



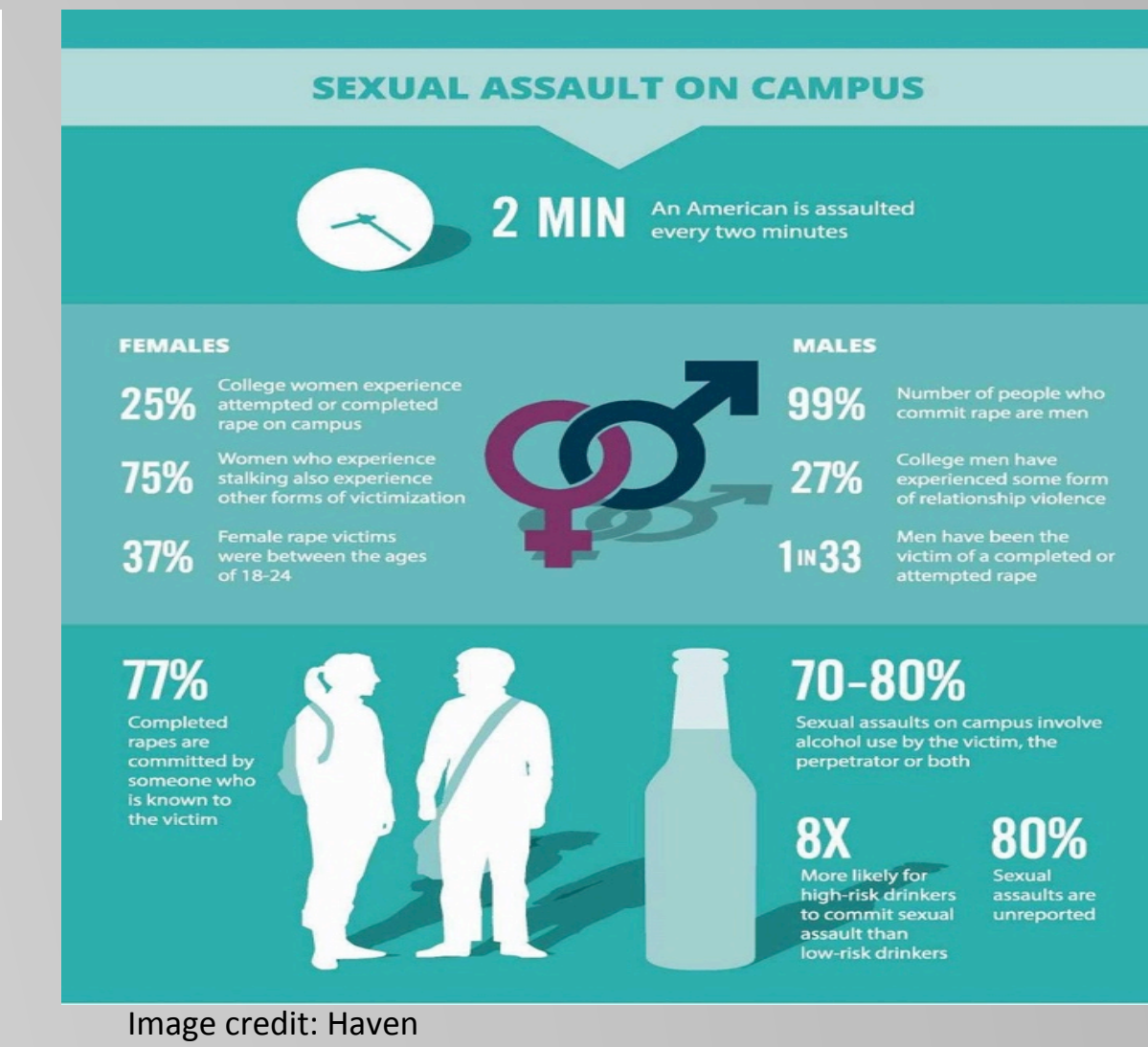
# The Traumatic Effects of Sexual Assault: A literature review of the effects of sexual assault on college students

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## Introduction and Statistics

There are prevailing rape myths surrounding anyone who may have experienced a sexual assault instance; however, these myths prevail even more on college campuses due to the environment in which many of these assaults take place. Sexual assault ranges in definition from any unwanted sexual experiences, physical or not, to rape. This literature review looks particularly at sexual assaults against college-aged individuals and the traumatic effects that occur following the incident. Roughly 1 in 5 females and 1 in 71 males will experience sexual assault while in college (McCauley, 2015) and of these assaults roughly 20% will actually be reported to police (Sinozich, 2014). Often times individuals, male and female alike, who are assaulted sexually face symptoms of depression, decreased success in academic settings, poor relationships, and an increased likelihood in engaging in risky behaviors. Half of female undergraduate rape survivors will meet the criteria to be diagnosed with PTSD for the rest of their lifetime (Kilpatrick, Resnick, Ruggiero, Conoscenti, & McCauley, 2007). Sexual assault prevention and support is a problem that should be addressed seriously and immediately in order to protect all students and increase the possibility for success and positive experiences. Supporting individuals who may have suffered from any form of sexual assault, changing the rape myth dialogue, and offering services to students like on-campus counseling programs to help them work through these traumatic experiences can help facilitate better outcomes.

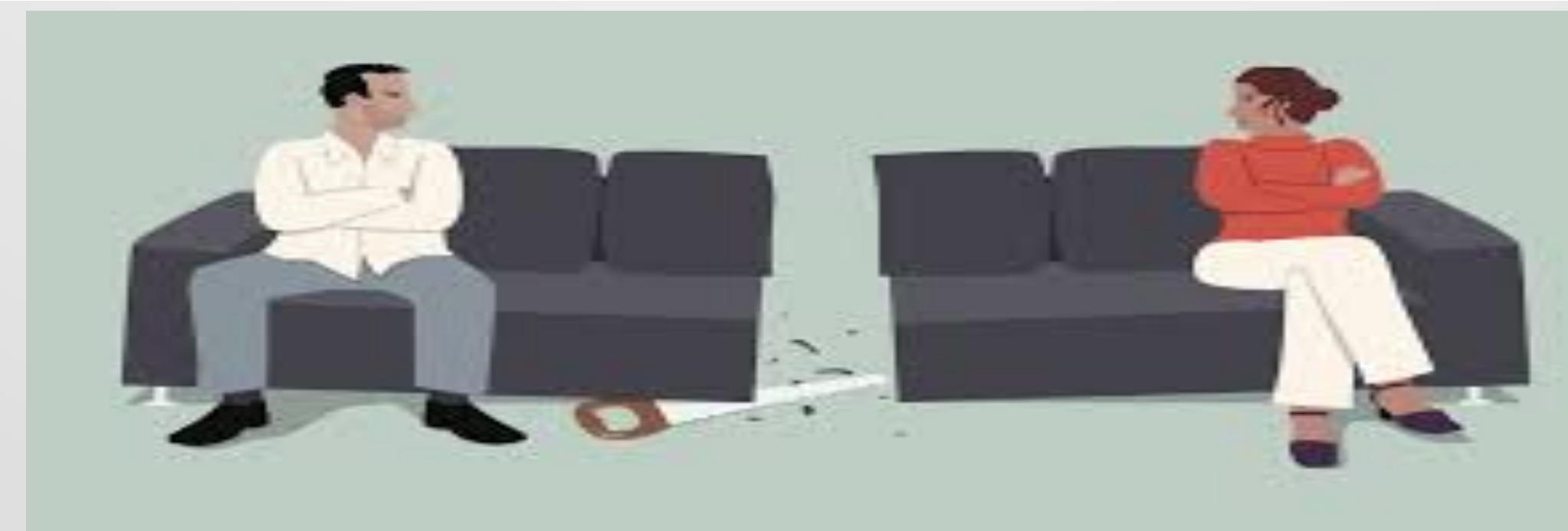


## Psychological Effects of Sexual Assault

Significant research has been done to determine how disorders such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are manifested. While some people may be pre-disposed to these illnesses, it is likely the environment and life situations play a bigger role on whether or not individuals will be resilient or manifest these disorders. The DSM-V has criteria specifically mentioning sexual violence as a predictor for post-traumatic stress disorder that can lead to recurrent and intrusive memories or dreams, dissociation, avoidance, distress, and persistent negative emotional state to name a few (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). A study conducted on college men who had experienced sexual assault found greater prevalence of PTSD, depression, and other distress disorders (Aosved, Long, & Voller) in comparison to their non-victimized counterparts. This finding was consistent among females as well. A study conducted in 2016 found that college females who had experienced sexual assault had significant depressive and PTSD symptoms as well as reporting higher rates of victim shaming (DeCou, Cole, Lynch, Wong, & Matthews, 2016). However, many cases of sexual assault go unreported due to this victim shaming mentality. It has been shown in several studies that supportive social reactions to admittance of sexual assault leads to less psychological distress on the victims part (Jonzon & Linblad, 2004; Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014). In contrast, when victims are met with negative social reactions they are less likely to disclose their assault in the future and often have more severe symptoms of trauma related disorders.

## Impact on Relationships

Individuals who suffer with trauma related disorders often have strained relationships because of the problems they have to deal with on a daily basis. Victims of sexual assault who have been diagnosed with PTSD often have flashbacks of the experience when they are around environments that trigger those memories (American Psychological Association, 2013). It can then be assumed that if an individual is victimized after a night out with friends, partaking in this social situation may evoke distress symptoms so the individual will choose not to attend this environment in the future. This can lead to strain on the relationship or even potentially having the relationship end all together. Also, relationships that have produced a negative social reaction to the disclosure of an assault can cause the individual to close themselves off from other people in fear of being rejected again (DeCou et. al., 2016). This can cause a circular process affecting worsening depressive symptoms of feeling worthless and thus causing the individual to remove themselves from existing relationships or forming new ones.



## Affect on Functioning

Research has shown that males and females who were victimized had an increased likelihood to use risky behaviors such as increased consumption of alcohol, drug use, and risky sexual behaviors like unprotected sex (Turchik, 2012). Shown in the image depicted above, alcohol is used in 70-80% of sexual assaults in college so these risky behaviors predisposed victims to being victimized again. Another affect that has been seen is that sexual assault leads to poorer academic performance in college students. A 2016 study conducted at University of Minnesota Twin Cities found that students who reported some form of sexual assault also had lower cumulative GPAs, while still accounting for antecedents such as known academic predictors (e.g. SAT), ethnicity, and personality traits such as conscientiousness (Baker et. al, 2016). This study also found that when students who experienced sexual assault were followed up with after four years, they ended college with lower GPAs than would have been predicted had sexual assault not occurred or left college, giving the assault as the reason why. Further research into this topic found that little research has been done specifically accounting for antecedents, but the finding of decreased academic performance after sexual assault has been found in another project (Jordan, Combs & Smith, 2014). As many who suffer from psychological disorders such as depression and PTSD, victims of sexual assault often have trouble engaging in various situations, increased anxiety, and partake in escape behaviors.

## Prevention Strategies

After the research being done in regards to college sexual assaults, many universities have adopted intervention programs in hopes to lower the risk of sexual assault on their campus. For example, ASU uses a program called Haven that is administered to entering Freshman through an online course. The purpose behind these programs is to teach students how to detect signs of situations that could potentially result in some form of sexual assault against themselves or a peer and how to intervene. However, males and females often answered differently on willingness to intervene and what situations constitute a rape. A study done in 2014 on college students found that males were more likely to use bystander behaviors in regards to perpetration, such as advising a friend his actions may be under the sexual assault definition, while females were more likely to use bystander behaviors to combat sexual assault, such as remaining in groups (Amar, Sutherland & Laughon, 2014). Women were also more likely to report partaking in bystander behaviors regardless of the gender of the victim. However, both males and females were less likely to intervene if the victim was a stranger rather than a close friend. This information is important to note because it could be potentially beneficial to provide gender specific prevention programs in order to increase likelihood of intervening. These programs could also focus on how gender roles play into rape myths and increasing efficacy towards victims that are strangers. Finally, a program could be put into place where students are educated and trained on how to identify risky situations and how to appropriately intervene. The members of this program would be able to cover a wide variety of social situations that may promote sexual assault behaviors and intervene for those who may not receive help otherwise. This group could also provide education on where sexual assault victims can receive help, such as campus counseling centers, if it is desired.



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