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THE SEX SECRET

too many girls are keeping

Every girl has her reason for keeping quiet—fear, guilt, self-doubt. But now is the time for the more than 150,000 silent victims of sexual assault per year to finally be heard and get the help they need. BY JESSICA PRESS

For some girls, it happens at a party. For other girls, it's while watching a movie on the couch in the basement. It can be in the backseat of your car, or on the beach, or even with tons of other people in plain sight. Sexual assault—unwanted sexual contact that can be anything from touching to forced kissing to some kind of penetration—isn't just something that happens in dark alleys or is done by creepy old men; 73 percent of all sexual assaults are between people who *know* each other.

Even *scarier*, though, may be the fact that most of the girls who are assaulted *never tell anyone*. They stay silent because they're afraid no one will believe them, or they don't want to get some guy everyone likes in trouble, or they don't want to get *themselves* in trouble for being in a situation where drinking or drugs were involved. But even if you're feeling ashamed, scared, and confused, you owe it to yourself to speak up: Girls who keep assaults to themselves often end up going through depression, anxiety, eating disorders, cutting, and other painful emotional problems. The good news now, though, is that it's easier than ever to get the care you or a friend needs. Read on to find out why, and how, to get help. ➡

SHARING THEIR SECRET

By revealing their pain, these girls hope to make you feel less alone—and to empower you to get help.

“I was **too drunk** to realize what was happening.”

Freshman year, I started hanging out with a group of guys who got in a lot of physical fights, but were really protective of *me*; I trusted them, and thought of them as my friends.

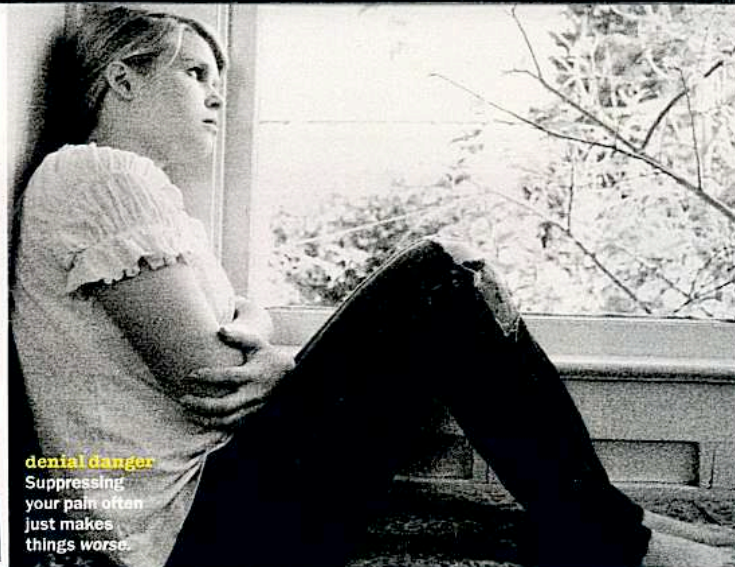
But one night, we were drinking in a school parking lot—there was a ditch next to it that we hung out in to avoid getting caught—and I blacked out from the alcohol. When I woke up an hour later, I was in the ditch; one of my ‘friends’ was lying next to me and my bra was undone and my shirt was on all wrong! I had scratches and what felt like a cigarette burn on my arm. My first reaction was confusion; then I freaked out and started crying. I just wanted to get home! One of my guy friends called his mom to drive me home, and his mom called *my* mom; when I walked in the door, my mom took one look at me and called the police. I had to see a gynecologist, who said there were signs of [my vagina] being penetrated. Since I couldn’t remember what had happened, she gave me a pill to prevent pregnancy and antibiotics for potential STDs.

A few weeks later, after I had time to think about what happened, I started feeling like something had been taken from me: I began worrying about whether I would ever feel *normal* again, or if it would *always* feel like someone had ruined my life. I really want to press charges against the guy who did it—I gave DNA samples after the assault, so I have evidence against him; the only holdup now is the DNA processing, which is backlogged until next summer. I just wish it would happen sooner, so I could help keep him from doing this to another girl out there.”

—CARRIE*, 16, ALBUQUERQUE, NM

“I thought it was **my fault**.”

I was sexually assaulted by my boyfriend when I was 15. We were hanging out at his house playing old-school Nintendo, and he started saying how badly he wanted to have sex. But I was a virgin



denial danger
Suppressing your pain often just makes things worse.

and wanted to *stay* one. After I avoided the topic for about half an hour, he got up and knocked me backward onto the bed. I struggled to get up, but he overpowered me. He ripped my pants and underwear off and shoved himself inside me; in between sobbing, all I felt was searing pain. Afterward, he kept saying how much he loved me—but I just felt like I had been raped. He drove me home, and I ran to my room and barricaded the door. I was convinced it was my fault; I’m a strong girl, emotionally and physically, so I should have been able to stop him.

It’s been more than two years since that night. I still feel I could have done more to stop him, but I’m starting to realize I’m not to blame. I haven’t told anyone what happened and I doubt I ever could; I don’t want to have to retell or relive the nightmare. I now have a severe inability to trust anyone. I wasn’t just sexually assaulted that night: I was stolen from. I had my virginity, innocence, ability to trust, and so much more taken from me. And I’ll never get those things back.”

—ERIN*, 18, TORONTO, ON, CANADA

warning signs

Experts say these seemingly small red flags could signal major danger:

- **He tries to isolate you from your friends:** Getting you alone makes you more vulnerable.
- **He tries to get you to drink:** If you’re drunk (or on any drug), you’ll be less alert and less able to fight back.
- **He has a bad attitude about girls and women:** If he’s degrading or disparaging in general, he’s also likely to be disrespectful to you.
- **He invades your personal space:** Being in-your-face shows he’s not afraid to physically intimidate you and that he doesn’t respect your boundaries.

REMEMBER:

Never leave your drink, or your friends, alone at parties.

PROTECT YOURSELF!

If you’re ever in a situation like the ones described on these pages, try these self-defense tips from Dallas Jessup, 16, who founded an anti-assault group called Just Yell Fire (justyellfire.com):

- **buddy up:** Always stay around a female friend you trust, and never go off to a secluded area with a guy you just met.
- **hit him:** If a guy tries to physically overtake you, hit or bite his Adam’s apple, earlobe, or neck—they’re very sensitive spots.
- **lie:** Say you have to get home to meet curfew, then get up and *leave*. And before you hang out, set up a code phrase with a friend (like “CGM” for “Come get me”), so you can text her to rescue you.

*Name has been changed. The people in these photos are models, used for illustrative purposes only.

**"I didn't know
how to say no."**

It was my first weekend at college, and I'd met up with a freshman guy I'd been chatting with on AIM and Facebook before school started. I was feeling homesick and overwhelmed, and didn't know anyone to reach out to other than him. He had a 'tough-guy' demeanor—I'm only five feet one, and he towered over me at nearly six feet—but he seemed like a good guy. He was friendly and well-dressed, and had even been valedictorian of his high school. We walked around campus, then went to my room to play board games. He kept touching my arm and face and playing with my hair, but I was brushing him off: I had no intention of hooking up so soon into college, especially because I'd just broken up with my boyfriend of nearly five years. After a while, we sat on my bed talking, then he started trying to get me to kiss him. I laughed it off to distract him, but I was getting *really* uncomfortable and panicked—especially when I realized he was getting an erection.

He kept taunting me about how I was too scared to kiss him, and I kept saying that I was tired; it seemed like a believable excuse. I was trying to keep things light, but I was starting to feel trapped: I suddenly felt more alone than I ever had, realizing no one knew where I was or who I was with. That's when he gave me a gross smile and pulled my hand to his crotch while unzipping his pants. I was in shock, so I did what he wanted me to do: stimulate him with my hand. Then he pushed my head and shoulders to demand I perform oral sex. His force made it obvious that he could have held me down or stifled my screams, so I went along with it, hoping I could put off anything worse.

Within a few minutes, I started crying. He asked if I was okay, and I stopped and told him about my recent breakup. It was true, but it was also an excuse to get him to leave me alone. But instead of stopping, he tried to kiss me and grope me! I started crying again, and told him I really needed to sleep. He *finally* left, and I freaked out. I called the local rape crisis center; I had mixed feelings about reporting what happened because part of me wanted to just shower and wash the entire memory of the night off me. But I couldn't let him get away with what he did: He was a calculating predator who preyed on my vulnerability. Since then, I've never been the same—and I doubt I ever will be."

-CATHLEEN*, 19, NEW YORK, NY

**if you've
been assaulted...**

Sexual assault is a crime—but it can be scary to think about reporting it to the police. Thankfully a new law is going into effect in January 2009 that will give you free access to rape kits—but you don't have to decide right away if you want to press charges. If you've been assaulted, go to your hospital ER, where a trained expert will use the kit to collect DNA evidence (by gently swabbing your body or collecting samples or clothing). The DNA will go on file—and in many states, it will be filed anonymously, so you'll have time to decide whether or not to report the crime.
Remember: Don't shower after an assault, and see your doctor for a full exam.



party problem
Drinking can very quickly take a dangerous turn for the worse.

**when drinking
blurs the line**

Alcohol can make any hookup situation confusing, but if a guy makes unwanted sexual contact when you're too drunk to stop him or to say no, or if he purposefully gets you drunk to hook up with you without your consent, then it's sexual assault.

"I met this really hot girl at a party and wasn't sure if I'd have a chance with her—but I figured if I got her drunk, she'd hook up with me. So I made her vodka-cranberries really strong. She didn't notice, and I definitely got play that night!"
-CRAIG*, 19, SEATTLE, WA

"I've bought a shot for a visibly drunk girl who asked for another drink—and who I thought I'd have a chance with—but I never thought there was anything wrong with that. What's really bad is that I've heard certain fraternities add more or stronger alcohol to punch than girls realize or crush prescription drugs into it to get girls way past socially drunk."
-TYLER*, 20, BALTIMORE, MD

bottom line: When you're partying, don't trust that guys will stop a drunken hookup before it goes too far.

*Names have been changed.

reach out for help

When you're feeling so scared and vulnerable, it can be hard to ask for help. But the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) makes it easy, free, and safe to reveal any kind of assault—and get help. Whether it happened recently or long ago, you can reach out 24/7, on the phone or online. Here's what to expect:

**IF YOU CALL THE HOTLINE
(800-656-HOPE):**

You'll be connected to a trained counselor in your area, who'll listen to you and get you the resources you need, from finding free counseling to sending someone to accompany you to see a doctor.

IF YOU LOG ON (RAINN.ORG):

You'll chat, IM-style, with a trained volunteer; your identity will *never* be revealed, and they can provide instructions for clearing your computer's cache so no one at home ever has to know what site you were on. The online hotline *can* help you find legal resources, but their main focus is really your *emotions*. They'll listen without doubt or judgment to whatever you've been holding on to, so they can help you help yourself.

if you're in immediate danger, call 911.