

**The Trauma of Sexual Assault**  
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Many cases of sexual assault have been in the national news in the past few weeks. Even the White House has commented on the disturbingly high numbers of these incidents. Sadly, this problem also exists on campuses, affecting women most notably, but also men.

Imagine how difficult it might be to continue attending classes if one's offender is on the same campus. Imagine how lonely a victim might feel not knowing where to go for information and understanding.

Any sexual act that lacks consent from both of the parties involved is a sexual assault. Sexual acts that occur when the individual is unconscious or otherwise unable to give his/her consent, possibly due to the use of alcohol or drugs, are sexual assaults and can be prosecuted.

The type of sexual assault we most often hear about is rape. Rape is defined as forced sexual intercourse between any two individuals. Forced oral or anal sodomy, between a man and a woman or two of the same sex are equal to rape in the eyes of the law. They are all felonies and a convicted offender could receive a lengthy prison sentence. There are also lesser forms of sexual assaults in legal terms, such as indecent exposure and touching of a sexual nature without any penetration. These crimes are misdemeanors and a convicted offender can also receive a fine and/or a jail sentence. Sexual assaults are also against the NOVA Code of Conduct because they are unethical and immoral.

We can lower the number of sexual assaults if we take a moment to intervene when we see a hostile environment being created. By becoming an active bystander and recognizing when someone is exerting unwanted power over another, when one is unable to give a clear, sober consent to sex, and by speaking up when in such a situation, we can make the difference in a potential victim's life. The consequences of sexual assault are very serious. Immediate concerns of physical injury, pregnancy, and STIs are obvious concerns. Resulting emotional damage may be equally as serious, leading to social and personal concerns, as well as lower academic performance.

There are simple steps we can take to help victims of sexual assault. First, and foremost, "Believe the Victim." Unless we are police or conduct administrators, our role is not to investigate or to be fact-finders. Rather, it is to say in effect "I believe you and I am so sorry this happened to you." Additionally, tell the victim "I know a person you can call to help you" and advise them to contact NOVA Sexual Assault Services (SAS), at 703.338.0834, and/or the police, at 703.764.5000.

It is important for a sexual assault victim to report this crime and talk about it with someone who understands and who can assist the victim in getting needed legal and emotional assistance.

NOVA SAS supports such victims. The SAS advocate can provide information on the issues of sexual assault dating/partner violence and stalking to members of the NOVA community. The advocate can explain the options a person has, either through the police/court process or the student conduct process. If a person only wants to talk through his or her feelings and perhaps get a referral to an off-campus therapist, the SAS advocate can facilitate that as well. All NOVA SAS services are free and confidential. The advocate can be reached by email at [nova.sas@nvcc.edu](mailto:nova.sas@nvcc.edu) or at her 24-hour cell phone: 703.338.0834.

For more information about this topic, contact Connie Kirkland, Director, NOVACares, 703.323.2136. NOVACares manages the NOVA SAS program.