

Alcohol & Drug-Facilitated Sexual Assault

In a survey conducted at the University of Alberta, it was found that over half of the sexual assaults experienced by students took place when the survivor of the assault was under the influence of alcohol or drugs (LoVerso, 2001). In addition, research shows that this is not a new phenomenon, and has been a reality for university students for many years (Koss, 1988).

In a **drug-facilitated sexual assault**, the perpetrator uses alcohol or other drugs (sometimes referred to as “date rape” drugs) as a method to decrease resistance from the person they are assaulting. The use of drugs or alcohol also ensures that the survivor may not recall enough details about the assault for charges to be laid against the perpetrator. The alcohol or drugs may have been taken voluntarily by the survivor, or forced upon them by the perpetrator. The most common drug used in this type of assault is alcohol.

Depending on the drug that was used, some survivors may have little memory of what took place, or no memory of being sexually assaulted at all. In either case, the individual may still experience symptoms related to being sexually assaulted, such as flashbacks and sudden memories. Like any survivor, the survivor of a drug-facilitated sexual assault will need time to go through the healing process. This may be more difficult for them due to the lack of understanding about what they are experiencing. Having indications that a sexual assault occurred, or having blacked out and yet not recalling what happened, can lead to the survivor feeling as though they are “going crazy” or can lead others to mistrust what the survivor is feeling.

Most survivors of sexual assault who were given a drug report suddenly feeling strangely lightheaded and intoxicated, with visual and/or physical impairment, then waking up drowsy, confused, weak, and/or with impaired motor skills, and with almost no recollection of what took place since feeling lightheaded. Often when they can remember parts of the assault they recall feeling paralyzed, powerless, and/or dissociated from their body, or they only remember scattered pieces of what occurred. In some cases, the survivors of drug-facilitated sexual assault have no memory at all of what took place. When alcohol is the only drug used, survivors may feel that they got drunker than they had planned to that night, or they have some memories of sexual contact that they did not consent to.

Someone who has experienced a drug-facilitated sexual assault is likely to feel very confused and disoriented. This confusion may be accentuated by the continued effects of the drugs that can make it difficult to think clearly. The loss of memory experienced by survivors of drug-facilitated sexual assault can make recovery more difficult as part

of the recovery process involves remembering and working through the memories, acknowledging that what happened was a sexual assault, and experiencing feelings around the sexual assault such as anger, regret, and acceptance.

Because drugs or alcohol are involved in these assaults, survivors are even more likely to blame themselves for what happened. Survivors may feel that they were at fault because they were intoxicated and “got out of control.” Yet it is important to understand that even if the alcohol or drugs were taken willingly, it is not the survivor’s fault. Drinking is a very common, socially accepted activity, and consenting to consuming alcohol or drugs is NOT consenting to sex. In addition, consent cannot be granted when intoxicated. The perpetrator of the assault is the only person who is to blame, and the Criminal Code of Canada legally outlines the perpetrator’s blame by stating that consent for sexual activity cannot be obtained when an individual is incapable of consenting (i.e. blacked out, impaired by alcohol or narcotics, or sleeping).

Drug & Alcohol Myths

There are many common myths in our society about the role of drugs and alcohol in sexual assault. These ideas are harmful and can lead others to not believe survivors, or can lead survivors to blame themselves for their assault. For example, there is a common misconception that accepting drinks from someone indicates interest in sexual activity. Yet, consenting to having a drink is not consenting to sexual activity; it is solely consenting to having a drink.

Much of the information about date rape drugs emphasizes ways in which survivors can stay safe from these drugs, especially while drinking in bars. Examples include only accepting drinks from people you know, or keeping an eye on your drink at all times. These statements are misleading for several reasons. Firstly, drugs can be used in many locations, not just in bars. The Sexual Assault Centre has seen cases where drugs were used at house parties, restaurants, and while camping. Also, it is more common for a friend, partner, or acquaintance to use drugs on someone than it is for a stranger. In addition, these statements are almost always directed at women, but people of all genders can experience drug-facilitated sexual assault.

Most importantly, these statements do not place the responsibility for stopping this crime on the individuals who are using drugs against someone (the perpetrator), but on those who may be given drugs (the survivor). This results in survivors feeling as though they were responsible for their sexual assault, but the only person who should be held responsible is the perpetrator of the assault.

Types of Drugs

- **Alcohol.** Alcohol is by far the most prevalent substance used to commit sexual assault and is easy to use because it is legal and socially accepted. Although it is

not often readily recognized as a tool used by perpetrators, almost half of the sexual assaults that young adults experience take place under the influence of alcohol¹. In some cases, perpetrators take advantage of the fact that an individual is drinking. In other cases, the perpetrator is actively involved in ensuring that an individual gets drunk by buying drinks, encouraging them to drink, or pouring drinks with more alcohol than usual. In either case, when an individual is severely impaired by alcohol, they are legally unable to consent to sexual activity. Unlike other date rape drugs, alcohol is also often used by the perpetrator on themselves. By using alcohol, the perpetrator lowers their own inhibitions and attempts to excuse themselves for committing the sexual assault. In other words, perpetrators use alcohol purposefully to aid them in committing the sexual assault.

- **Other Drugs.** Some of the more well-known drugs used in drug-facilitated sexual assault include Rohypnol (also known as “roofies”, “the forget pill” or “flunitrazepam”), GHB (Gamma-hydroxybutyrate), Ketamine, and Ecstasy. The effects of each of these drugs vary; however, they all have certain common side effects or symptoms used in drug-facilitated sexual assault. These symptoms include sedative effects that, depending on the drug, can last from 30 minutes to 24 hours. Other effects include short-term memory loss, vomiting, numbness, or a temporary inability to move. Some of these drugs may pose serious health risks, especially when combined with alcohol.

Detection of Drugs

All date rape drugs are processed by the body quickly and are thus difficult to detect. When testing for drugs, the closest to the time of the drugging as possible is best, as after 72 hours detection will be impossible. It also varies depending on the drug used; for example, GHB can be untraceable in only 12 hours, whereas rohypnol will be traceable up to 72 hours. Drugs are detected through a urine sample test, but rohypnol can also be detected through a blood test.

Indications of a Sexual Assault

In drug-facilitated sexual assaults, it is possible that the survivor has little or no recollection of a sexual assault. The following are some indications that a drug-facilitated sexual assault may have occurred:

- **Physical Indications:**
 - Soreness in the genital or anal areas
 - Marks or bruises on the skin
 - Abnormal discharge and/or bleeding
- **Other Indications:**
 - Loss of memory for a whole part of an evening or day
 - Waking up in different surroundings and not knowing how they got there
 - Waking up with clothes missing or put on differently
 - A sense that something wrong happened or that something is “not right”

¹ This has been found in many studies, including The Survey of Unwanted Sexual Experiences Among University of Alberta Students, 2001.

Medical Attention

If a drug-facilitated sexual assault takes place or is suspected, it is important to get some form of medical attention to test for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and/or pregnancy, and if possible to ascertain if a drug was used. A physical exam after a sexual assault can be very difficult, but in Edmonton there are services such as SART, the STI Clinic, and the University Health Centre that can help make the process more comfortable. The U of A Sexual Assault Centre can provide more information about medical options and support survivors through this process.

- **SART** (Sexual Assault Response Team) consists of a team of nurses who examine and treat survivors who report being sexually assaulted to a hospital emergency room. SART is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The SART nurses perform physical examinations to look for and treat injuries after a sexual assault, and can collect evidence for future legal prosecution of the sexual assault if the survivor chooses to pursue this (such as a urine sample to test for the presence of drugs). If the survivor wants physical evidence to be recorded through the use of a sexual assault kit, the police will be phoned. This does not mean that the survivor has to report to the police, but the police will be there to take the completed kit from the SART nurse to ensure continuity of the evidence, and talk with the survivor if they are willing.
- If the survivor is concerned with the possibility of having contracted an STI, the **STI Clinic in Edmonton** provides free, confidential, and anonymous testing.
- Another option is the **University Health Centre** (UHC). The UHC provides confidential testing for pregnancy, STIs, and HIV/AIDS, as well as medical examinations for students, staff, and their immediate family members.

Even if someone has been drugged, but not sexually assaulted it is still recommended to seek medical attention for their physical well-being. The substance itself could be potentially very harmful to their health. If you are with a friend or loved one who you suspect has been drugged, make sure that you stay with the person to ensure their safety. Individuals who have been drugged often have the same emotions surrounding the experience as a sexual assault survivor may have—loss of control, fears about what they do not remember, loss of trust, feelings of going crazy, etc. It is important that these individuals receive the same support that a sexual assault survivor would. For information on providing support to a survivor of sexual assault or someone who has been drugged, you can contact the U of A Sexual Assault Centre.