

**Alcohol and sexual assault**  
Presentation to Generation Next 2018

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### Why 'alcohol and sexual assault'?

Extremely controversial topic – complex issue

- what previous generations saw as 'acceptable' is now regarded as 'criminal'
- confusion about terminology and definitions
- wrapped up in 'gender politics'

My concern is around young people and this issue

- each year I meet more young women (aged 14-16) who divulge they have been sexually assaulted when drunk
- most never report the crime, believing it is **just part of the alcohol experience!**
- we must change the culture – young men and young women
- young men** – it is not acceptable to have sex or sexual contact with someone who is too drunk to consent
- young women** – look after and support each other – victim blaming and shaming is not acceptable

DARTA Drug and Alcohol Research and Training Australia

**Continue to see sexual assault in the news**

Harvey Weinstein scandal highlighted how powerful men have been able to assault women and get away with it. Men also came forward to tell similar stories

**Sexual assault and harassment in the Australian media**

Australia has not escaped – with high profile men being accused of 'inappropriate behaviour'

**Outline of presentation**

- what is 'sexual assault'?
- other important terms to be used in this presentation
- what is the prevalence of sexual assault in Australia and internationally?
- what do we know about the role alcohol plays?
- situational factors around alcohol-involved sexual assault
- role of alcohol in 'consent'
- what can parents do to support their children in this area?
- as someone who works with young people, what can you do?

A person who commits a sexual assault is often called a **perpetrator** or **offender**. A person who is sexually assaulted is often called a **survivor** or **victim**. When either person is drinking alcohol before or during the assault, we call this an **alcohol-involved sexual assault**.

**What is 'sexual assault'?**

'Sexual assault', 'sexual abuse' and 'rape' often used interchangeably but ...

**Rape** – "usually defined as vaginal, anal or oral sexual intercourse obtained through force or threat of force; a lack of consent; or inability to give consent due to age, intoxication or mental status"

**Sexual assault** – "a more inclusive term, used to describe the full range of forced sexual acts including physically forced kissing or touching, verbally coerced sexual intercourse, and physically forced vaginal, oral and anal penetration"

All Australian jurisdictions have criminalised sexual assault, although legal definitions differ. They also have an **'indecent assault'** offence covering sexual acts other than those involving penetration

1 in 6 women and 1 in 33 men will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime

### International literature and sexual assault

Mohy et al (2013). Alcohol and sexual assault. Alcohol Research and Health 26, 48-53

**Prevalence hard to determine - estimates based on:**

- police reports, national samples of crime victims, interviews with incarcerated rapists and victims seeking hospital treatment, general population surveys of women, surveys of college students

**USA - 25% of women sexually assaulted, 18% raped**

- at least 20% of men report having perpetrated sexual assault and 5% committed rape
- college student surveys - most thorough data - approximately 50% of college women sexually assaulted, and 27% experiencing rape or attempted rape
- 25% of college men have committed sexual assault, and 8% have committed rape or attempted rape

**Much higher rates in other parts of the world, particularly developing countries**

### Sexual assault in Australia

Wells et al (2012). Sexual Assault in Australia: A Review of the Literature. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). 2012. Sexual Assault in Australia: A Review of the Literature. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

**2017 ABS data – 18% of women and 4.7% of men 18 years or over experienced sexual violence**

- women most likely to be sexual assaulted by male they knew (87%)
- most likely to be in their own home (40%) or perpetrator's home (17%)
- majority (9 out of 10) did not contact police

**2012 – similar figures (17% of women and 4% of men) – particular groups more at risk**

- young people, ATSI, LGBT and those from CALD backgrounds may experience higher rates of sexual assault than the general population
- young people (18-24 years), with women four times more likely to experience sexual assault than men
- 18-24 year-old women twice the rate of sexual assault compared to women nationally and 10 times the rate of those over 55
- ATSI women – 3-5x more likely than non-Indigenous women to be victims of sexual violence - most prevalent in remote and regional areas

**Sexual assault – not just a 'woman's issue'**

Important to acknowledge that men can also be sexually assaulted, by other men and also women ... however, this presentation will focus on women

**What role does alcohol play in sexual assault?**

Important to look at the effect that alcohol has on both the perpetrator and victim. For a long time, society had a problem 'dissentangling' drunken sex from assault ... that has changed

### What role does alcohol play?

Mohy et al (2013). Alcohol and sexual assault. Alcohol Research and Health 26, 48-53

**As with other violent crimes, around half of all sexual assaults are committed by men who have drunk alcohol**

**Half of all sexual assault victims report drinking alcohol at time of assault**

- alcohol consumption by perpetrators and victims tends to co-occur, i.e., when one is drinking, the other is as well - rarely only the victim drinking alcohol
- not surprising - drinking often a shared activity in social situations (e.g., in bars or at parties)
- data is not collected on how much was drunk or level of intoxication - this makes it difficult to "dissentangle the unique effects of alcohol consumption on the perpetrators' versus the victims' behaviour"

### Alcohol and cognitive function

Wells et al (2012). Sexual Assault in Australia: A Review of the Literature. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). 2012. Sexual Assault in Australia: A Review of the Literature. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

**Alcohol disrupts cognitive processes - difficult to interpret complex stimuli – men and women**

- alcohol myopia – narrowing of attentional resources – only able to attend to most salient cues
- like a camera showing only part of scene in focus
- cues inhibiting sexual aggression (morality or empathy) become less important than arousal and entitlement – particularly if predisposed to this behaviour

*"Some men may drink before a party or date because they want to feel sexually disinhibited. However, 'as intoxication rises, physiological impairment may lock the drinker on this course by blocking awareness of inhibitory restraints'"*

**"Knowing that alcohol contributes to sexual assault does not diminish a perpetrator's responsibility. Men are morally and legally responsible for sexual assaults that they commit, regardless of whether or not they were intoxicated. Although women's alcohol consumption may increase their likelihood of experiencing sexual assault, this does not make them responsible for the man's behaviour. Women can empower themselves by identifying actions which may put them at risk, without feeling responsible."**

(Abbey et al. 2004)



**Need to distinguish between causality and responsibility**

Times are changing - no longer able to simply 'blame the alcohol' if a man commits this crime or say that it is up to the woman to 'not drink as much' ...

### Situational factors: alcohol-involved sexual assaults

Abbey et al. (2004) found that alcohol involvement in sexual assault varies with the type of relationship and other types of research see also: [Abbey et al. \(2004\) Research and Training Australia](#)

Factors research has identified as important to consider in alcohol-involved sexual assaults:

- **Type of relationship between perpetrator and victim**
  - assaults involving alcohol more likely to be committed by non-romantic friend or acquaintance
  - drinking victims know perpetrator for shorter time
- **locations that perpetrator and victim spend time together**
  - alcohol assaults more likely to involve spontaneous interactions and time spent at parties or bars
- **perpetrator's misperception** of the woman's degree of sexual interest
- **victim's risk assessment**
- **alcohol's effects** on the man's use of force and the woman's response



### Misperception of women's sexual interest or intention

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Men perceive women as "behaving more sexually and as being more interested in having sex with them than the women actually are"

- perpetrators may at least initially misperceive cues
- vagueness of cues frequently leads to miscommunication

#### Alcohol enhances men's misperception

- intoxication allows perpetrator to "interpret friendly cues as a sexual invitation if that is the behaviour he is anticipating"
- study found drinkers perceive ambiguous comments (e.g., "I'd like to see that movie too", "You go to that club? I've been there too") as signs of sexual interest, non-drinkers more cautious in their interpretation



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Men use simple cues to judge women's character and sexual availability when they are drinking alcohol

- clothing, type of drink and speed of drinking
- women who drink alone in bars characterized as "deserving targets" – seen as sexually promiscuous
- woman who has two drinks is perceived as sexually available – more promiscuous, more eager to have sex than those who didn't drink

After 2 drinks, cognition affected - intoxicated men who read, hear or watch a date rape scenario more likely to:

- believe woman enjoyed it
- think man acted appropriately
- agree that they would use force in similar situation



### Victim's risk assessment

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Alcohol myopia – if a woman feels she has made it clear she does not want sex, intoxication makes it hard to recognize signs that he has misunderstood her

- sober victims less likely to engage in consensual sexual activities (e.g., kissing, petting)
- intoxicated women "may not have discerned the impact that their kisses were having"

Alcohol reduces women's ability to assess risk - intoxicated women less likely to notice or respond to mildly inappropriate sexual behavior. When she does respond

- a verbally aggressive response is common
- alcohol + provocation leads to aggression



### Alcohol's effect on man's use of force and woman's response

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Cognitive deficits after drinking increase men's likelihood of behaving aggressively

- intoxicated men retaliate strongly if feel threatened, once they begin to act aggressively, difficult to stop them
- intoxicated men also more aggressive toward female targets
- sexual assaults involving intoxicated perpetrators more likely to include extreme levels of forced sex, more violent behaviour and more injuries to victim

Alcohol impairs motor skills – limiting a woman's ability to effectively resist sexual assault

- intoxicated victims more likely to experience extreme levels of sexual assault and to engage in less resistance – less perpetrator violence and fewer injuries



**Consent** | What is consent and what is the role of alcohol in this process?

### Understanding 'consent'

"Consent is informed, and is freely and actively given. Consent is communicated through mutually understood words which indicate willingness by all of the involved parties to engage in sexual activity" (RAINN, 2017)

When sexual activity is clearly agreed upon by both parties

- consent is an ongoing process
- no threats, intimidation or coercion
- not unconscious or asleep
- not under the legal age of consent
- the lack of 'no' does not mean 'yes'
- not impaired by alcohol or other drugs

**CONSENT IS CLEAR COHERENT WILLING ONGOING**

Clear	Coherent	Willing	Ongoing
Consent is given freely and without any form of coercion, intimidation, or force.	Consent is given by someone who is capable of making their own decisions, and is not impaired by alcohol or other drugs.	Consent is given by someone who is aware of what they are doing, and is not being forced or threatened.	Consent is given by someone who is aware of what they are doing, and is not being forced or threatened.

Sexual assault is any sexual contact without consent.

**consent is...**

- verbal**: The person says "yes" or "no" clearly and without any form of coercion, intimidation, or force.
- voluntary**: The person gives consent freely, without any form of coercion, intimidation, or force.
- ongoing**: Consent is given by someone who is aware of what they are doing, and is not being forced or threatened.
- sober**: The person gives consent while they are not impaired by alcohol or other drugs.

Sex without consent is **rape**.

**Changing the messaging** | Where once the message targeted potential victims, e.g., 'Don't get drunk', 'Don't lose control' – now far more likely to target the perpetrator ...

**'Don't Be That Guy' campaign** | A 2011 campaign from Canada – "urging men to own their role to end rape" targeting men aged 18-25 years

**Some attitudes are difficult to shift though ...** | Debate around 'take rape' culture, why is it different for women (i.e., are men raped when they get drunk?) and victim blaming continues from across society ...

### How can parents support young men in this area?

Alley et al (2008) found that parents and guardians who do not know about their relationship and what types of research are still needed. Aggression and violence behavior 9, 27-30

**Characteristics linked to sexual assault perpetration**

- traditional gender role beliefs
- hostility towards women
- acceptance of force in interpersonal relationships
- stereotypes about drinking women

**Cultural change needed** – simple messages need to be conveyed and 'consent' needs to be discussed

- 'no means no'
- it is not ok to have sex with someone who is too drunk to consent
- they need positive male role models – around drinking and attitudes towards women
- watch what you say – off-the-cuff comments (e.g., "Look what she's wearing?", "What does she expect when she's drunk?" reinforce negative attitudes towards women and support a victim blaming culture
- provide advice on how to protect themselves – how do you negotiate consent? How can you look after a drunk girl and ensure you're not accused of inappropriate behaviour?

## How can parents support young women in this area?

- Cultural change** – particularly around victim blaming
- discuss risks around drinking alcohol and air concerns you may have about what they wear and what they do
  - watch what you say** – be wary of reinforcing shaming culture
  - make others aware when they say 'the wrong thing'** – don't just let it pass – it's not okay to say those things

**Discuss consent** – what it means and how it is negotiated

Discuss simple safety strategies when socializing

- looking after your mates** – stick together and don't let friends go off on their own or leave them behind
- 'designated driver'** – even when no-one is driving, make sure there is at least one sober person in the group
- encourage young women to **discuss expectations of friends** - i.e., when should a friend step in and help and when is it inappropriate?



## As someone who works with young people, what can you do?

Need to change focus ...

**"When kids are little, we don't teach them how not to get hit, we teach them not to hit."**

- shift onus away from person avoiding assault or turning down an advance, and promote concept of **"enthusiastic consent"**
- programs for young men helping them understand enthusiastic consent, how to interpret hesitant body language and why their partner might not overtly say no, even if they want to

Young women must be educated about risks associated with alcohol and personal responsibility ... how to keep safe

- bullying programs expanded to encourage young women to support each other in this area, i.e., challenge 'slut shaming'
- "what did she expect when she got drunk?"**
- ... **a hangover! She expected a hangover!**



## For further information and contact details

For a references and supporting information to do with this presentation, go to my website -

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