

Alcohol and Sexual Assault: The Connection

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Alcohol and sexual assault often happen together. According to some research, 30 percent of all sexual assaults occur when the perpetrator is under the influence of alcohol. In some cases, the victim is also intoxicated. Drinking makes it easy for the perpetrator to ignore sexual boundaries.

A common misunderstanding is that if people commit sexual assaults only when drunk, then (a) the drinking must have caused the assault and (b) sobriety and alcohol counseling are adequate to prevent future assaults. These erroneous conclusions confuse correlation and causation. To illustrate, consider the correlation between consciousness and sexual assault. Perpetrators of sexual assault typically commit sexual assaults only when they are awake, but it would be ridiculous to suggest that being awake caused them to commit sexual assaults. So, what is the relationship between alcohol and sexual violence?

First, alcohol use does not cause sexual violence. Putting alcohol into your system does not cause you to commit a sexual assault anymore than putting gasoline into your car causes you to drive to the airport. Gasoline makes it easier to do what you want to do (e.g., drive a car) while alcohol also makes it easier to do what you want to do (e.g., grope women). If you do not at least think about doing something when sober, you are not likely to do it when drunk. For example, no one worries about becoming so intoxicated that he will lose control and stab himself in the eye with a fork. Why? Because he would never consider doing that when sober.

Alcohol acts as a permission slip. By reducing inhibitions, alcohol often makes it more likely that someone will choose to sexually assault another person. As one man in a violent offender program noted, “When I first came to your program I told you that I hit my wife because I was drunk; now I realize that I drank so that I could hit her.” He realized that alcohol did not excuse or even explain the abuse. Instead, alcohol was the way that he had tried to avoid responsibility for the abuse.

Sexual assault occurs despite alcohol use, not because of it. When someone is extremely intoxicated, we call that person “impaired.” “Impaired” means that you have more difficulty performing tasks. Therefore, if you are going to sexually assault someone when drunk, you have to try harder, focus your attention and be more determined than if you were sober. In effect, people who sexually assault when drunk, do so, not because they are intoxicated, but despite their intoxication. They have to overcome the impairment to commit the sexual assault.

Memory loss is not the same as lack of intent. If a perpetrator of sexual assault claims that he has no specific recollection of the assault, that does not mean that he had no intention of doing it at the time. All it means is that the perpetrator is currently either unable or unwilling to report his state of mind when the assaults occurred. For example,

sometimes we hear perpetrators report on events that were acceptable (e.g., “I remember drinking and dancing”) but not the events that could result in arrest and prosecution (e.g., “I don’t recall fondling that person”). Or the perpetrator will not recall the offense, but will be able to assert with confidence what his state of mind was at the time (e.g., “I had no desire for sexual gratification.”). How can you NOT remember what you did, but be absolutely certain what your motives were when you did it? How does alcohol know which memories to delete and which to keep intact?

Sexual assault and substance abuse are separate issues. If someone violates sexual boundaries while drunk, that person has two problems that need to be addressed. Taking responsibility for alcohol consumption addresses only half of the problem. The perpetrator also needs to take responsibility for the sexual violence. On the most basic level, the perpetrator needs to learn that all sexual contact without permission is sexual violence.

To address this, good sex offender programs teach the principles of sexual consent. These principles are:

(1) Privilege. Sex is never a right; it is always a privilege, an honor, a gift that can either be granted or taken away by the person you wish to have contact with.

(2) Permission. Since sexual contact is always a privilege, you always must seek permission before initiating contact. In addition, you need to be sober enough to know whether or not you have been given permission. Permission requires that the other person is capable, at the time, of giving you permission (e.g., that person is old enough, sober enough, and not coerced by you to say “Yes.”) If the other person is afraid to say “No” because you have a position of power or authority, you cannot know whether your potential sexual partner truly wishes to have contact with you (even if he or she does not actively resist your advances).

(3) Justification/Intent. There is no excuse for engaging in sexual contact without consent. Sexually respectful people adopt the philosophy of “First Do No Harm.” Those who do not respect sexual boundaries should not be allowed to explain or minimize their use of aggression as the result of alcohol or drug use, stress, deviant arousal patterns, loss of control or misunderstandings.

(4) Responsibility. The only person who ever is responsible for a sexual assault is the perpetrator. The victim never is. We, as members of their community, share responsibility for holding perpetrators accountable for their violence. How do we do this? By never blaming victims for the harm they suffered. By remembering that sexual violence is not “just a part of the disease of alcoholism.” By never letting a perpetrator’s sexual access and satisfaction become more important than the victim’s sexual safety and autonomy. By keeping these principles in mind, we can make great strides in achieving sexual safety in our community.