

# Debunking rape myths

## Overview resource by Dublin Rape Crisis Centre

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Sexual assault and rape are frightening and distressing issues. To protect ourselves psychologically, we may create sets of rules for behaviour to try to distance ourselves from the possibility that we, or someone we love, could be violated – or could violate someone else – in this way.

Likewise, societies develop beliefs, myths & attitudes about why rape and sexual assault happens, to protect themselves from having to deal with the reality of these issues.

These beliefs are often deeply misinformed and unhelpful to the victim, compounding the impact of the assault. They deny the reality of rape and sexual assault. Very commonly, they minimise its impact and seek to place responsibility for the assault on the victim. They protect the perpetrator and allow abusive behaviours to go unchallenged. And they are not borne out in evidence.

We need to be aware of and alert to the extent to which we have internalised misinformed beliefs, myths and attitudes, so we can challenge and manage these within ourselves and ensure they do not interfere with our ability to be helpful and supportive. Such myths may even be entrenched in and upheld by our laws and state policies.

Below we explore some harmful rape myths that damage victim/survivors and their chance to heal and seek justice, and allow the perpetrators to deny responsibility and carry on harmful behaviours.

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**MYTH:** Rape comes from overwhelming sexual desire.

**FACT:** Sexual assault & rape are acts of violence driven by the wish to dominate or degrade. The perpetrator overrules the victim/survivor's own wishes through coercion or overt violence.

- When a victim/survivor believes that rape is caused by the perpetrator being so sexually aroused as not to be able to help themselves, they often question their own dress, behaviour or demeanour and end up blaming themselves.
- This affects the victim/survivor's ability to access supports and services, and their expectations of how they will be seen and judged. The supporter or service provider needs to be very conscious of this and be actively non-judgemental.

**MYTH:** You can provoke rape by your dress and behaviour.

**FACT:** How you dress and what you do is never reason for assault. Compared to other crimes, [rapes & sexual assaults see the victim more frequently blamed for the crime and indeed blaming themselves for it](#). A person may behave and dress in ways which are utterly normal and socially accepted, yet when someone rapes them, they are blamed. [Such victim blaming/shaming is a response across almost all cultures and societies](#).

- Victim blaming hugely compounds the impact of sexual violence on the victim, who may feel they cannot tell/report as they will be shunned and stigmatised if they do.

- People may agonise over what it was in their dress or behaviour that led to the attack, even though it was not about those factors. They **may censor and limit their activities** to avoid being a target of sexual violence, but people of all ages, in diverse situations, are sexually assaulted or raped and thus this censoring and limiting **creates a false sense of security**.
- A victim/survivor may feel that something he or she did – or didn't do – led to the rape or sexual assault: They stayed late at the office, drank at a party, took a lift home from a friend or a neighbour, took a taxi. But we do these things regularly and in safety all the time. **What turns everyday activities into an instance of rape or sexual assault is the action of the perpetrator: They are the only one responsible.**
- In rape, the perpetrator takes advantage of an aspect of a situation which gives them power to rape: maybe because the victim/survivor trusts them; because he/she is alone, or sick, or older; because the perpetrator is physically stronger; or any situation where there is an imbalance of power in favour of the perpetrator. **The responsibility for rape lies with the perpetrator, who has used this imbalance of power to subject another person to a traumatic & horrifying ordeal.**

Many individuals who have been raped or sexually assaulted internalise the blame and shame of what has been done to them and will need a lot of support to see it differently and place the responsibility and shame where it belongs: with the perpetrator.

**MYTH: Men are not raped.**

**FACT: Men are raped & assaulted.** Assault on men is very under-reported, for reasons such as the way in which men are socialised or fears of being labelled, so it is difficult to be sure of the true extent. In 2018, some [21.6% of callers to the National Helpline & 10.3% of DRCC counselling clients were male](#). Many are men who experienced rape, sexual assault and/or child sexual abuse.

**MYTH: People are usually sexually assaulted by strangers.**

**FACT: Most people know the person who raped them.** In 2018, [almost 80% of clients of DRCC who had been sexually assaulted or raped as adults knew their attacker](#). For one in five clients, the assault was by a partner. In these cases, the trauma is compounded by the breach of trust, the sense that no one is safe, and the likelihood of meeting the perpetrator in their home, in the family circle, in the neighbourhood, in college, at work. This can lead to social isolation, job loss, or dropping out of education – a huge impact.

**MYTH: People often make false accusations of rape out of spite or to cover up their own behaviour.**

**FACT: International research shows false rape accusations are rare.** Research across 11 European countries shows [police deemed over 91% of allegations of rape as meeting crime investigation thresholds](#). UK data indicates that [less than 1% of rape claims are false](#). In fact, rape is an under-reported crime: In Ireland, less than 10% of victims report it.

**MYTH: Rape can only happen through violence, so if there are no injuries, it wasn't rape.**

**FACT: Rape does not always involve physical violence.** In Irish law, rape is recognised as non-consensual sexual intercourse. 'Non-consensual' may mean the perpetrator **coerced the**

**victim/survivor**, that is, he or she forced the person using intimidation, threats or fear. Also, **some people cannot give consent**, such as those asleep, unconscious or under the influence of drugs, young people aged under 17 or people with certain disabilities. Physical violence is not an essential ingredient of this crime.

**MYTH: If you didn't say no, it was not rape.**

**FACT: It is not always possible to say 'no'.** People have a variety of responses to danger. Two survival mechanisms are well known: the 'fight' or 'flight' responses. However, there are also the 'freeze' and 'fawn' responses. A person may freeze up in response to a threat, unable to move or speak. Alternatively, the person may seek to mollify or 'befriend' the attacker, hoping that this will help them avoid harm. All these responses are automatic – a person has no control over which way they will react. **For some people, therefore, it will be impossible to say 'no'** as their own survival mechanism prevents it. **It does not mean they consent** to the activity. Consent must be ongoing and given freely – it is possible [to ensure all parties are consenting](#).

**MYTH: Only young, attractive women are raped.**

**FACT: Women of any age, appearance, social class, ethnic origin and intellectual ability are vulnerable to rape. Men and children are also raped. People with physical or intellectual disabilities are raped.** In a war situation, women can be raped as a policy of intimidation, revenge or demoralization, and in that case all females, from the very youngest to the very oldest, may be targeted.

**MYTH: If you were ok to have sex with the person before, it isn't rape now.**

**FACT: If a sexual encounter is non-consensual, it is a crime.** [Sexual consent is an ongoing process and can be withdrawn](#). Consent given in a previous encounter does not automatically bestow consent in any subsequent encounter. Person A can decide to stop a sexual encounter with Person B and withdraw consent at any point. Or, Person A can have a consensual encounter or series of encounters with Person B, and then decide not to repeat the experience. Person B may be disappointed, but has no entitlement to consent & cannot force or coerce Person A into having sex because of a past relationship or sexual encounter. If Person B does this, it is rape and it is second only to murder as a serious crime.

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**More reading:**

- [The SAVI Report: Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland](#), McGee et al, The Liffey Press, 2002.
- [Attitudes about rape victims revealed](#), RTE, 2008.
- [Different systems, similar outcomes? Tracking attrition in reported rape cases in eleven countries](#), Kelly & Lovett, CWASU, 2009.
- [21% of Irish say sex without consent OK in certain circumstances](#), Eurobarometer poll on Violence Against Women, EU Commission, 2016.
- [DRCC Statistical Supplement 2018](#), Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, 2019.
- [Knowledge or Belief concerning Consent in Rape Law](#), Law Reform Commission, 2019.
- [Consent: What do I need to know? An overview resource](#), Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, 2020.