

A LINE ON LIFE

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Myths of Rape *

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From FBI figures more than 91,000 rapes were reported in the United States in 1987. To add to this, only about 8-16% of rapes are ever reported. So the actual incidence of rapes is at least times higher! Many myths in our culture encourage rapes by blaming the victim.

Myth #1 — Women want to be raped. This is a popular theme in books, movies and pornography. As further "*proof*," people point out that many women have rape fantasies. However, these women do not want their fantasies to become reality. In her rape fantasy, the woman has complete control — the rapist does whatever she wants him to do. In contrast, she has no control — and lots of fear — in a real rape.

Myth #2 — No woman can be raped against her will. A 19th century novelist promoted this myth when he said, "*You can't thread a moving needle*." This makes rape seem impossible in the minds of many people. They believe that women are cooperating by keeping their "*needle*" still. However, if you are likely to be shot, stabbed or choked if you move, I'm sure you would remain still also. Most rapists hold a weapon on their victims or threaten them (or their loved ones) with violence or death.

In addition, not all rapes involve penis-vagina intercourse. Some rapists insert foreign objects into the vagina. Others may have oral or anal sex, or masturbate while abusing a woman. Sadistic rapists get their gratification solely by inflicting pain on their victims.

Myth #3 — Women who are raped ask for it. According to this myth, women cause their own rape by hitchhiking, walking in isolated areas, leaving doors unlocked, wearing "*seductive*" clothing, or acting in a "*provocative*" manner. The notion that women cause their own rape is partially related to the gender roles promoted by our culture. Women are taught to be attractive and seductive. At the same time, men are taught that any attractive woman is "*fair game*" for aggressive sexual advances.

Because of the "*she asked for it*" myth, methods to stop rape tend to put restrictions on women only. They are told not to dress "*suggestively*," not to hitchhike or walk alone at night, and to be extremely cautious in social situations. On the surface, these restrictions are logical, but they would not avoid all rapes. This is because, in about half of attacks, the victim knows the rapist. Furthermore, about half of all rapes occur in the victim's home!

These restrictions on women place the responsibility solely on the potential victim. When Golda Meir was Prime Minister of Israel, she was asked to place a curfew on women to end a series of rapes. However, she refused, saying —

"But it is the men who are attacking the women. If there is to be a curfew, let the men stay at home."

Myth #4 — If a woman is going to be raped, she might as well relax and enjoy it.

This is a mythical theme in some movies — the victim is finally swept away with passion. Like the first myth, it completely misinterprets the victim's emotional reaction to sexual assault. When your safety is threatened, all you feel is fear. Someone who is terrified will find it impossible to experience any type of pleasure.

These myths are supported by a society that puts women in an inferior social position and emphasizes violence as the stereotypical masculine role. In a 1981 study of 156 tribal societies, rape was rare or unknown in 46% of them. These "*rape-free*" societies treated women with great respect — giving their reproductive, economic and social roles much prestige. There was also little violence of any kind in these cultures.

In contrast, 18% of the tribal societies had "*rape-prone*" cultures. There were high levels of violence. In addition, women were viewed as property and segregated into separate social groups. (Does this "*rape-prone*" society sound familiar?)

We need to view rape differently. Rather than a sexual crime, most psychologists view rape as an **act of aggression**. Most rapists are not motivated by sexual gratification — but by anger or a need for power. They use sexuality as a way to express their aggressive feelings.

**Rape victims are not to blame,
but they can make themselves
less vulnerable by assuming
more responsibility for their lives.**

Some women believe another myth — **they are helpless victims**. There are commonsense methods to reduce chances of being a victim of any violent crime — including rape.

- Be aware of your surroundings when walking.
- Avoid dark and deserted areas. (Even police officers walk in pairs in some neighborhoods.)
- If you live alone, use your initials on any listing rather than a feminine first name.
- When interacting with others, use your posture and speech to communicate self-confidence. You can even take a course in self-defense. (Most attackers pick victims who seem less likely to resist.)

These are only a few hints that can reduce your chances of becoming a victim. However — regardless of your situation or training — you should not become naively overconfident. Some women believe still another myth — "*It could never happen to me.*"



Even if it does happen — or has happened — to you, there is still something you can do. Tell someone you can trust. In Yuma, we have Amberly's Place, named after a 9-year-old Arizona girl, who was raped and killed. Diane Umpress, Director of Victim Services, or trained volunteers are available on a 24-hour, 7 days a week basis at 928-**373-0849**. Amberly's Place offers complete and compassionate "one-stop" victim services that empower victims and those close to them to deal with their trauma. The services involve a coordinated effort among physicians on call (some of them pediatricians), Child Protective Services, Adult Protective Services, the Yuma

Police Department, the Yuma Sheriff's Office and the Yuma County Attorney. The teamwork among these agencies means that you may get all the help you need within a few hours.

* Adapted from Crooks and Baur's *Our Sexuality*, Brooks/Coles Publishing, 1999, pages 569-571, 579-580.