

THE LINK BETWEEN SUBSTANCE ABUSE & SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The relationship between substance abuse and sexual violence goes both ways. People who have experienced sexual violence are more likely to abuse substances. At the same time, people who abuse substances are at a higher risk to become victims of sexual violence.

Substance abuse and sexual assault both carry a great deal of social stigma, but when a victim/survivor has experienced both, the stigma can be especially difficult to overcome. This can compound the challenges of the healing process. For example, the media constantly reinforces the idea that drinking and sex go hand-in-hand, which can contribute to feelings of shame and self-blame. Even if a victim of sexual assault willingly drank alcohol or took drugs, the victim is not at fault for being assaulted.

Increased Chances of Becoming a Victim of Sexual Violence:

Sexual violence can happen to anyone, but certain risk factors and vulnerabilities can increase the likelihood of it happening to you. Abuse of alcohol and/or drugs is one of these factors. The stereotypical rape scenario does not involve drinking or drugs; however, in reality, it often does. A high percentage of adult victims were intoxicated at the time of their assault, and therefore unable to give consent.

Alcohol and drug use have been shown to increase vulnerability to violence through exposure to unsafe situations. Teens with drug problems are 18-21 times more likely to be sexually abused. Approximately one-half of all sexual assault victims report that they were drinking alcohol at the time of their assault. This does not mean that substance use causes sexual violence, but rather suggests that perpetrators target victims who are perceived as vulnerable. Perpetrators often use substances to incapacitate their victims in order to facilitate a sexual assault. Alcohol is the



drug most commonly used by perpetrators to help commit sexual assault.

Increased Chances of Substance Abuse:

Subsequently, victims of sexual assault may use alcohol or drugs to cope with their feelings after the assault. Many victims experience Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), or similar symptoms, including shock, flashbacks, intense emotions, and painful memories. Rape victims are 3.4 times more likely to use marijuana, 5.3 times more likely to use prescription drugs for non- medicinal purposes, 6.4 times more likely to use cocaine, and 10 times more likely to use hard drugs other than cocaine.

Studies have shown a strong relationship between substance abuse and sexual abuse, even for those who did not use substances prior to the assault. Men and women reporting sexual abuse have higher rates of alcohol and drug use disorders than other men and women. Abuse victims reported initiating substance use earlier than their non-abused peers.

Men and women who experienced childhood sexual abuse are even more at risk for substance abuse issues later in life. Nearly 90% of alcoholic women were sexually abused as children or suffered severe violence at the hands of the parent.

Seeking Treatment as a Victim and Substance Abuser:

When seeking help for dealing with substance abuse and sexual violence, it is important that treatment deals with both components and their interaction because they are intertwined. The key to effective treatment is a thorough professional evaluation and the development of an individualized treatment plan to deal with these issues.

*(Source: Dawgert, Sarah (2009). Substance Abuse and Sexual Violence: Building Prevention and Intervention Responses. The Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape.)
Courtesy of Family and Children Services, Carroll County.
Mental Illness: Recognizing Warning Signs*