Sexuality Matters

Sexual Assault

By the end of this lesson, you should be able to:

- Define sexual assault and characteristics of affirmative consent;
- Describe the role of alcohol and substances in sexual assault;
- Identify the stoplights of affirmative consent;
- Identify protective strategies;
- Describe how the brain and body respond to trauma;
- Explain how trauma impacts memory;
- Identify the national laws addressing sexual assault in higher education;
- Describe bystander intervention; and,
- Identify ways to intervene in potentially problematic situations.

Trigger warning:
Before we get started, we want to let you know that the content of this lesson includes discussion of sexual violence, which may be triggering for some people. Consider spending some time to take care of yourself and seek help if desired. Talking to loved ones, trusted friends, or seeking support from survivor organizations can be helpful for some people. You’ll find resource links within this lesson.

Community Resource
The Aurora Center (612) 626-9111 (24-hours) – Free and Confidential Services

The Aurora Center at the University of Minnesota
Video Transcript
Traci Thomas-Card: My name is Traci Thomas-Card. I'm the Prevention Program Coordinator for the Aurora Center for Advocacy and Education and Boynton Health Service. The Aurora Center for Advocacy and Education serves students, staff, and faculty here on the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus, as well as Augsburg College in issues related to sexual assault, relationship violence, or stalking. We have a 24-hour helpline. The number is (612) 626-9111. We serve all sexual and gender identities. We provide direct services,...
Sexual Assault Services at the U of M Video Transcript Cont’d…
Traci Thomas-Card: …which involves crisis counseling, advocacy related to housing, police, medical, court. We can help students and staff and faculty file restraining orders if that's something that they choose. We serve both those who are directly affected as well as what we call concerned persons. So, family and friends of somebody who’s been directly affected by sexual assault, relationship violence, or stalking. If you would like to contact us, no matter how minor you think that the issue might be please feel free to either stop by our office in Appleby Hall-117 or to call our business line, which is (612) 626-9111.

So what do we mean when we talk about sexual assault and affirmative consent?
According to the University of Minnesota,

Sexual assault is actual, attempted, or threatened sexual contact with another person without that person’s affirmative consent. Affirmative consent is informed, freely and actively communicated willingness to participate in sexual activity that is expressed by clear and unambiguous words or actions.1

What are clear and unambiguous words and actions? They are:

Freely and actively given by informed individuals that a reasonable person in the circumstances would believe communicate a willingness to participate in a mutually agreed upon sexual activity. The following factors will be considered when determining consent:

- It is the responsibility of each person who wishes to engage in the sexual activity to obtain consent.
- A lack of protest, the absence of resistance and silence do not indicate consent.
- The existence of a present or past dating or romantic relationship does not imply consent to future sexual activity.
- Consent must be present throughout the sexual activity and may be initially given, but withdrawn at any time.
- When consent is withdrawn all sexual activity must stop. Likewise, where there is confusion about the state of consent, sexual activity must stop until both parties consent again.
- Consent to one form of sexual activity does not imply consent to other forms of sexual activity.
Consent is not obtained where:
- There is physical force, threats, intimidation or coercion.
- There is incapacitation due to the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- There is the inability to communicate because of a physical or mental condition.
- An individual is asleep, unconscious or involuntarily physically restrained.
- An individual is unable to understand the nature or extent of the sexual situation because of mental or physical incapacitation or impairment.
- One party is not of legal age to give consent pursuant to Minnesota state law.\(^2\)

**Within our society, rape myths continue to be perpetuated.**

*It's important to keep in mind that sexual assault affects everyone, regardless of sex, gender identity, race, sexual orientation, relationship status, religion, age, or ability.*

Children are often taught about stranger danger and see media references that depict a woman walking alone at night and a stranger jumping out of a dark alley and raping her. In reality, this sort of scenario rarely happens. According to a report from the National Institute of Justice, 90% of college women know their offender, whether that is an acquaintance, friend, intimate partner, family member, or other known person.\(^3\)

**Another common myth is that only women are victims.**

Although men are less likely to be victim/survivors, they are still affected. It's harder to assess how many men are victim/survivors because men are less likely to report being victimized compared to people of other genders.

Folks who identify as transgender have some of the highest rates of being sexually assaulted, with estimates around 50% of people who are transgender being assaulted at some point in their lives.\(^4,5,6\)

**Finally, there seems to be this blown up perception that many people falsely report rape in order to get revenge or gain sympathy.**

The numbers paint a different story. Rates of false reports are very low and consistent with other crimes.\(^7\) The issue is with how the legal system defines sexual assault and how law enforcement personnel classifies an incident within a report. False reports are often confused with incidents in which a sexual assault occurred, but it did not meet the legal definition of rape, or the law.
enforcement personnel did not believe the incident met the legal criteria for rape.\(^8\)

**Define Sexual Assault**

**Video Transcript**

Traci Thomas-Card: Sexual assault is defined as the actual, attempted, or threatened sexual contact with another person, in which consent has not been given. So, physical force, threats, or coercion have been used. Often times on college campuses, we see alcohol or other substances being used in order to get a person to have sex with somebody else. Sexual assault is about control; it’s not about someone’s desire to have sex.

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**Rape is one of the most underreported crimes in the United States.\(^9\),\(^10\)**

Less than 5% of victim/survivors in college report the crime to the police!\(^3\) Why is that? A study was done to assess the most commonly reported reasons why sexual assault is not reported. The most frequently cited reasons include:

- Feeling of self-guilt or blame
- Being embarrassed or shameful and wanting to keep the experience private
- Humiliation or fear about how other people will perceive the victim
- Feeling they won’t be believed
- Fear of the perpetrator
- Not having trust in the justice system\(^11\)

Further, a 2009 investigation by the Center for Public Integrity found that students reported two major institutional barriers to reporting their assault. They feared:

- Administrators would not believe them
• The judiciary process on their campus would not be carried out in an effective manner\textsuperscript{12}

In the 2015 Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault at the University of Minnesota, 24% of female and 5% of male undergraduate respondents said they were sexually assaulted since enrollment.\textsuperscript{13} Of those, 75% of the victim/survivors didn’t report their experience and cited not believing the assault was serious enough as the top reason.

\textit{It's estimated that 1 in 4 to 5 women and 1 in 17 men will experience sexual assault or attempted sexual assault in college.}\textsuperscript{3}

Keep in mind these rates don’t factor in any previous child abuse. These rates mirror those in the community and have been consistent over the past 30 years. We’re not seeing a change in the culture around rape. Just stop and think about these statistics. Chances are pretty good that you know someone who has been sexually assaulted, even if they never tell you. It could be your friend, partner, sibling, parent, or roommate.

The thing to keep in mind regarding these statistics is that they may actually be on the low end of rates of sexual assault. The investigators and the level of anonymity felt by the participants being surveyed can alter how forthcoming someone is to reveal personal information. Also, a person may have been sexually assaulted, but may not define what happened to them as a sexual assault.
What are some myths about sexual assault heard at the University of Minnesota?

**Lesson Transcript**

Traci Thomas-Card: So, some common myths around sexual assault. One of the biggest myths I hear is that there are a large number of victims who falsely report the crime. The reality is that sexual assault, relationship violence, and stalking are falsely reported at the same rate as other major crimes. So, about 2% to 5% of the time. Other major crimes including burglaries, assaults, aggravated assaults, things like that. Another common myth I hear is that men can't be victims of sexual assault or relationship violence. The reality is we know 1 out 6 to 10 males is the victim of some type of assault or abuse at some point in their lifetimes. Most assaults will happen to boys between the ages of 4 and 12. However, that doesn't mean that once you're past the 12-year-old age, that assaults can't happen. For instance, on the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus, we know about 1.8% of men reported being assaulted within the last 12 months. Another myth we frequently hear is that sexual assaults can't happen in relationships. The reality is most sexual assaults happen either with a perpetrator being an acquaintance or an intimate partner of the victim/survivor. And this is true whether it's a heterosexual relationship, whether it's a same-sex relationship, and of all cultures and ethnicities.

While we've already talked about making consent a routine and easy part of sexual communication, there is another area where consent gets tricky: alcohol and other substances. Most people grasp the concept of consent pretty easily, but they often have questions when substances come into the picture.

**In college, alcohol is the most common factor in sexual assaults.**

Let’s stop and think about why this might happen. When you think about alcohol, what are some positive things that you think can happen when you drink and go party? Well, some people think that it's easier to start a conversation with a new person or flirt when they've got some liquid courage. Other people think that they loosen up and have fun when they've had something to drink. And some folks think it’s easier to hook-up with someone under the influence. Alcohol is often used as a sort of social lubricant. Also, consider how movies and TV shows characterize the college experience. Many of these media examples depict a fun and positive experience around alcohol, especially when mixed with sex. These depictions shape our intentions and expectancies around what happens when we drink.
Ponder this pairing.

If you choose to mix the two, what really happens? Do you usually have mind-blowing orgasms when you’re drunk? Are both you and your partner sexually satisfied after? Do you remember the details or how great it was? If you’re answering no to any of these questions, then ask yourself what benefit you’re really getting out of drunk or high sex?

If we’re looking at this from a physiological standpoint, alcohol actually affects how pleasurable sex can be. Alcohol is a depressant, which means it slows down the central nervous system. It reduces the amount of blood flow that is going to your sexual equipment, which means it’s harder to get and maintain an erection and become turned on and lubricated. Nerve endings are dulled, and so it’s harder to feel sensations and respond to touch. Does this sound like a fun and easy way to get off?

So we know that sexual assault and alcohol are linked.

This doesn’t mean that alcohol use causes sexual assault, but it does mean that its presence impacts the situation. It’s estimated that 50-75% of sexual assaults that happen to students while in college involve alcohol use by the perpetrator, victim/survivor, or both. That shows just how often alcohol is involved in these situations.

Although it is not as common as alcohol, other drugs like GHB, Rohypnol, benzodiazepines, sleeping pills and other sedatives are used to facilitate sexual assault. It’s always a good idea to keep an eye on your drink and make sure that either you make it or are closely watching the person who prepares it.

When a person has been drinking, their inhibitions are lowered and it can make it more difficult to be in control. That being said, it is not an excuse for committing a sexual assault and it doesn’t mean that a person is to blame for being sexually assaulted when alcohol is involved. We’re very aware that people won’t stop drinking and having sex. What we can do is talk about how to not sexually assault someone when you’ve been getting your drink on. What we want to make clear is that there is a difference between drunk sex and sexual assault. Ask yourself about your intentions regarding the situation? Are you planning on having sex when you’re drinking and is it something you see as a sure thing? Are you trying to get someone to drink in order to hook up? How are you ensuring that there is consent? Are you getting a clear and enthusiastic
yes from your partner? Are you paying attention for mixed signals? Do you think someone will wake up regretting the situation or feeling violated?

**Drunk Sex**

*Video Transcript*

Traci Thomas-Card: We know a majority of sexual assaults that occur on college campuses have alcohol involved, but when you're talking about the differences between drunk sex and sexual assault, drunk sex—it implies that consent has happened. Sexual assault—there is no consent taking place. So, there's a big difference between regretful sex and sexual assault. And to be honest, in most advocacy centers, we don't see people coming in saying, "I had drunk sex last night." We see people coming in saying, "I've been violated. I didn't give consent to this activity." We know that since alcohol is involved in a majority of sexual assaults that occur on college campuses, it impairs folk's judgment to give consent. So, when we're under the influence of alcohol or some other substance, we often are unable to fully understand what is being asked of us. Similarly, it works the same with perpetrators. Perpetrators will often use alcohol or another substance to get somebody to consent. And that falls under coercion, which is not a way to legally get consent from someone.

**The law says that if someone is incapacitated, they can't give consent.**

This can be a little blurry because everyone has a different limit or line of when it's too much alcohol. If you're getting frisky with someone who is new, it's hard to know how this person communicates about sex. Without the benefit of previous sober sexual communication, it can be difficult to read signals. Add alcohol to the mix and you've got a situation where it can be hard to make sure your partner is consenting.

**Alcohol-related Sexual Assault**

*Video Transcript*

Traci Thomas-Card: Another common myth I tend to hear about alcohol-related sexual assaults is if the perpetrator was drinking, then he or she is not to blame. And the fact of the matter is the perpetrator is to blame in all cases, not the victim. So, the law varies from state to state when we are talking about alcohol-related sexual assaults where both people have been drinking. For example, in Minnesota, the law states that whoever initiated that sexual contact without consent is the
Alcohol-related Sexual Assault Video Transcript Cont’d…
Traci Thomas-Card: … person responsible. So, sometimes people are under the misconception that the only time a date rape drug applies is when somebody slips something into your drink. The reality is in a number of states, alcohol is considered the number 1 date rape drug. Perpetrators often don’t need other drugs, like GHB or Rohypnol because alcohol is such a powerful intoxicant.

Let’s talk about the stoplights of affirmative consent.
These are from The Aurora Center for Advocacy and Education.

1. Green lights: Keep communicating
   a. Everyone’s come to an informed and freely communicated decision about how far to go.
   b. Everyone expresses their comfort with the situation through clear and unambiguous words or actions.
   c. You both feel comfortable and safe stopping at any time.
   d. Everyone’s turned on!
2. Yellow lights: Signs you should pause and ask
   a. You’re not sure what your partner wants.
   b. You’re getting mixed signals.
   c. You haven’t talked about how far to go.
   d. You assume that you’ll do the same thing as last time.
   e. Your partner stops, hesitates, or is silent.
   f. You or your partner have been drinking.
3. Red lights: Signs you should stop
   a. You’re too intoxicated to gauge or give consent.
   b. Your partner is asleep or passed out.
   c. You hope your partner will say nothing and go with the flow.
   d. You intend to have sex by any means possible.
   e. You’re told to stop; consent is revoked.

If you’re even wondering if a situation you’re in is consensual, it probably isn’t.
Your partner should be having a good time and enthusiastic about what is going on. If at any time they’re not, or if you’re getting mixed signals, it’s best to just stop. Think about the pros and cons about going forward if you’re unsure. Best-case scenario is that both of you enjoy what happened and have no
regrets afterwards. Worst-case scenario is that you've sexually assaulted someone. If you’re even the least bit unsure of how this scenario will play out, it's always better to be on the safe side in this situation.

How do you reduce your risk of committing sexual assault?

Video Transcript

Traci Thomas-Card: There are a lot of things students can to do to ensure that they aren’t committing or at risk of committing a sexual assault. One thing to do, and probably the best advice that I have, is to make sure that you have consent from a partner if you’re going to engage in sexual relationship with another person. Another thing to do is to understand that if a partner rejects the sexual activity that you’re proposing it isn’t a personal rejection, and not to take it personally. Other things that folks can do is understanding the difference between a healthy relationship and an unhealthy relationship. So, remembering signs of trust and respect and love towards one another as opposed to things like jealously or tempers or fear and shame and blame. So, that’s a really difficult question for somebody to deal with especially if they think a friend is exhibiting perpetrator-like behaviors. It’s important to know that every situation is unique. Generally, I will give folks a couple of options. One of those options being to support that person. There are resources available nationally. Rehabilitation programs that try to help reduce perpetrator behavior. Another option is to approach your friend directly and say “You know what, I have noticed some things lately that I don’t agree with and I want to have a conversation with you about that.” Last but not least, you have the option of re-evaluating whether you want to be friends with somebody who is exhibiting that sort of behavior.

Okay, let’s say that you’re involved in a situation that is going in a sexual direction and you’re concerned that your boundaries will be crossed.

Your initial attempts at verbal and nonverbal communication aren’t working. What do you do? First thing to do is get out of there. It may be as simple as walking away, or it may prove more challenging. At this point, don’t worry about embarrassing yourself or telling lies to leave. It’s better to deal with those repercussions later instead of staying in the situation.

One strategy is to make up a story. Maybe you tell the person that you’re meeting your family early for breakfast and you need to be ready for them. Or if you’re already at your place you could say that your roommate or friend will be back soon. Along those same lines, you could say that you’re responsible for your friends tonight, so you have to go get them and make sure they get home safely or you have to call them to check in. This also gives you an excuse to leave and find someone to help. Another strategy is distracting the person. Ask them to get you a glass of water, something to eat, or tell them you have to go
to the bathroom. All of these options give you an opportunity to high tail it out of there. If all else fails, pretend that you’re sick. This could be saying your nauseous, have food poisoning, diarrhea, or if applicable, your period. It may be embarrassing at the time, but bringing up a bodily issue can turn off a lot of people and will give you a chance to exit. Don’t be afraid of hurting someone’s feelings if it will get you out of there. While it may seem unnatural to be offensive or come off as rude, do what you need to do in the moment and deal with hurt feelings later.

**Resource**

**Circle of 6** – A Free App to Let Others Know You Need Help

**And sometimes, these strategies won’t work.**

If that’s the case, just because you couldn’t get out of there does not mean that it’s your fault or you somehow failed to protect yourself. Protective strategies are all fine and good, but it doesn’t mean we should somehow expect that everyone should or can be responsible for protecting themselves. It’s the responsibility of the other person to not sexually assault you. In our culture, we so often hear that the victim/survivor shouldn’t have been drunk, or wearing certain clothes, or that they were already dating the person so what did they expect? All of these victim-blaming messages are simply unacceptable.

**Community Resource**

**The Aurora Center** (612) 626-9111 (24-hours) – Free and Confidential Services
Victim Blaming

Video Transcript

Traci Thomas-Card: We know that, particularly, when alcohol is involved, victims will often blame themselves for the choice to drink, even though the choice to drink is not a justification or a reason for somebody assaulting somebody else. We often hear a lot of victim-blaming comments. So, thinking about things like, "Well, the victim was wearing next-to-nothing," or "The victim was doing this or saying this or drinking this." Whereas the focus should really be on the perpetrator's choice to assault somebody, to commit a crime. As a whole, society tends to talk about victim-blaming behavior as a way to make us feel safer. Right. So, if we are not engaging in certain behaviors or making certain choices, it makes us feel safer. For instance, women are often asked to carry their keys with them when they're walking to the parking lot at night or to not walk alone or to not wear a ponytail in their hair. And all of these techniques are risk reduction techniques. So, what they're doing is they're putting the blame and the responsibility on not getting assaulted on the victim. Rather than putting the responsibility on the perpetrator: the person who made the choice to commit a crime.

Experiences of feeling powerless

Video Transcript

Trigger Warning: This video transcript contains personal stories about sexual assault or feeling powerless.

Robin: I was in a movie with a really good friend of mine that I had the biggest crush in the world on. And we were sitting there just watching—I think it was Star Wars 3 or something like that, and he started touching me in a very distinctively sexual manner. And while I had the biggest crush in the world on this person, I’d never actually thought of engaging in any sort of sexual activity with this person ‘cause like, I knew they had a partner, and I knew a lot of things were going on. It was kind of just this pure crush in my mind, like a mental crush on this person. And so, having them touch me was very shocking. I didn't know how to react. I didn't know what to do. I ended up just gripping his wrist really hard, trying to get him to stop. But we were in a movie theatre, and I didn't want to say anything, and I didn't want anybody to look or notice. And he was so much stronger than me that I wasn't...
Robin: ...able to stop him. And a lot of it was like, my own choice. I chose not to like punch him because, again, I didn't want other people to know. I didn't—I wasn't able to sort out my thoughts about like this dichotomy of somebody that I considered a friend and a trusted person touching me and doing things without my consent. So, just this feeling of helplessness, of powerlessness, of I don't know how to react. I don't know what I can do to make this situation better and I ended up just riding it out. The movie was over, and we left. It was actually really hard for me to process what had happened to me. I was still in a place where I kinda had an unhealthy view of sexuality. And so, I took it as a compliment that this person wanted to touch me, to be with me in whatever manner, but I didn't want it. And I recognized that I didn't want it. But I didn't know how to take this scenario and fit it with the person that I trusted and that was my friend. So, I kind of chose to ignore it. I went about my daily life. He and I still wrestled around and whatever. I noticed in retrospect, in hindsight that I always made others, made sure that other people were around us. I never went to the movies with him again. Whenever he wanted to hang out and do whatever, I always invited other friends. I kind of unconsciously started to try and protect myself. And I played a victim-blaming game saying that it was my own fault. I had let the situation get to this manner and. So, I started taking all of these measures to try and prevent it when I should have really acknowledged that it wasn't my fault.

Abby: She had been raped by a friend of ours in high school. And who was a really good friend of both of ours. And that was the first time I had experienced sexual violence in my world. And I just remember having no tools to deal with that. Like, I don't remember having any real conversations about that with any of the adults in my life so I didn't know how to handle that information. And that made me feel really powerless. Actually, I remember calling a crisis line that I found online. I don't remember particularly what was said. But I think that was the only way that I knew how to gain any sort of sense of control over that. Like I needed more information on how to deal with that.

Janelle: A time where I felt powerless is—I was beginning to have sex with my then-girlfriend at the time. We had been in a steady relationship for a while. And she did something that we had done in the past, but in this instance, I just felt really uncomfortable and like, triggered. And she didn't realize that—that I was kind of like pulling away a little bit.
Powerless Stories Video Transcript Cont’d…
Janelle: … ’Caus she thought that that was just—She didn’t recognize that ’cause it was something that we had done before and that I had liked it. And it was fine. So, she just kind of like kept on going with the flow and didn’t think of anything. And for the minute and a half that I like, it happened and I couldn’t do anything about it—I was like extremely uncomfortable in that situation. I felt so powerless and uncomfortable, and I didn’t know what to do. And she didn’t realize that it was going on. And I felt really bad ’cause she was enjoying it. I never wanna have that feeling again. That was horrible. It took me—It felt like forever to say something, but I think it was only like maybe a minute, 30 seconds or a minute. But as I pulled away and kind of sat in that powerless state for a little bit, she noticed and kind of pulled away and looked at me and asked, “Are you okay? Do you want me to stop?” Basic yes or no questions. And I said, “No. Yes. No, I am not okay. Yes, please stop.” And she just took a step back, and we sat on my bed and put our clothes back on and talked about that situation and why I felt that way, even though we had done that before, and I was comfortable with it before. In this specific moment, I wasn’t. And kind of went into it. And if I wanted to maybe try that again ever or not try that again or. Really work through why that happened and how I felt in it.

What happens to the body when a person experiences a traumatic event like sexual assault?

Our brains respond to traumatic situations through a complex process. We’re only going to focus on the brain regions involved that are responsible for emotions and memory.

The first structure we’ll focus on is the amygdala. Its task is to look out for threats to your survival. As a result, it tells your body how to act and feel in dangerous situations. Next is the hypothalamus, and its job is to talk to other parts of the brain and tell them what to do—it’s the central communication hub. The third structure is the pituitary gland, which sends messages to the other glands in the body. One of those glands it communicates with is the adrenal glands. The adrenals sit on top of the kidneys and are responsible for producing and secreting hormones. The hypothalamus, pituitary gland, and adrenals all work together to form the HPA axis.
When the body determines it’s going through a traumatic event, like a sexual assault, the amygdala tells the hypothalamus to start communicating to the other parts of the brain. The hypothalamus then talks to the pituitary gland, which signals the adrenals to release a flood of four types of hormones: catecholamines, cortisol, opioids, and oxytocin.

The first group of hormones released are **catecholamines**, which help the body prepare for the fight or flight response. A rapid increase in catecholamines can actually impair rational thought, which interferes with the brain’s ability to make logical decisions. As a result, victim/survivors might wonder why they didn’t try to get away or fight back, but in reality their brain may have not been fully able to make those decisions.

The second hormone, **cortisol**, determines whether the person will stay and fight or run away, based on the amount of energy available. If the body doesn’t release the optimal amount of cortisol, it won’t have enough energy to fight or flee.

While we typically hear only about the fight or flight response, there’s a third that’s not usually mentioned: freeze. This response all depends on the amount of cortisol and catecholamines the body releases, which is something that happens automatically, without any control by the individual. The freeze response is technically known as **tonic immobility**. Basically, the brain may think the safest thing to do is to “play dead” and decides to shut the body down. It’s an uncontrollable response that is identified by muscular paralysis, increased breathing, and eye closure. In the event of this sexual assault-induced paralysis, the person literally cannot move their body. Research estimates that between 12-50% of sexual assault victim/survivors experience tonic immobility. 

In order to help the body deal with the physical and emotional pain it’s experiencing, the adrenals release the final two hormones – opioids and oxytocin. **Opioids** are the body’s natural pain killer and **oxytocin** helps to
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increase positive feelings. These two hormones have unanticipated effects on someone experiencing trauma. Because opioids block pain, they also cover up emotional responses. This can result in a flat affect or no displays of emotion at all. This can be hard for people who interact with the victim/survivor soon after the incident to understand, because they might expect them to be very emotional about what they went through. Additionally, a large release of oxytocin can result in overly positive emotional displays like laughing or smiling, which can be confusing for observers. Again, these are not things that the victim/survivor can control.

Finally, let’s explain how trauma impacts memory formation. When the amygdala detects a threat, it communicates with the hippocampus to record the memory in a 2-step process. The first step is encoding, which sorts and organizes the sights, sounds, and other sensory information. The second step, consolidation, groups all of the information from the event together.21

These four types of hormones—catecholamines, cortisol, opioids, and oxytocin—interfere with this process by damaging the cells in the amygdala and hippocampus, and as a result make it difficult for the victim/survivor to recall all of the details right away or put them in the correct order. The memories are fragmented and take time to recover.22,23,24,25

Dr. Rebecca Campbell, a leading researcher on victimization, uses the following analogy to explain this complex process in her presentation to the National Institute of Justice:26

“What if I told you that you had to take your notes on today’s presentations on little teeny post-it notes like this size or maybe this size? …And I want you to write down everything that you know and have learned in this presentation on post-it notes of different sizes. And they’re all small. They’re all little tiny pieces. I want you to write down what you
know. And on something like this you might get a couple of words. On something like this you might get a small sketch, but it’s going to be in lots of teeny tiny pieces. And let’s just also pretend these are different colors — some are pink, some are yellow, and some are blue.

Now, I want you to take all of the post-it notes where you’ve so carefully tried to write down what you’ve learned in this talk. I want you to put them all in your hands, and I want you to imagine the messiest desk ever. ... I want you to take that pile of precious post-it notes, and I want you to scatter them all over that desk. ... I want you to put them in folders that have nothing to do with this talk. I want you to crinkle some of them up and shove them under things. I want you to take one and wad it up and put it in the pencil case. And then I want you to walk away for 24 hours, and then I want you to go back in and I want you to stand before that world’s messiest desk and I want you to find all of those post-it notes. And I want you to put them in the correct order, and then I want you to tell me right back what you learned in my presentation.

That’s why memory can be slow and difficult — because the encoding and the consolidation went down in a fragmented way. It went down on little tiny post-it notes and they were put in all different places in the mind. And you have to sort through all of it, and it’s not well-organized, because remember I told you to put some of them in folders that had nothing to do with this. I told you to put one in the pencil jar. It’s not where it’s supposed to be. It takes a while to find all the pieces and put them together. So that’s why victims, when they’re trying to talk about this assault, it comes out slow and difficult.

But the question everybody wants to know about is the accuracy of that information, okay. And what we know from the research is that the laying down of that memory is accurate and the recall of it is accurate. So what gets written on the post-it notes — accurate. The storage of it is disorganized and fragmented.

However, there is an exception — alcohol. If the victim was under the influence of alcohol at the time of the assault, the encoding process might not have happened at all or in any degree of accuracy... alcohol impairs encoding across the board — not just for traumatic events, for a lot of events. So if you have a traumatic event that occurred under the context of alcohol, the information might not have been encoded, and it may not be consolidated, and it may not be transferred into long-term memory. So for victims who are assaulted under the influence of alcohol, they may not have anything to retrieve. So to speak, their post-it notes are just blank. They may not have it, okay? But for those who are able to remember it, either in pieces and parts, it does go in accurately, it does
come out accurately, but it comes out slow, steady, fragmented and disorganized.

To summarize, sexual assault can produce a mix of unexpected emotional and physical responses, as well as impact memory consolidation. Some may think victim/survivors are lying about their assaults because they suddenly remember new information or change the order of events. Others may think victim/survivors are not telling the truth because their emotional reactions don’t make sense or because they didn’t fight back or say no. All of these are misunderstandings of the neurobiology of trauma. Instead, we should recognize these symptoms as normal responses to sexual assault and be patient with people who tell us they were assaulted.

What if a friend or other person discloses to you that they’ve been sexually assaulted?

Listen to them tell their story. Actively listen instead of thinking of your response in your head while they are talking. Don’t interrupt, question what they were doing, or ask for details. If the person wants to share more, they will. Believe them and assure them that nothing they did caused this to happen to them. Don’t push them to go to the hospital or file a police report if they don’t want to. Respect their privacy. Do refer them to the campus sexual assault center or counseling center. If your school doesn’t have these services, you can refer them to a state or national hotline. For a list of resources, visit the resource links on this page.

Community Resource
The Aurora Center (612) 626-9111 (24-hours) – Free and Confidential Services

Resource
RAINN
Students as advocates against sexual assault, relationship violence, and stalking

**Video Transcript**

Traci Thomas-Card: Students can be some of our best advocates in the fight against sexual assault, relationship violence, and stalking. It starts with supporting and validating a friend whose gone through some traumatic experiences. It also helps to know the resources that are available to you. So, for instance, on many college campuses, there are centers who are dedicated to helping support victim/survivors of sexual assault, relationship violence, and stalking. If there isn’t a resource located on your campus, I would recommend looking into the community resources that are available. There are often wonderful teams of professional advocates who are trained to deal with these situations. And students are welcome to accompany their friends and to support them in these endeavors.

You may have noticed the increased national attention to sexual violence on college campuses. Recent updates to national laws have been enacted to address sexual violence in higher education, and as a result, colleges must comply with these mandates. According to the United States Government:

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is a federal civil rights law that prohibits sex discrimination in educational programs and activities receiving federal funding, including colleges and universities, and elementary and secondary schools.

All students – women, girls, men, and boys; straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and gender-nonconforming; students in elementary and secondary schools and colleges and universities; part-time and full-time students; students with and without disabilities; and students of different races and national origins – have the right to pursue an education free from sex discrimination, including sexual violence and harassment.

The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights and the U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division enforce Title IX in our nation’s schools. Sex-based discrimination in public schools also implicates legal rights under Title IV of the Civil Rights Act, which is enforced by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Under Title IX, schools have the following responsibilities to address sexual violence:
A school has a responsibility to respond promptly and effectively to reports of sexual violence.

If a school knows (or reasonably should know) about possible sexual violence, it must quickly investigate to determine what occurred and then take appropriate steps to resolve the situation.

A criminal investigation into allegations of sexual violence does not relieve a school of its duty under Title IX to resolve reports promptly and effectively.

A school must ensure that the person who experienced the sexual violence is safe, even while an investigation is ongoing.

In addition to Title IX, the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act provides certain rights to sexual assault victim/survivors: 28

- Survivors shall be informed of their options to notify law enforcement.
- Survivors shall be notified of counseling services.
- Survivors shall be notified of options for changing academic and living situations.
- Survivors have the right to have an advocate present during any campus proceeding related to the sexual assault.
- Survivors must be informed of the outcome of any disciplinary proceeding involving the accused perpetrator.

Finally, the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act (Campus SaVE), which is an amendment to the Clery Act, requires schools to collect and report statistics on sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence, and stalking that occurred on or near campus. 28 This act further mandates schools to provide education to the campus community on the awareness and prevention of sexual violence. The federal government requires these mandates to ensure that all schools are providing safe environments to learn and are properly handling cases of sexual assault, violence, and stalking.

What offices provides confidential services?

At the University of Minnesota, there are three offices where you can seek confidential services:

- The Aurora Center for Advocacy and Education
- Student Counseling Services
- Boynton Mental Health Services

These offices will not disclose information you share regarding a sexual assault unless you specifically give your consent, or if you:

- Indicate you intend to seriously harm yourself or others.
• Report or describe child abuse or neglect of yourself or another if it’s happened within the past 3 years.
• Have your counseling records subpoenaed by a court of law.

All other University employees are required to make a report to the appropriate University offices when they are informed of an incident of sexual assault. They are not allowed to guarantee confidentiality.

**Community Resources**
The Aurora Center (612) 626-9111 (24-hours) – Free and Confidential Services
Student Counseling Services
Boynton Mental Health Services
UMN Policy: Responding to Incidents of Sexual Assault, Stalking and Relationship Violence

**Review your school’s protocols for sexual assault.**

Note: While we believe knowing this information is very important, because of the breadth of information, you will not be quizzed on the materials linked on this page.

**Victim Rights**
Please return to page 32 of the online lessons or [read the University of Minnesota’s statement directly](#) on Victim Rights on Sexual Assault, Relationship Violence, and Stalking.

**How can society get to a healthier place and decrease factors that contribute to sexual assault? Video Transcripts**
Traci Thomas-Card: There are a lot of things that we as a society can do. Starting with better and more comprehensive sex education programs. So, often when students get to college, they don’t understand the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships. So, that’s a good start. We can start by believing victims. Listening to them when they’re telling their stories. Understanding the trauma that a victim is experiencing. We can hold perpetrators more accountable.

**How can society get to a healthier place and decrease factors that contribute to sexual assault? Video Transcripts Cont’d…**
Traci Thomas-Card: ...assault is the most under reported crime in the country, and so the more we hold perpetrators accountable, the more likely we are to be able to reduce the amount of incidence that happen. Last but not least, I think we can, on a larger scale, stop the objectification of women. So, for instance, if we think about the concept of a trophy wife. A trophy wife is somebody who is not in a mutual partnership with her spouse but instead is someone who is there to be trotted out on special occasions and showed off to the friends.

Have you ever been in or saw a situation where you thought it might not end well?

It could have been the tiniest of red flags, but it just didn’t sit right with you. Too often, people have this experience, but fail to do something about it. Why is that? If you saw someone who needed help, but there were a bunch of other people around, would you do something, or wait for somebody else to take the lead?

The following information is adapted from the Step UP! Program at the University of Arizona. 

Most often, people fail to step up because of the particulars of the situation. One reason is because they either don’t notice, or choose to not notice what’s happening around them. Second, they may not be sure that something is really a problem and that someone needs help. Individuals also tend to do what the other people around them are doing. If none of your friends were doing anything, what would prompt you to take action? This is problematic because if everyone in the room thinks everything is okay, nobody steps up. Now you’ve got a situation where it makes it more difficult for an individual to speak up, because it’s always a risk to dissent from the rest of the group. Third, there is an inverse relationship between the number of people present and the likelihood of intervening. Everyone assumes that someone else will do something and this problem increases as more people are present. Fourth, a person may identify a situation, but don’t think they have the skills or knowledge to get involved. They don’t know what they would say or do when it came to it, and so they just do nothing. Finally, people may not act because they think the costs outweigh the benefits. They fear what might happen if they misjudged the situation and something wasn’t really wrong. They might feel
embarrassed, afraid that they might hurt, or that they were doing more harm than good. All of these are reasons why people don’t help.

So how do we tackle the reasons why people don’t help?
The five decision-making steps are:

1. **Notice the event.** Pay attention to what’s going on and look for any signs or red flags of a potential problem.
2. **Interpret it as a problem.** Start asking questions or gathering more info to assess the situation. Anticipate the possibility of peer pressure and think about how you’d react.
3. **Assume personal responsibility.** Don’t rely on someone else to make the first move. Tell people you’re going to do something and ask for their help.
4. **Know how to help.** Learn and practice both direct and indirect ways to help in various situations in case you become involved.
5. **Step UP!** Follow the S.E.E. Model: Safe responding, Early intervention, and Effective helping.
   a. **Safe** responding: Figure out what techniques, direct or indirect, you’ll use that will keep everyone involved safe.
   b. **Early** intervention: Don’t wait if possible, the earlier the action, the easier it will be.
   c. **Effective** helping: Think about how you’re going to say and do what you need to. You’ll want to keep in mind your audience, content, timing, location, tone, and evidence or reasoning. Using the communication skills you’ve learned, you can verbalize the situation with your friends. The “I” statements: I care, I see, I feel, I want, and I will are all ways to start the conversation.

**Why do people ultimately choose to get involved?**
The six most commonly cited reasons are:

- It was the right thing to do
- Students should look out for each other
- I would want someone to help me in that situation
- Someone needed help
- So the situation wouldn’t escalate
- To preserve the reputation of my school or organization

Think about these reasons and how they line up with your personal values. What would you want to happen if you were involved in a situation that needed bystander intervention?

Okay, so we’ve told you about bystander intervention, why people do or do not act, and how to tackle the reasons why people don’t act. Now we’re going to talk about some possible action steps if you see or hear something that doesn’t sit well with you.
To intervene, follow the 3 D's:
1. Direct: Confront the situation directly
2. Distract: Diffuse the situation. Change the subject. Interrupt the flow of behavior.
3. Delegate: When you don’t feel safe or comfortable approaching the situation alone, you can involve others.

Many of these situations that we’re going to mention are likely to come up at a party or another social function, although they can be applicable in a variety of scenarios. One action step is to interrupt the situation. This could be as simple as going over and starting a conversation with one of the people or asking them to go to another location to talk with you. The goal is to remove both people from the situation by either distraction or other means, even if you have to make up a story. Sometimes it’s easier if you have somebody else to help you so that each of you can distract one or more people. What if you notice that one person is really incapacitated? You already know that means that they are unable to give consent. Make sure that you or another trusted individual stays with them. If you’re worried that they may have been drugged in any way, get them out of there and get them emergency help.

Now let’s think of a different type of scenario.
You hear somebody say something that makes light of sexual assault, is victim blaming, or uses language in an offensive or inappropriate way that you think is not okay. Often, it can be really hard to tell someone that something they’ve said isn’t cool or all right to say. But how is somebody supposed to change their language and behavior if they aren’t called out on it? Take for example the phrase, “that’s so gay.” We know that it’s hurtful to say it, but how would you go about telling someone? You might start by asking them what they really mean when they use that word. More often than not, the true meaning of the word is
not being used properly. Once they tell you what they were trying to accomplish, you can provide them with some other words that will still get their point across without degrading someone else.

Maybe you hear someone talk about their intent to have sex with someone and plan to do whatever is necessary to get that to happen. It could be bringing someone numerous drinks, getting them alone in a room, or using something else to incapacitate a person. These are situations to step up and say something. You might ask the person if they really think they need to get someone drunk or use other methods to have sex with someone? Or if they think they couldn’t attract someone when they are sober and fully in control of their body? Tell them that what they are suggesting is sexual assault. Until you put that label on their intentions, they may not view the situation as wrong. Remember, the S.E.E. rule when taking action. Safe responding, early intervention, and effective helping. For more tips and information on bystander intervention, visit the Step UP! Website.

Resource
STEP UP Program at the U of MN

What is bystander intervention?

Video Transcripts

Traci Thomas-Card: Bystander intervention is intended to address a variety of situations. From minor issues to major issues. Bystander intervention is intended to reduce the bystander effect, which tells us that 80% of the time, when people are alone, they will help somebody they see in a situation that doesn’t seem quite right. They will help only 20% of the time when they’re in a big group of people. So, for instance, if we are all walking to class together, and we see somebody slip on the ice, we’re less likely to help that person if we’re in a big group than if you’re walking to class by yourself and you see somebody slip on the ice. And the great thing about bystander intervention programs is that the intervention techniques can be direct or indirect, depending on the student’s personality and the situation they’re encountering. So, a common scenario that we see is students going to a party. They see Alex and Jordan. Jordan is slurring her words. She is stumbling on the dance floor, and then they see Alex start to lead her upstairs. At that
What is bystander intervention? Video Transcripts Continued...

Traci Thomas-Card: ... point, students could intervene directly. They could approach either Alex or Jordan. They could intervene using a distraction method. "Jordan, your car's getting towed. Alex, you have a phone call." Or they could delegate. Talking to the host of the party. Calling the authorities, if that's something that they feel comfortable doing. Sometimes, when we're walking around college campuses or even on our social media sites, we'll see folks talking about rape or making victim-blaming comments. Definitely, we want students to feel safe to intervene in those situations. Again, students, if they're using the direct method, "I don't find that comment funny," or "You don't know if there's a survivor in the room," and "We shouldn't be saying things like that." They could delegate. They could talk to a trusted authority figure, whether that is an instructor or a staff member or an advocate—somebody who can intervene on their behalf.

Everyday Hero Public Service Message
What does it mean to be an everyday hero? Watch this short video on redefining sexual assault to find out!

How have you stepped up?
Video Transcript
Andrew: I noticed a woman going down a road right in front of my house, and it was 4am in the morning. Me and a few other guys, who were out on our porch, and she was crying. And there was nobody else on the road. So, we asked if she was okay. She didn't say anything. She just kept walking. So, we all went down there. We asked her like, "Hey, are you okay? Like we just want to make sure you get home safe. You don't have to talk to us or anything, but we're gonna just make sure you get home safe." And so, we just walked next to her, down the road for maybe 6 to 7 blocks in complete silence. And then all of a sudden, she just like, I don't what happened, she just like gave me a big hug and she just started crying into me. And she started saying, telling us what had happened and that she had been sexually assaulted and all these things. We asked her do you want us to call like a sexual advocate or sexual assault advocate? Do you want us to take you to the hospital? Like what do you want us to do? Like we'll do anything that you want us to do? She was
How have you stepped up? Video Transcript Cont’d…
Andrew: ...extremely thankful for us doing that, even though she was hesitant at first, which I can understand because I mean, being a woman at 4am in the morning, and 4 guys asked like, “Are you okay?” I can understand her hesitations, especially going through something like that. We brought her home, and she got into her place. And she just said, “Thank you,” and that was it.
Devyn: The 2 people I was with were also trans-identified, and we got to the coffee shop and there was this older person there who was actually harassing another friend that we knew, whose also trans, at the coffee shop. My partner immediately stood up and—I mean this older man was really, really drunk. And was like inebriated and ended up being arrested later. But yeah, my partner and the friends that I was with all stood up and got this person to back off, which almost ended up in a fight, but luckily didn’t break into anything more than that.
Danica: I was at a party with my roommates one night. I was kind of being the responsible one. I wasn’t drinking. My roommate had met this one guy that she was totally jazzed about, and he was a total creep, and he was like, “Yeah I should like come back with you guys.” I was like, “No, I don’t think you’re coming back with us.” And I was like fighting him and my roommate who—they wanted to like go back, and I was like, “I’m really sorry, but if my roommate was not really drunk right now, she would definitely not want this to happen, so I need to act for her.” The guy was really mad. He was like, “This is none of your business and she’s my friend.” And I was like, “Well, she’s my roommate. You don’t even know her.” She was grateful the next day, but it was tough then. It was tough to step in and kind of override two people when technically, maybe it’s not my business, but she’s my roommate so. Sometimes, that’s what you have to do. I mean. There’s not an easy way to intervene or to react to something that’s going badly. You just have to do it so you won’t regret not doing so later.

Decisions That Matter
Please return to page 43 of the online lessons or participate in this interactive experience on decision making and stepping up in a college social scene directly.
Information in these course lessons is provided for educational purposes. It is not meant to and cannot substitute for advice or care provided by an in-person medical professional. The information contained herein is not meant to be used to diagnose or treat a health problem or disease, or for prescribing any medication. You should always consult your own healthcare provider if you have a health problem or medical condition.

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