Activists and advocates have been using the month of April for sexual assault awareness, education, and prevention since the 1970s. April was officially declared as Sexual Assault Awareness Month in 2001 by the National Sexual Violence Resource Center and their partners, and SAAM continues to be recognized across the US today as a way to raise awareness about the reality of sexual assault. The popularization of the #MeToo hashtag kick started a lot of discussion about sexual assault, both in the news and online. This discussion highlighted a lot of misconceptions and misunderstandings about sexual assault that are widely believed in our culture. In addition to seeing myths online, I’ve also seen and heard plenty of myths in-person among OU students. So in observance of SAAM, I wanted to tackle some common myths that I’ve come across in my past three years of working in sexual violence prevention on this campus.

MYTH BUSTING FOR SEXUAL ASSAULT AWARENESS MONTH

APRIL 15, 2020

Myth #1: Sexual assault is always perpetrated by a stranger

I think this myth probably has some roots in TV’s portrayal of sexual assault. Crime shows tend to all have the same version of a predatory stranger lurking in the dark waiting to grab someone. Since this is the story that we see over and over again, we can come to believe that this the only way that sexual assault can happen—and that if sexual assault isn’t perpetrated by a stranger then it isn’t “real” sexual assault. But actually, 8 out of 10 times sexual assault is perpetrated by someone that the victim/survivor already knows.

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Myth #1 continued

Of course, “stranger rapes” do happen in real life, but they aren’t nearly as common as the media makes them out to be. If a perpetrator violates someone’s right to consent, then it’s sexual assault whether they knew each other or not.

Myth #2: Men can’t be victims/survivors of sexual assault

This myth is everywhere. Sexual assault can get talked about in a very black and white way, leading us to believe that perpetrator = man and victim = woman. But sexual assault doesn’t follow scripts or rules, and men can and do experience sexual assault. Because of the expectations our culture places on men, it can be extremely difficult for them to come forward and seek help after experiencing a sexual assault. We tell men they should be strong, so they should be able to fight off an attacker, and we tell them they’re supposed to be super into sex, so there should never be a time when they don’t want it. These harmful standards we put upon men make it incredibly likely that sexual assault among men is underreported.

Myth #3: Rape is about sexual attraction

Rape is not about sexual attraction or lust or appearance or anything like that. Sexual assault doesn’t happen because a perpetrator is just so attracted to someone that they can’t help themselves—that’s not real. Sexual assault doesn’t happen because someone dresses in a way that’s “too revealing” or because they flirt or dance or drink in a “suggestive” way. Sexual assault is actually about power and control. Perpetrators aren’t driven by lust or passion, they are actually just looking for someone that they can make vulnerable and take advantage of.

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Myth #3 continued
Because sexual assault is a crime of power and control, if you ever have a friend tell you that they’ve been assaulted, you want to make sure to help them regain power and control over their life. Let them make their own decision on who to tell, where to seek help, and how to move forward. Unless they ask for our advice or input, the best thing to do is to listen and support whatever decisions they make.

Sexual Assault Resources

- **OU Advocates**
- **Norman Women’s Resource Center**
- **RAINN**
- **National Sexual Violence Resource Center**
- **Sexual Assault Stats + Research (CDC)**

All of Sara’s citations are hyperlinked and listed below.

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