

EVA NOTES

ENDING  VIOLENCE
Association of BC

A recurring series of notes on gender-based violence

December 2015

Sexual Assault “Resistance” Training for University Women



Despite its name, Sexual Assault “Resistance” Training is not merely another means of making women responsible for reducing the risk of (or preventing) sexual assault. Instead, it is the culmination of years of study by Charlene Senn, whose goals were to put feminist theories into practice and expand and reinforce young women’s knowledge and skills.

DETAILS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

A total of 451 women from the University of Windsor, Ontario were assigned to the “resistance” group and 442 women were assigned to the control group. The resistance group was provided four 3-hour educational sessions. The 1-year risk of completed rape was significantly lower in the “resistance” group; 23 completed rapes versus 42 completed rapes of those in the control group. The 1-year risk of attempted rape was also significantly lower; 15 for the “resistance” group vs. 40 for the control group.

However, the process of developing an effective sexual assault resistance programme for university woman is “an imperfect feminist journey” according to Charlene Senn, one of the study’s authors and educator at the University of Windsor in Ontario.

In the 2015 published study, University of Windsor women attended sessions focused on much more than self-defense. Rather, the learning was focused on assessing the risk of sexual assault and develop problem-solving strategies; acknowledge danger in situations that have turned coercive and overcome barriers to ‘resisting’ unwanted sexualized behaviours; act to find effective options for ‘resistance’, including physical self-defense; healthy sexuality, and behaviour education to explore attitudes, values and the desires of women and men.

Although shown to be successful, the four-stage program is intended only for women. Senn acknowledges that interventions focusing on men’s behaviour and men’s participation in bystander education and bystander intervention are also key to successful efforts to shift the social norms, particularly those present on campus. Research has shown that a bystander approach with content designed to shift social norms reduces men’s sexual aggression.

The work of feminist researchers to develop sexual assault resistance education programmes for women is built upon the early work of feminist activists and is strongly allied with the feminist herstory. Nevertheless, dilemmas existed for Charlene Senn, which she addresses in her article, *An imperfect feminist journey: Reflections on the process to develop an effective sexual assault resistance programme for university women.*

The enhanced AAA programme is based substantially on a review of more than a decade of rape research by graduate research assistants who drew upon theory and empirical data available to suggest that effective rape resistance programmes for women would require three stages: Assess, Acknowledge, Act. This programme is strongly allied with the feminist theory, putting feminist and social psychological theories into practice, as outlined below:

Assess – This first stage provides women with information necessary to better assess risk for sexual assault in situations and in men's behaviour. Notably, this stage is not focused on a woman's skill in avoiding risk, but rather the focus is on increasing a woman's ability to resist men's threatening and coercive behaviour.

Acknowledge – This stage moves women past knowledge, and assessment and problem solving around potential risks, and begins to empower women to face the barriers they might encounter to acknowledging that a man they know, and likely "like", is now a threat to their sexual identity. Rather than rely on the existing programmes that connect sexual violence with miscommunication, the AAA programme starts with "no means no" but proceeds to an entire list of other statements that also mean no. This stage then works to empower women to take a forceful and explicit stand as a good way to make clear her position, and then move quickly to accept that the man in the situation is coercive, which allows her to take other steps to protect herself.

Act – This stage focuses on preparing women with the knowledge, emotional willingness, skills and ability to fight back.

The Fourth Stage – Senn's addition to the AAA framework was to enhance it with an emancipatory sexuality education unit following the three stages.

Feminists have long theorized that the difficulty in recognizing and resisting sexualized violence perpetrated by someone the woman knows is the foundation of socially accepted norms and beliefs about female and male sexuality. According to Senn, women's inability to resist sexual assaults by acquaintances, at least in part, is linked to the patriarchal notions of men's needs, desires and perceptions of such.

The exercises for this final stage were chosen to strengthen or expand women's knowledge of sexual practices and engage them in identification of their own desires, and to practice negotiating their sexual needs, putting women's positive sexual desires at the centre of these discussions, making them valuable and worth pursuing.

SOURCES

Senn, C. Y., Eliasziw, M., Barata, P. C., Thurston, W. E., Newby-Clark, I. R., Radtke, H. L., & Hobden, K. L. (2015). Efficacy of a sexual assault resistance program for university women. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 372, 2326-2335.

Senn, C. Y. (2011). An imperfect feminist journey: Reflections on the process to develop an effective sexual assault resistance programme for university women. *Feminism & Psychology*, 21(1), 121-137.