

SPEAKING UP ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT: BREAKING DOWN BUZZWORDS TO START MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS

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Fraternities and sororities are no strangers to being part of sensationalized stories in the media. These stories seem to unfairly perpetuate ideas about excessive drinking, gender stereotypes, and cultural insensitivities being central to the membership experience. Constant critique of the sorority experience has put many sorority women on the defensive particularly when the accusations aren't true and don't resemble our own sorority experiences. In other cases, **we just don't want to face the truth about how far we have to go as a society and, as sorority women, what role we may play in perpetuating social injustice.** Conversations about sexual assault are no different.

In the past several months, I've found myself living at the intersection of two worlds that had previously been relatively unrelated. As a devoted sorority woman, I firmly believe that sororities can better the lives of women and enhance the college experience. As an anti-rape advocate and Ph.D. candidate researching and teaching about intimate partner violence and sexual assault, I also firmly believe in promoting safe, healthy relationships and preventing sexual assault. As fraternities and sororities continue to be part of the conversations on campus sexual assault, I discourage members from becoming defensive and, instead, encourage serious reflection about how the fraternity and sorority community may in fact contribute to an unsafe campus culture and how we can support our sisters if faced with sexual assault.

For some, the following information may be old news. For others, it may challenge the way you've always thought about sexual assault. Either way, this is my effort at starting the past due conversation about sexual assault in Theta Phi Alpha. **We owe it to our members to address the problem of sexual assault as an organization and to empower our individual members to make change on their respective campuses and in the lives of their sisters.**

WHAT IS SEXUAL ASSAULT?

Legal definitions of sexual assault vary, as do definitions of rape. Generally speaking, sexual assault refers to unwanted sexual contact, whereas rape typically refers specifically to unwanted sexual intercourse (vaginal or anal). **The bottom line is that the sexual contact is non-consensual and done against someone's will.** I'll be using the term "sexual assault" to broadly refer to all types of unwanted sexual contact.

Because "rape myths," or misperceptions of sexual assault and rape, dominate many conversations about sexual assault, part of understanding sexual assault requires us to know what sexual assault is *not*.

MYTH: Sexual assault is forceful and often committed by violent strangers.

FACT: First, most sexual assault is non-violent, and victims don't often present themselves with external or internal injuries. **Many perpetrators use coercion, either through threats of violence or emotional manipulation, instead of physical violence, to pressure the victim into unwanted sexual activity.** Second, sexual assault is disproportionately perpetrated by someone the victim knows.

MYTH: It can't be sexual assault if the alleged victim didn't fight back, or if they didn't say "no."

FACT: As mentioned, most sexual assault isn't physically violent. And whether it is or not, victims may refrain from physically fighting or resisting their partners because they are fearful of being injured or killed. **The absence of "no" does not mean "yes."** It's your responsibility to ensure you have consent.

Remember, consent cannot be given when one is under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. If you're interested in someone and sexual activity seems like a good idea, then waiting to make the decision until you and/or your partner are sober is best for all parties involved.

MYTH: If you have engaged in sexual activity with the person before, or they are your partner, they can't sexually assault you.

FACT: Regardless of relationship status or sexual history, sexual assault is non-consensual sexual activity perpetrated against someone's will.

MYTH: Some women behave in ways that lead to getting sexually assaulted.

FACT: Of course individuals can engage in behaviors to promote their individual safety, but at the end of the day, sexual assault is the responsibility of the perpetrator. Regardless of clothing and behavior, no one has the right to sexually assault another person. In short, sexual assault is *never* the fault of the victim.

MYTH: With so many women lying about rape, we can't believe anyone.

FACT: A miniscule number of sexual assault allegations are false, and focusing energies on these cases diminishes the resources that should be dedicated to supporting real victims of sexual assault.

WHAT IS CONSENT?

If one can engage in such an intimate act as sexual activity with someone, getting consent may simply include verbally asking one's partner if they're interested in engaging in sexual activity. Checking in on their comfort level throughout the sexual activity is a good idea too. Just because one's partner wanted to engage in sexual activity at one time doesn't mean that they'll remain comfortable with the activity for the duration. **Consent remains the property of the person who gave it, so it's theirs to take away at any time.** Similarly, getting consent once is not a golden ticket for unlimited sexual access to one's partner. An individual has the right to give consent – or not give consent – when they want, regardless of how badly their partner wants to engage in sexual activity again. This also means that just because someone is taking off their clothes or engaging in one sexual activity does not mean that they want to take it to the next level. It simply means they wanted to take off their clothes, or they wanted to engage in that particular activity for the time being. Don't make assumptions about someone's wants and needs.

For many people, it feels awkward to explicitly ask for consent. So, good news: it's usually pretty easy to tell if someone is uninterested in engaging in sexual activity. If they look uncomfortable or sad, they probably are – in which case you should pump the brakes, including stopping whatever activity

you might be engaging in. If they aren't enthusiastic or actively participating in the sexual activity, that's also a good sign that they aren't fully committed to engaging in the sexual activity. Even then, body language and non-verbal cues can be difficult to interpret, so it's always best to err on the side of caution if you can't be sure you have your partner's consent. Sexual activity is better for everyone when all parties are fully invested in it, so it's worth the wait.

Remember, consent cannot be given when one is under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. If you're interested in someone and sexual activity seems like a good idea, then waiting to make the decision until you and/or your partner are sober is best for all parties involved.

1 <https://www.npcwomen.org/resources/pdf/Adventures%20in%20Friendship.pdf>

2 <http://www.nij.gov/topics/crime/rape-sexual-violence/campus/pages/increased-risk.aspx>

3 Auster, C. J., & Leone, J. M. (2001). Late adolescents' perspectives on marital rape: The impact of gender and fraternity/sorority membership. *Adolescence*, 36, 141-152.

WHAT ROLE DO WE PLAY AS SORORITY WOMEN?

Historically, women's fraternities were established in response to promote women's equal participation on college campuses and to provide women with friendships and mutual support in often hostile academic environments. Today, sororities continue to present themselves as organizations that prioritize social, educational, and health issues, and a commitment to bettering women's lives.¹ However, empirical research suggests that sorority women are at greater risk of sexual assault,² and the hyper-gendered nature of fraternity and sorority life may contribute to that risk.³

As well-resourced women's organizations, sororities are uniquely positioned to be the leaders of change on college campuses by promoting safer campus communities through sexual assault prevention and intervention initiatives. **I encourage our members to reach out to their respective campuses to identify the available resources for sexual assault prevention and intervention, and to become actively involved in these initiatives.**

Prevention initiatives may include:

- Holding educational workshops open to the campus community
- Coordinating programming tailored to fraternities and sororities
- Participating in campus-sponsored programs
- Taking courses about gender, relationship violence, and/or sexual assault
- Take the oath (#liveyouroath)

As sisters, we may not be qualified to appropriately, legally, or emotionally counsel victims of sexual assault. In that case, it may be helpful to:

- Get educated on Title IX guidelines for reporting and available campus resources for sexual assault reporting and/or counseling
- Invite the campus Title IX coordinator to host chapter-wide informational workshops about campus resources
- Invite representatives from community agencies for sexual assault intervention to review legal, medical, and other resources for victims of sexual assault. Share the National Sexual Assault Hotline number: 1-800-656-HOPE

Perhaps most relevant to our role as sisters is to commit to supporting one another should one of our sisters be the victim of sexual assault. Placing blame on the victim of sexual assault rather than the perpetrator of sexual assault (i.e., victim-blaming), or doubting the validity of their story, go against the values of sisterhood and fail to support our fellow sisters during times of need. You don't have to be an expert in the field to support victims of sexual assault, so here are some quick tips to being just, loyal, and compassionate to sisters faced with sexual assault:

- **Refrain from passing judgment.** Perhaps parts of the victim's account makes you uncomfortable or you can't personally relate to what happened. Perhaps you're thinking you would have done something differently had you been in a similar situation. Remember that you weren't in the situation and, therefore, it's not your place to imagine what might have happened if you were.

- **Validate her feelings and her story.** Victims may question what they did to deserve or encourage the sexual assault. They may cry hysterically one moment and laugh the next – or they may be totally stoic. Everyone's response to sexual assault is different, and it's important to validate their feelings and their perspective. As sisters, it isn't our responsibility to determine the accuracy of someone's story or to prosecute the perpetrator. In our role as sorority sisters, we are only responsible for sisterhood and support; we aren't responsible for playing the role of the nurse examiners, the police, or the courts.
- **Support her decisions.** If you are knowledgeable in this area, it may be helpful to share the many options available to victims of sexual assault. There are pros and cons to formally reporting sexual assault, and the decision is often difficult. However, it's important to remember that your sister deserves your support even if she chooses a course of action that you don't agree with.

So, although it is scary to see so many people tearing down the fraternity and sorority experience and feel that the membership experience we value so much is constantly under fire, I'd like to start a conversation about sexual assault with our members. To be effective, we must be candid, reserve judgment, and empower our members to use their resources as sorority women to lead positive changes on their campuses. Because, as with most criticism, regardless of how harsh it may be, there is often at least one bit of useful, truthful information that can be used. And as much as we don't want to admit it, our critics are right in this: **Sororities can and should do better in addressing sexual assault.** I'd be proud to see Theta Phi Alpha women leading the charge.

For members that would like to talk more about relationship violence, sexual assault, and/or Theta Phi Alpha's role in prevention, please contact Nikki at nikkicon.004@gmail.com. Stay tuned for more information about Theta Phi Alpha's upcoming initiatives in this area:

• Online learning and resource center

- Sexual assault and relationship violence prevention programming
- Suggested readings and discussion guides
- Virtual office hours

WANT TO LEARN MORE IN THE MEANTIME?

Check out Robin Warshaw's (1994), *I Never Called it Rape: The Ms. Report on Recognizing, Fighting, and Surviving Date and Acquaintance Rape.*

Visit www.liveyouroath.org, where you can also find discussion questions for your chapter and take an oath to end campus sexual assault.

Nikki earned her M.S. in Child and Family Studies and her C.A.S. in Women's and Gender Studies at Syracuse University, with a focus on gender-based violence, and currently works as a Project Manager and Research Associate in Public Health. As a Ph.D. candidate, Nikki is studying violence, control, and sexual assault in college dating relationships and also works as a sexual assault victim advocate, providing support to men, women, and children at the time of reporting sexual assault to local hospitals and police agencies. She currently serves the Fraternity as National Vice President-Extension.