A survivor's healing process is determined largely by how we respond to them when they disclose their sexual assault. Far too often, authorities and others respond in a manner that lacks empathy. Sometimes, survivors' struggles may even be weaponized by people who use the [DARVO](#) strategy as a means of discrediting them.

- **Deny:** The perpetrator denies the assault occurred, even when presented with evidence (*"It never happened."*)
- **Attack:** The perpetrator attacks the victim for calling out the behavior, often making the victim doubt their own reality (*"You're remembering it all wrong."*)
- **Reverse Victim and Offender:** The perpetrator portrays themselves as the true victim, turning the real victim into the accused (*"I can't believe you're accusing me of this."*)

We can begin to turn this around by believing people when they tell us they have been assaulted. To combat victim-blaming, debunk myths, and counter DARVO, it is helpful to remember three key components to advocacy.

- **Communication:** Reframe how we talk about sexual assault to be more focused on the experiences and needs of survivors, while being honest about our own biases regarding this topic.
- **Education:** Continue to educate ourselves and others about sexual assault and the signs that survivors may be inappropriately blamed by perpetrators or others. The sooner we recognize that DARVO tactics are being used, the faster we can intervene to help turn them around.
- **Collaboration:** Develop specialized training for law enforcement, medical providers, mental health professionals, and the public to increase understanding of how being a survivor of assault impacts cognitive, social, and emotional functioning.

Remember: Supporting survivors begins with believing them. Raise your voice to advocate for those whose voices may be silenced. By taking every opportunity to advocate for survivors through each conversation had, you can increase others' awareness about sexual assault. It all starts with you.

Talk to someone who can help! To find a licensed psychologist near you, use PPA's Psychologist Locator at <https://www.papsy.org/locator>. For information on other mental health topics, go to <https://www.papsy.org>, then "Resources" and then "Public Resources". PPA offers these articles for informational purposes only; they are not a substitute for professional diagnosis and treatment.