

*MEN UNLEARNING RARE*

# Men Unlearning Rape

**\*\* taken from techingsexualethics.org \*\***

"How do you know when your friend wants to kiss on a date?" We've asked this question of thousands of young men in the last year college students living in fraternities and residence halls, high school and middle school students, men working in the community, and young men coming out of prison or entering the military. The "we" here is Men Stopping Rape, a continually changing group of activist men who for the past seven years have engaged men in a discussion of a "real men's" issue rape. In this article we share some of our stories and strategies, and what we've discovered from doing this work about ourselves and the nature of our relationships with women and other men. Most importantly, we've begun to have a vision of the world without men raping. We like that world. We want that world now, and we're learning what we have to do to help make that happen.

Let's begin where we often start our workshops, with the question we posed earlier. Here are some of the men's answers: "It's in her eyes....She leans toward me and I lean toward her....I just grab her hand....It's in the air....I just know....It's like waves....She laughs at my jokes....You can never know for sure. You just gotta make the move....It just happens....A feeling of electricity....A relaxed mood....Her eyes are closed....Body language."

These same answers come from men of different racial, class, religious and ethnic backgrounds. What they have in common is that just below the surface of these words lies the same ideology of rape. Normally hidden, here the mentality and the moment of rape is voluntarily revealed without hesitation or deceit. These answers show the extent to which "normal guys," trained (encouraged) by movies and advertising, by vernacular language and metaphor, by the demands and expectations of family,

tool of domination. Or that escape from patriarchal mores is hopeless and certainly it can't be done with the help of other men so why bother with such an effort? Our experience and the testimony of many of the men we have worked with is that men though anxious and often full of rape mythology and feelings of guilt can and DO change their attitudes and behaviors. When approached with compassion, friendship, honesty and feminist clarity, men of varied ethnic, class and racial backgrounds can be invited to take a look at how the lies they've been taught are hurting them and others. They accept our unexpected, but long-awaited invitation to stop raping. Men are unlearning rape.

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**Michael Biernbaum** (1943-1995) was Board Chair of Protective Behaviors, Inc. (USA), a co-founder of Men Stopping Rape, The Madison Men's Center and Changing Men: Issues in Gender, Sex and Politics, an international pro-feminist journal. His great mind and gentle soul are missed.

our denial that this could constitute rape to the understanding that our intent does not invalidate another's feeling of having been raped; that our denial does not undo rape; and that our lack of awareness of what we've done does not exculpate us.

### **Unlearning Patriarchy**

Rape is one place where the infrastructure of male dominance comes very close to the surface and can be seen for what it is. Rape follows from a cultural pattern of conditioning and education that guarantees that there will always be a "top" and a "bottom," a "buyer" and a "bought." By rooting out rape and rape-supportive behaviors we are undermining the very foundations of the patriarchal world order. This understanding, above all else, energizes us and compels us to act. Reaching into the lives of men with these profound questions, and loving and respecting these men enough to struggle with their answers in the context of their lives, is one of the most powerful and important ways to reveal the lies of our distant fathers. We are asking men: Who are you? What kind of person(s) do you want to be friends with, be intimate with? If you are going to have children, what kind of father do you want to be, and what kind of children do you want to raise?

None of us can do this work without getting lots of support for ourselves while supporting other men making changes. Support is crucial. Without support, we burn out and wither. There are risks and dangers, too. Men who challenge the traditional image, who step out of line, can get cast out or beaten with the Old Boy's club. We offer men support for daring to make changes in a patriarchal world that resists change and offers continuous reinforcement for rape-supportive and self-destructive behaviors.

We often hear that men can't or won't engage the subject of rape. Or if they do, there will always be a vast difference between what men think rape is and what female and male survivors of rape know it to be. Or that all men know exactly what rape is and that they use it consciously as a

friends and cultural traditions, have raised body language, non-verbal cues and assumptions to a fine and deadly art that almost inevitably leads to rape. They are excuses or rationalizations for acting without much (or any) information that let him avoid having to ask the most immediately useful question, "May I?" or "Would you like to?" Rather than ask a question he is not used to asking of equals, and risk an answer he may neither wish to hear nor be prepared to accept, each of these young men is choosing as we admit we did to act unilaterally, without corroboration and without expressed consent. These sorts of rationalizations are fabricated out of the stuff of myth (a "real" man knows everything about sex without asking), privilege (it's a man's right to do so and I'm going to) and self-deception (she wants it and I can get away with it). (We use the emotional word rape interchangeably with the legally defined term sexual assault to refer to unwanted sexual contact, the sexualized violation of a person against their will and without consent, by force or threat of force.) There can be no doubt that sexualized violence is occurring in crisis proportions. One out of every 3 females is sexually assaulted before the age of 18. Every man knows someone who has been raped (though he may not know he knows). Women have been writing and speaking powerfully for years about rape and the effect of the culture of rape upon their lives. In general men have not been able to hear or been willing to accept women's words and anger, preferring instead their own interpretation of events and responding to an incident of rape as the act of an isolated or sick individual. When asked, men almost universally say they are "against rape." (With so many men "against rape," the few remaining perpetrators must be very busy indeed.) So although everyday millions of males in our society practice various forms of assault on the remainder of the population, and particularly against women, there is only the tiniest visible agitation against it by other males.

To most men rape is a woman's issue, not something that affects them or demands their immediate attention. But the reality here, too, is not what men generally believe it to be. Whether or not men choose to recognize

it, 1 out of 5 males are sexually assaulted before the age of 18. In prison, where the absence of consent is an absolute reality, men live under the daily threat of rape, used by the system as a method of control and terror. Because of rape we pay a terrible price in the quality of our relationships with women and with men: distrust, fear, disappointment, uncertainty, homophobia. The situation is serious, persistent and dangerous.

### Strategies That Work

We cannot wait for men to seek us out. (It could be a long wait.) We go to them, and when we meet there is a certain sense of inevitability about our meeting, an unstated recognition that if the raping is to stop, our meeting together is unavoidable. Most don't know what to expect. As one fraternity man admitted, "I was worried what you guys would be like, but it was OK you turned out to be 'macho feminists'." (Is this praise?) Our being there is an example and model for men, demonstrating that ending sexist violence is an appropriate activity for men, one that does not "betray" other men or our manhood.

It is our experience that we men talk far more honestly when no women are present. There is less distortion of our words when we cannot "play" to women (i.e., please, placate or seduce them). The language and revelations are more brutally frank, but no women are present to be hurt or further victimized by it. We can best deal with the pain, anger and grief within an all-male context. Hilarity, too, we share when trust lets nervous laughter give way to the humor of our often absurd masculine training.

We work to create a space where men feel safe to talk and participate. We start with their beliefs, not ours. We listen carefully, with curiosity and without immediate judgment to what they can tell us about their dating and relationship experiences. We begin the process of unlearning rape with the familiar because fear of the unfamiliar is a strong deterrent to change. As one man told us, "I may be stagnant, but at least I'm not confused." The men invariably withdraw or stop talking if we start with

### Consent

So why do we ask about kissing? The reason is, if I don't believe that I need to ask whether I may kiss or hold hands, then why would I think to get verbal consent for intercourse or any other intimate sexual contact? Essentially we are saying that consent a continual process by which partners each explicitly agree and give permission, without coercion or threat of coercion is necessary and right in even the smallest act. The need for consent is not measured by the type or degree of contact proposed. Its value is absolute, and its absence particularly where a history of trust has not been established and tested over time introduces an unnecessary and unacceptable level of risk for sexual assault. The idea of establishing consent often sounds like a joke to men at first, but it is an idea that catches on quickly once we put to rest apprehensions that sex with consent can't be "romantic" or "spontaneous."

We often illuminate the value of consent by posing what we call the "Zen parable": A couple has sex. He doesn't ask, and she doesn't say No. Could that be rape?" This scenario enters a so-called "gray area" that describes the "innocent" behavior of many men. Responses range from denial ("I don't see how you can call that rape!") to realization ("Oh, wow, it sure could!"). The discussion around this scenario helps men understand the meaning and value of consent and the immediacy of their risk for committing sexual assault.

Our message is clear: sex without verbal consent is more likely to be rape. Even if we can get away with it, even if the victim has not identified it as rape, even if she or he did not experience it as rape, consent was not established and its absence makes rape a definite possibility. The key is whether the freedom to choose is always present, whether choosing to change one's mind or to stop at any point. Having this choice represents our mutual right to feel safe and marks the absence of rape. It is a process that continually recognizes each person's autonomy and participation in the decision-making. Consent is the bridge that lets us move from acceptance of our prerogative to get what we want without asking and

all the sounds of "power-over." We are definitely not the "good guys" and they the "bad." We are no different from them, and no better. This is hard to remember, particularly when we hear what we as individual feminist men are sick of hearing, but what we as men stopping rape want to hear and have to hear if we are to find a way into these men's hearts. This is a tension that is present in all our work with men.

### **Challenging Homophobia**

We experience turmoil over how best to reveal the connections between men's violence against women and their homophobia (their violence against any men who they perceive to be "like women"). We are hurt by the heterosexist bias that underlies so many of the men's words. The question we gay and non-gay face in every workshop is not only how to handle this hurt, but also when to challenge these biases and how to do so in ways that let us feel safe and that continue to invite participation. We know that some men are so entrenched in their homophobia that they will use their perception of our gayness as an excuse for not getting involved in the discussion.

We know, too, that gay and bisexual men are present in every group, often silenced by the very threats and fears that support rape. Anti-gay violence is so rampant in this country that we must ask if it's even possible to invite gay men's participation without putting them at risk for physical and emotional abuse after we've gone. The question we face is not theoretical, but practical: how to challenge gay-hate most effectively without inviting men to tune us out? One way is to routinely broaden our language and analysis to include both heterosexual and homosexual experiences. Though these are difficult questions for us, the issue itself unifies us and is one around which in theory and practice we share great solidarity.

expositions about patriarchy and privilege, or lectures about what they should be doing. Scolding them as enemies of women, blaming them for rape may satisfy our anger and frustration but will fail to engage them. After all, most of these men (and most men in general) believe that what they know is right and that none of their dating behaviors is problematic or suspect. Most have never been charged with rape and would otherwise never acknowledge committing rape.

### **Conflicting Feelings**

It took time for us to find an empathetic way to open ourselves to the men in our workshops. What we are asking of ourselves is as difficult as it is authentic: to approach as brothers, as friends, caring and non-blameful. This is difficult because we acknowledge our anger at men who deny their complicity in rape and who continue to act from positions of privilege and dominance, often brutally. At the same time we know that men can be loving, sweet, silly and gentle. We feel love for individual men in our lives and for ourselves. We know men can unlearn rape and can join us in deconstructing patriarchal notions of masculinity.

We live with these conflicting feelings. We refuse to rescue the man from himself or protect the boy-child within with a false cloak of innocence. Instead the way we honor his integrity is by accepting his responsibility for who he is. We are asking each man to join in the same process that we are involved in: accepting responsibility for what he's done and coming to recognize that he has raped whether he says "coerced" or speaks more euphemistically of "not being proud of what I've done."

Most of the men we talk with tell us that they want to "do something about rape," meaning: something about other men who rape. The process we initiate and support is inward-directed: confronting the rapist within, understanding his complicity in the rape culture, and learning how to be a man without rape. We defer until later the outward-directed process of learning how to confront rape-supportive behaviors in others and to safely intervene to stop the violence of others.

While we accept the realities offered by the men as starting points, as we move into the discussion we do everything we can to make sure that we do not support or encourage attitudes we are working to change in these men. If anything can be construed as our "bottom line," it is that we will not contribute to trivializing, denying or misrepresenting the extent of the sexualized violence by men and the part that each man plays. When we differ in interpretation of fact or in our opinion of what has happened, we say what we know to be the reality for us as feminist men. We give respect while demanding it for ourselves.

### The Set-Up

One effective approach we have developed is to explain how traditional masculine values set men up to commit sexual assault. We tell them: "If you do what you've learned to do, as we ourselves did what we were told to do, you are putting yourself at risk for committing sexual assault, and for severe and legitimate criminal charges against you. If the person you've been with perceives what happened as rape, then it is rape, whether or not you agree or even know what you've done. We are here to tell you that you're setting yourselves up. You guys deserve better." This may be the first time in their lives that they've heard other men verbalize a break from those expectations. The impetus to change these behaviors begins when men see that too often what they've been told to do is sexual assault. Many express feelings of anger when they realize the "set up." It's a rude shock to learn that rape hurts them. They want to know, as one young man demanded of us, "Why has no one told us these things?" We are revealing the hidden costs of male privilege to men, most of whom are not aware of the privilege they exercise. In this process we bring men a message of self-respect. Many experience something equivalent to "waking up" from a bad dream, and from that point on the process often unfolds fairly rapidly. They understand that it is in their own interest to reduce their risk for committing sexual assault. They can move from viewing rape as an isolated act to its being a part of

a broad spectrum of behaviors and attitudes that involve all men one way or another. This "rape spectrum" includes innuendo, rape "jokes," objectification, emotional withdrawal, sexual harassment, rape imagery in pornography, gay-hate, violent metaphors in speech and hatred of women. These are places where each man can act to end his support of sexualized violence. They can rethink their use of "men talk" the violent and private sexist language that most men use to talk about sex. (Do you really want to "screw her legs off, or screw her brains out?") These concepts are dangerous. They dehumanize our sexual interactions and make sexual assault acceptable and almost inevitable. Ultimately, the men become curious about new ways of being with women and men without needing to control them. This means rediscovering their feelings, communicating their feelings in non-hurtful ways, and expanding their understanding of intimacy and affection neither of which necessarily have anything to do with sex.

### Our Inner Struggle

There are bitter (sometimes bittersweet) ironies in our doing this work. The one we feel most intensely every time we leave a particularly invigorating workshop is that at some level we have been invited in and listened to because we are not women. Men are not used to listening to women in the same way we listen to men. Most of the men we talk with barely know how to listen to and hear anyone other than themselves. Rape is one measure of how poorly men listen to women. This work is like dropping stones in a deep well: we don't often get to hear the splashes. We know from our own lives that the process of change that we may help start takes time. Insights and changes may begin while we are present, but we all need extended time to practice and relearn. The long-term changes will happen in these men's personal lives, of which we are not a part. It is crucial to avoid separating from the men with whom we are talking. We, like they, know the right words, ideas and "moves" of patriarchal sex