

Headquarters U.S. Air Force

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Preventing Sexual Assault



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Setting the Stage for Prevention

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- **Primary prevention is stopping violence before it occurs**
 - **Response is any activity that involves an individual who has already perpetrated**

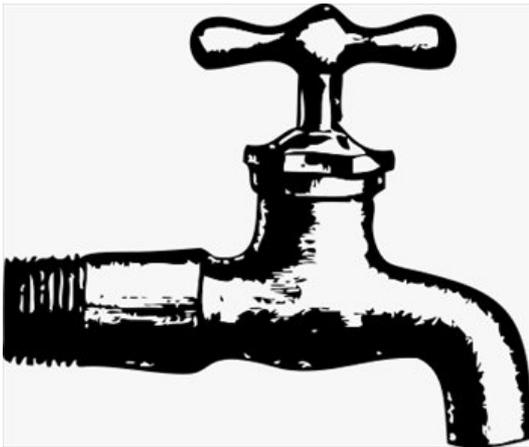
- **Strongest evidence for prevention focuses on preventing perpetration**

- **Preventing perpetration involves**
 - **Reducing known risk factors and increasing protective factors**
 - **Implementing best practices for prevention**



Conceptualizing Primary Prevention

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- Primary prevention has the potential to “shut off” the flow of perpetrators and victims through the system
- The lifecycle of primary prevention requires ongoing, age-appropriate strategies





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Individuals at Risk for Perpetrating Sexual Assault



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How prevalent is sexual assault perpetration?

- **25% of collegiate or civilian men report using coercive tactics to obtain sex in their lifetimes (Spitzberg, 1999)**
 - **A subset of these men report perpetrating rape**

- **One study found 13% of men entering the military reported raping or attempting to rape a partner prior to entering the military (McWhorter et al., 2009)**



Risk Factors for Perpetration

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- **A combination of factors contribute to the risk of becoming a perpetrator**

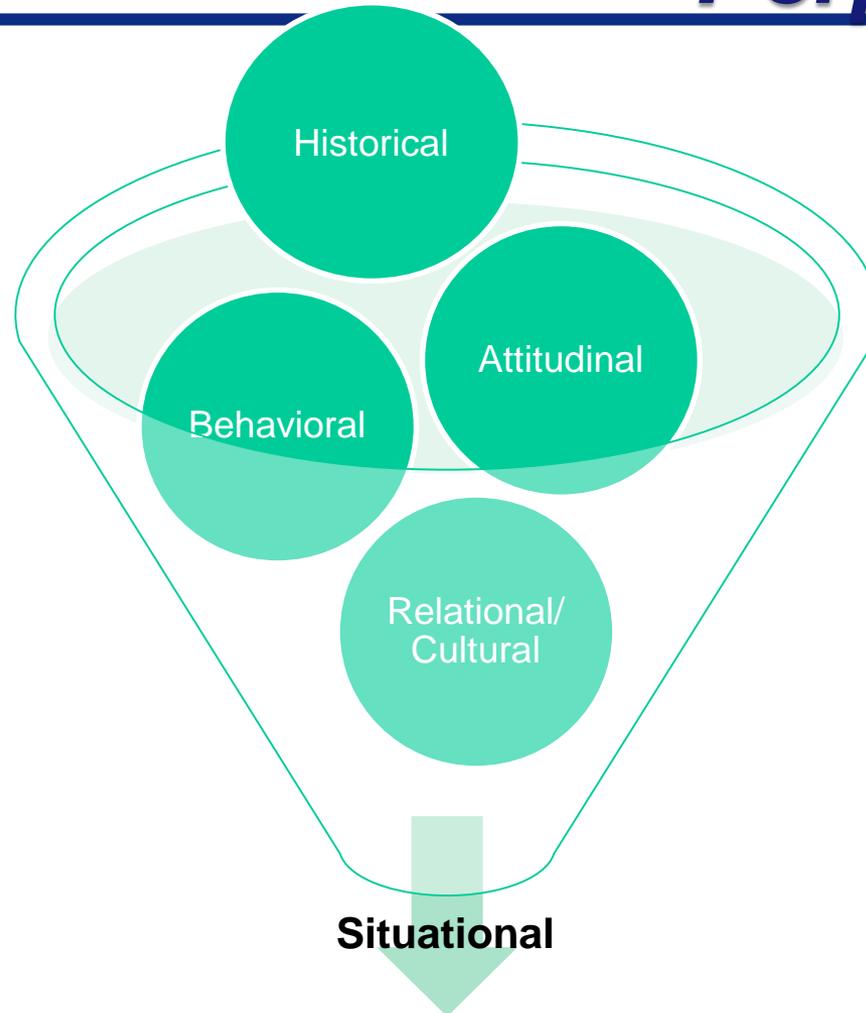
- **No single profile of a perpetrator exists**

- **Many risk factors are *modifiable***
 - **Risk factors can be changed to reduce the individual's risk**



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Risk for Sexual Assault Perpetration



Risk for Sexual Assault Perpetration

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Examples of Risk Factors for Sexual Assault Perpetration

Historical

- History of child maltreatment
- Violence in the home
- Past perpetration of sexual assault

Attitudinal

- Rape myth acceptance
- Hostility towards women
- Acceptance of violence

Cultural

- Norms that support violence and discrimination

Behavioral

- Multiple sexual partners
- Impersonal sex
- Aggressive behavior

Relational

- Peer approval for forced sex and pressure to have sex
- Relationship conflict

Situational

- Alcohol use
- Cue misinterpretation



Alcohol's Multiple Roles in Sexual Assault

(Abbey, 2015)

Prior to Assault: Psychological Effects of Alcohol

Perpetrator:

- * Expectations about drinking
- * Alcohol as a sexual signal

Victim:

- * Expectations about drinking
- * Perpetrator's selection of victim

During the Assault: Pharmacological Effects of Alcohol

Perpetrator:

- * Thought impairments affect perception of woman
- * Heightened aggression

Victim:

- * Thought impairments affect risk assessment
- * Decreased ability to react

After the Assault: Explanations Based on Alcohol

Perpetrator:

- * Alcohol as excuse

Victim:

- * Blamed for losing control



Alcohol's Multiple Roles in Sexual Assault cont'd

(Abbey, 2015)

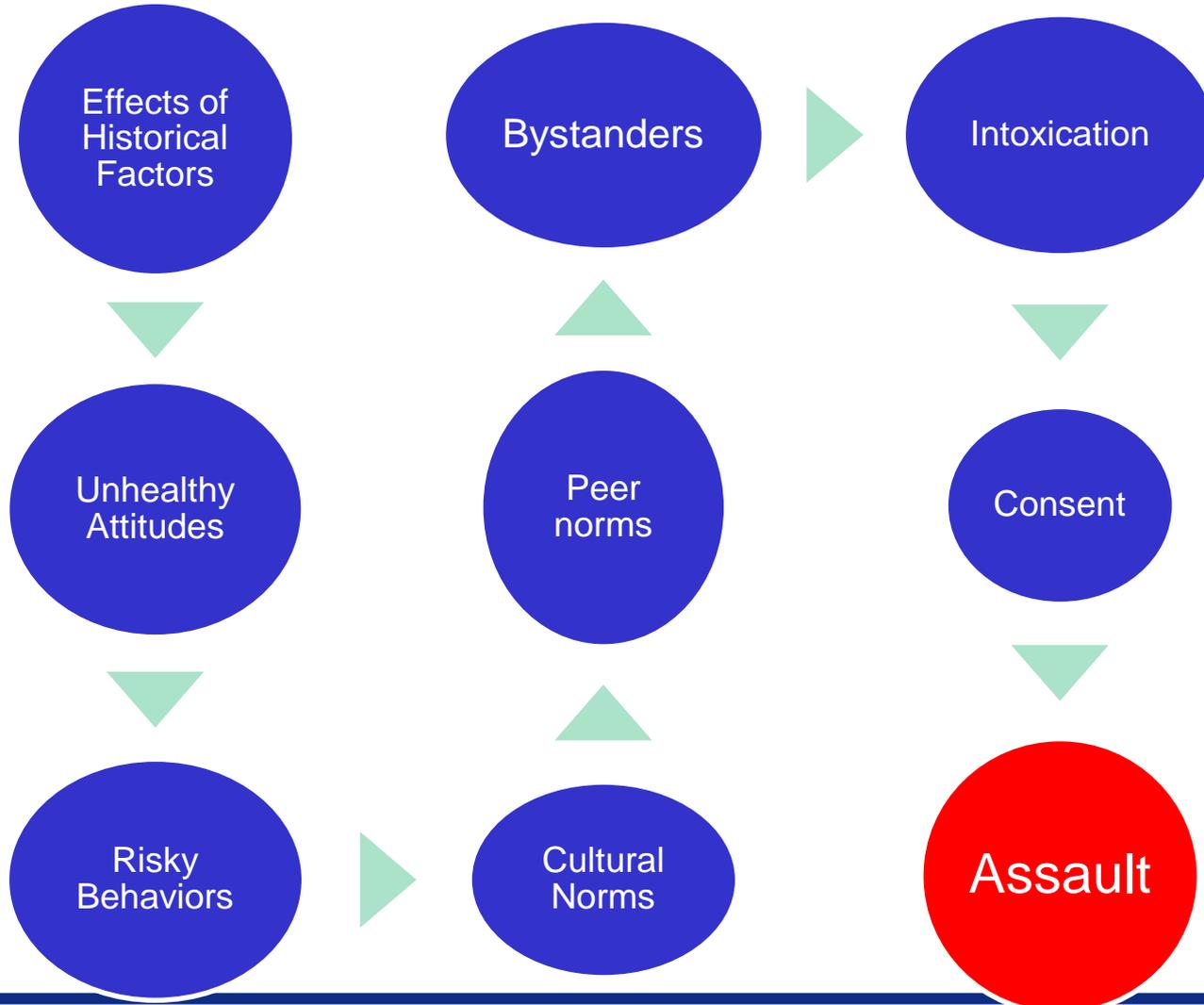
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- Effects of alcohol interact, such that perpetrators:
 - **Expect** a drinking woman to be interested in sex
 - **Expectations** affect perceptions
 - Refusals can be construed as “playing hard to get”
 - **Thought impairments** let perpetrators focus on
 - Their arousal and sense of entitlement
 - While ignoring a woman's signs of distress and refusals



Opportunities for Prevention

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Patterns of Offending

- **The majority of rapists do not perpetrate rape consistently over time**

- **Instead, a variety of patterns of offending exist**
 - **Non-violent**
 - **Life Course Persistent**
 - **Adolescent Limited**
 - **Adult Onset**

- **Dynamic patterns present multiple opportunities for prevention**



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Exercise

- **What are some barriers to prevention?**
 - **These include ideas about sexual assault and about prevention**



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Prevention

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Sexual Assault is ~~Inevitable~~ Preventable

- Assault no longer seen as inevitable part of life
- Public health approach offers hope (and proof!) that sexual assault is preventable
- Using the best available research evidence provides the most confidence that efforts will reduce and prevent sexual assault



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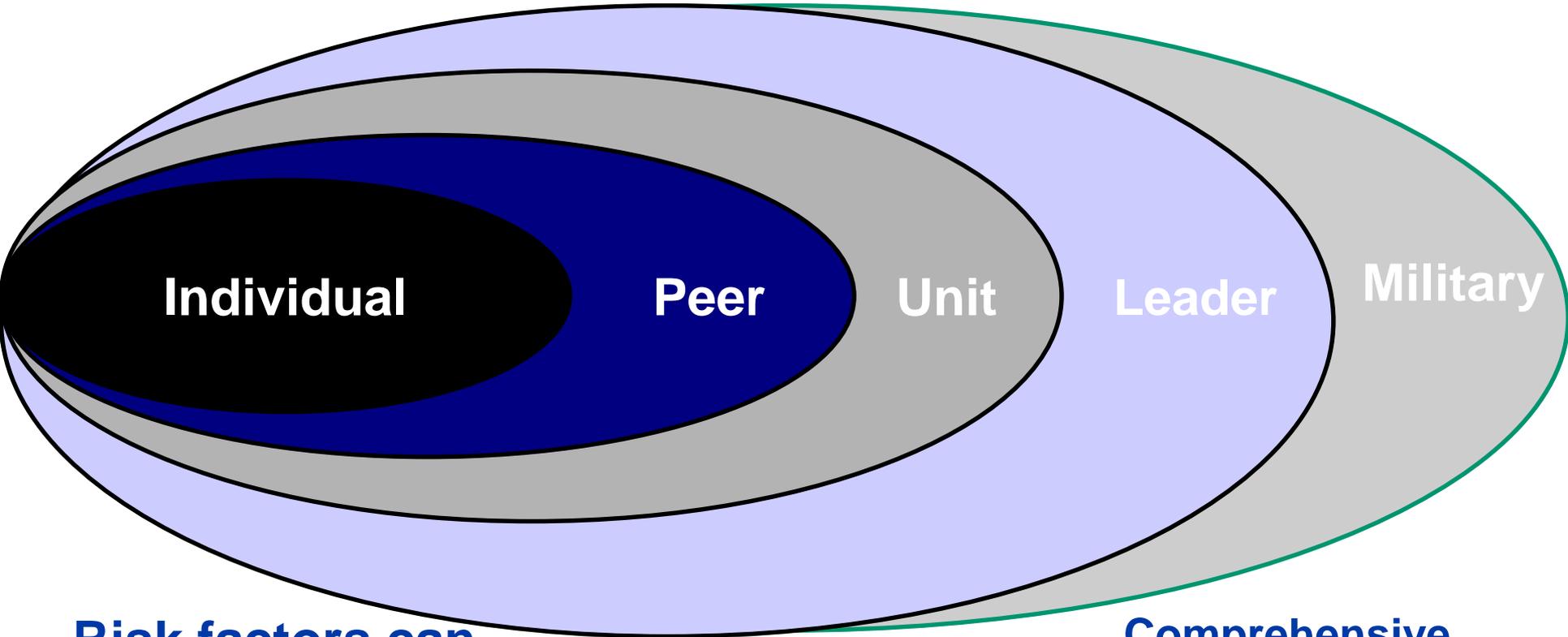
Public Health Approach as Foundation for Prevention

- **Uses data driven, data informed strategies**
- **Addresses risk factors and influencers at every level**
- **Focuses on primary prevention**
- **Incorporates the principles of prevention**



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Social Ecological Model



Risk factors can occur at each level

Comprehensive approaches consider risk factors at all levels

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Lessons from Principles of Prevention

- **Based on theory and research**
- **Promotes positive relationships**
- **Developmentally appropriate**
- **Comprehensive**
- **Sufficient dosage**



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Doing What Works

- **What works?**
 - Programs with multiple sessions that focused on skill-building and active participation more likely to have sustained effects
 - Bystander, dating violence, social-emotional skills-based programs, and alcohol policies look promising

- **What doesn't work?**
 - One-session programs likely insufficient to change behavior



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Bystander Approaches

- **What is the bystander effect?**
 - **An individual's likelihood of helping decreases when passive bystanders are present in a critical situation**

- **Why do people not help?**
 - **Diffusion of responsibility**
 - **Evaluation apprehension/Social Influence**
 - **Lack of skills**

- **What does it mean to be an active bystander**
 - **Direct– “See something, say something”**
 - **Indirect– “Be the change you wish to see...”**
 - **Everyone can do something!**



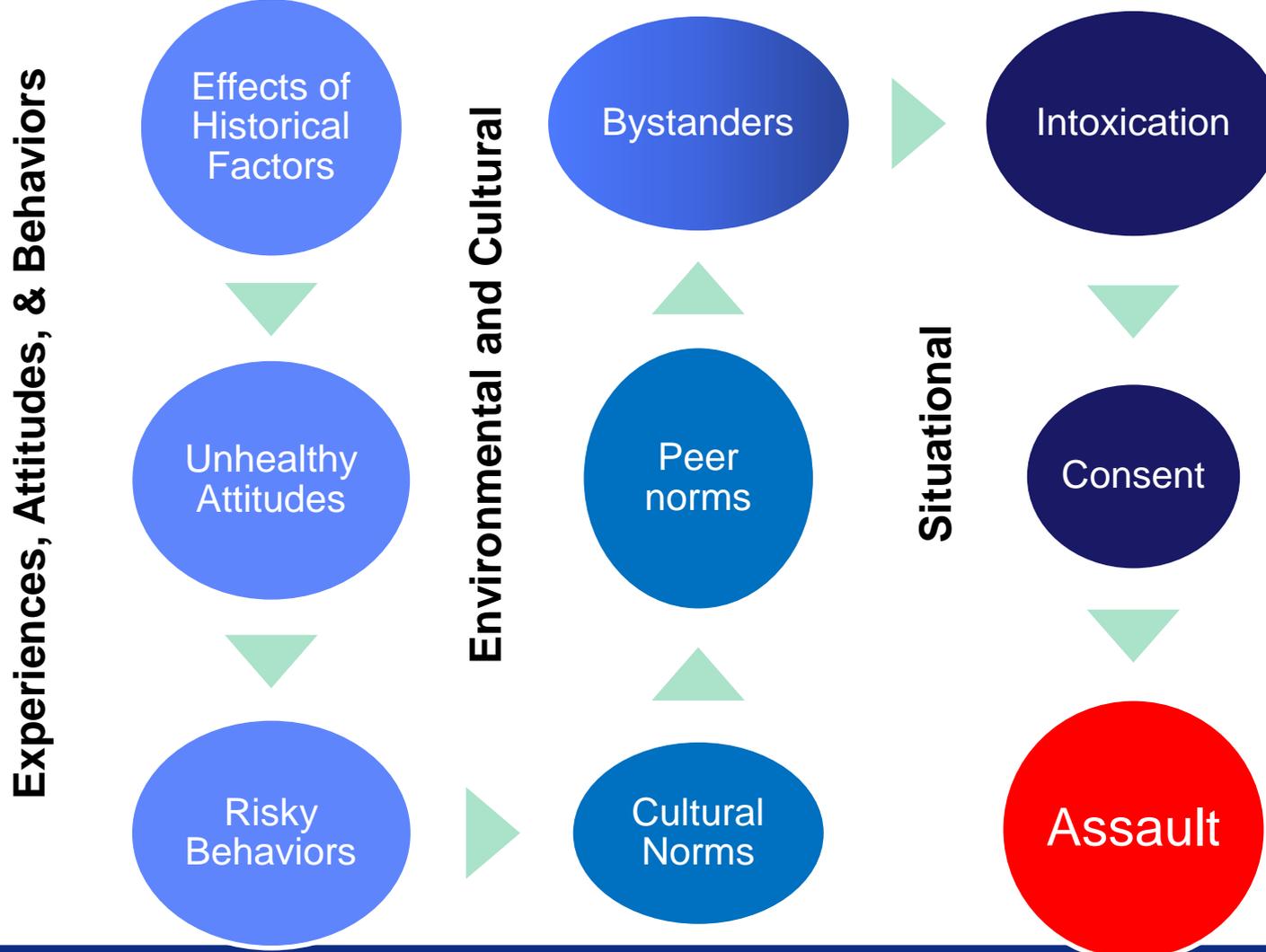
Alcohol Policies

- **Alcohol affects multiple problem behaviors**
 - **Delinquency, physical assault, intimate partner violence, and homicide**
 - **Sexual assault**
 - ~ 1/2 of sexual assaults involve consumption of alcohol
 - 34-74% of SV perpetrators used alcohol at time of the assault
 - Alcohol is a risk factor– but not a cause, or an excuse
- **Policies to reduce alcohol consumption/availability**
 - **“Happy Hour” Restrictions**
 - **Higher Prices**
 - **Decrease outlet density**
 - **Ban alcohol within a specific area**



Opportunities for Prevention

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What Does Prevention Look Like?

- **Half of all sexual assaults take place in dating or intimate relationships, so...**
- **Perpetrators use coercive sexual tactics to obtain sex, so...**
- **Prevention may foster healthy relationships by teaching communication and conflict resolution skills**
- **Prevention may teach healthy sexuality and skills to communicate about and respect sexual boundaries**



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What Does Prevention Look Like?

- **Half of all sexual assaults involve alcohol, so...**
- **Peers are strong influencers of behavior, so...**
- **Prevention may reduce consumption by teaching life skills, increasing the price, or decreasing the availability of alcohol**
- **Prevention empowers bystanders to change social norms about sexual assault by speaking out against sexist jokes, sexual harassment, and hazing**



Primary Prevention for Leaders

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Individual

- Bystander training
- Foster healthy life skills
- Promote healthy masculinity
- Address risky sex and other risk behaviors

Relationships

- Bystander intervention
- Promote safety, equality & respect
- Model healthy relationships and respectful language

Community

- Increase accountability and enforcement for sexual harassment, sexualized bullying & sexual assault
- Physical change to high risk settings
- Social marketing to promote healthy social norms

Society

- Alcohol policies
- Eliminate “legitimate” forms of violence



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Prevention messages for leaders

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Instead of...

Telling men not to perpetrate
and telling women not to
put themselves at risk

Try...

Giving proactive examples
of what both men and women
can do together to address
a climate or culture that allows
for gender stereotyping or
sexual harassment



Prevention messages for leaders

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Instead of...

Limiting guidance to a slogan or sound-bite, such as “real wingman act;”

Try...

Building on the message by acknowledging that it can be hard to act due to peer pressure and social consequences, and give specific examples of how

Being real and get personal



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Prevention Do's and Don'ts

Do

- Focus on preventing perpetration
- Combine a variety of strategies to teach and reinforce skills and key messages
- Select programs with scientific evidence of effectiveness
- Engage at multiple touch points prior to a possible assault

Don't

- Focus only on the victim
- Implement low dose awareness-raising strategies
- Select programs only because they are well-received, have been used in the past, or are well-marketed
- Focus only on events immediately preceding assault (consent, alcohol intoxication)



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Prevention doesn't have to be complex.

**Prevention just has to take into account that sexual
assault is complex.**



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QUESTIONS?