What is Sexual Assault?

Sexuality is often considered to be a very private issue and, in some circles, talking about it is thought to be unacceptable, or “taboo”. Because sexual matters are less likely to be openly discussed, many are not sure what constitutes an infringement of their sexuality.

Legally, sexual assault refers to any sexual contact that is against a person’s will or without his/her consent. A victim may be considered incapable of giving full consent if:

- he/she is underage (in the eyes of the law)
- he/she is under the influence of alcohol or other drug(s), or unconscious,
- weapons, physical force, or the threat of violence, are used to obtain ‘consent’

Sexual assault is sexual assault, whether or not the aggressor & victim are relatives, strangers, married/engaged, friends, or acquaintances.

While both males & females, of all ages, can be victims of sexual assault, assaults against males are much less likely to be reported (it is estimated that as many as 1 in 10 males may be sexually assaulted in their lifetimes’).

Sexual Assault is any unwanted sexual contact against the person’s will or without his/her consent. This includes inappropriate touching, sexual intercourse that you say ‘no’ to, attempted rape and non-contact activity such as watching private sex acts (voyeurism), exhibitionism, or speaking to the victim in a sexual nature. Rape is forced sexual intercourse involving penetration of the vaginal, oral, or anal orifices.

Reactions to sexual assault

It is very common for survivors of sexual assault to feel somehow responsible for what happened, “It was my fault.”

It is important to remember that nobody ever asks to be raped or sexually assaulted.

You are not to blame, even if you were partying, drinking, doing drugs, didn’t put up a fight, froze up, or said “yes” to one type of intimacy but not to what happened.

Other reactions include:

- **Emotional Shock**: I feel numb. How can I be so calm? Why can’t I cry?
- **Disbelief and/or Denial**: Did it really happen? Why me? Maybe I just imagined it. It wasn’t really rape.
- **Embarrassment**: What will people think? I can’t tell my family or friends.
- **Shame**: I feel completely filthy, like there’s something wrong with me. I can’t get clean.
- **Guilt**: I feel as if it’s my fault, or I should’ve been able to stop it. If only I had...
- **Depression**: How am I going to get through the semester? I’m always tired! I feel so hopeless. Maybe I’d be better off dead.
- **Powerlessness**: Will I ever feel in control again? My life is ruined.
- **Disorientation**: I don’t even know what day it is, or what class I’m supposed to be in. I keep forgetting things.
- **Flashbacks**: I’m still re-living the assault! I keep seeing that face and feeling like it’s happening all over again.
- **Fear, nightmares**: I’m scared of everything. What if I have herpes or AIDS? I can’t sleep because I’ll have nightmares. I’m afraid to go out. I’m afraid to be alone.
- **Anxiety**: I’m having panic attacks. I can’t breathe! I can’t stop shaking. I feel overwhelmed.
- **Anger/rage**: I feel like killing the person who attacked me! I can’t stand anyone taking advantage of me in any way.
- **Physical distress**: My stomach/head/back aches all the time. I feel jittery, can’t sit still. I don’t feel like eating, I can’t sleep.

What to do if you, or someone you know, has been sexually assaulted:

- **Get to a safe place** or secure your doors & windows if indoors.
- **Call for support & help immediately**:
  - A friend or relative
  - The Rape Crisis Society 24hr hotline: 622-7273
  - Domestic Violence 24hr Hotline 800-SAVE (800-7283)
  - Police Rapid Response: 999
  - UWI Police: 662-2002, exts 3510, 2120
- **Report the assault to police** as soon as you feasibly can, **whether or not you plan to take legal action**.
- **Don’t shower or wash/change your clothes** since useful physical evidence may be destroyed.
- **As with other traumatic events**, you may struggle to remember what happened but, as upsetting as it may be, try to **write down as much as you can remember**.
- **Whether or not you have signs of injury**, it is **essential to get medical attention**, preferably within 72 hours of the incident.

Your doctor can provide emergency contraception if necessary, as well as screen for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) & check for other physical injury.

- Medical Research Foundation 623-5834
- Queens Park Counselling Centre 625 3944

The MRF and QPCC are located next door to each other and provide free screening for STIs & HIV. The MRF also provides prophylactic treatment to reduce the chance of HIV infection following unprotected sexual contact (these medications are most effective if started within 72 hours of the incident).
Coping afterwards

Sexual assault can be traumatic and you may feel overwhelmed. It takes time to recover and come to terms with what’s happened.

• Feelings of shame may leave you reluctant to talk about it but burying your feelings can delay recovery and, in some cases, might exacerbate your distress. Talk to someone you trust & feel comfortable with. Or, if you prefer, speak with a professional counsellor (especially if you are bothered by thoughts of suicide or a desire to harm yourself).

• Try stress reduction techniques such as gentle exercise, yoga, music, massage, hot baths, prayer and/or meditation.

• Try keeping a journal for writing down your thoughts & feelings.

• Take care of yourself: maintain a balanced diet & regular sleep cycle as much as possible.

• Don’t isolate yourself. When you can, try to maintain your usual routine – see a friend, sit in class (even if you can’t concentrate).

• Things to avoid: excessive caffeine, sugar and/or nicotine. Alcohol and/or drugs might help numb your pain in the short term but may lead to other problems.

Reducing the chance of sexual assault

• Always be aware of your surroundings: avoid wearing headphones or chatting on your phone when walking alone.

• Avoid isolated places: go out in pairs or groups, whenever possible; don’t study late on campus alone.

• Walk with purpose: even if you don’t know where you are going, act like you do! Be assertive: don’t allow anyone to violate your space because you’re afraid of seeming impolite.

• If you feel unsafe with someone, or in a particular place, trust your instincts – leave.

Medical Services on-campus

The Health Services Unit (HSU) at UWI is open year round, Mondays – Fridays. During semesters, there are evening sessions till 8pm and a Saturday morning service.

Services include cervical smear tests and a sexual health clinic for free & confidential advice on contraception & HIV testing.

Counselling Services

The Counselling & Psychological Services (CAPS) offers free & confidential counselling to all UWI students. Counsellors are available by appointment, although students in emergencies are seen as soon as possible.

Call us: 662 2002 ext 2491

Or email: counsellor@sta.uwi.edu

We are located in the Health Service Unit, between Trinity Hall and the Learning Resources Centre (LRC).

CAPS is available throughout the year, Mondays to Fridays, from 8:30am – 7pm during term-time. During vacation, we close at 4:30pm.

Further resources


http://dancinginthedarkness.com

http://www.rainn.org

This leaflet prepared by the Counselling & Psychological Services, UWI, St Augustine.