



Unwanted Sexual Experiences at UNH:

Disclosures about Unwanted Sexual Experiences

• 2006 •

Introduction, Methods and Sample

This is the third in a series of reports based on data collected in 2006 on unwanted sexual experiences at UNH. This report focuses on disclosures about unwanted sexual experiences by friends of study participants and disclosures by study participants of their own experiences. The study is the result of ongoing research collaboration at the University of New Hampshire funded by the UNH Office of the President; data have been collected three times since 1988. In 2006 we collected information from students at the end of February and asked questions about unwanted sexual contact or intercourse that had occurred since the beginning of the fall semester of that academic year. Approximately half of the sample (N=1242) completed paper surveys in a random sample of UNH undergraduate courses across colleges. The other half (N=1163) completed a web-based survey.

Disclosures by Friends

Questions about disclosures of unwanted sexual experiences by friends were included only on the paper version of the survey, so these results are based on the 1227 students who completed the paper survey and answered the disclosure questions. Participants were asked if, since they had been at UNH, a friend ever told them that she/he had been the victim of an unwanted sexual experience. Three hundred fifty-four (28.9%) students reported that

a friend had disclosed to them while at UNH. Of students who had a friend disclose to them, 96.5% were told by a female friend, while 19.7% were told by a male friend. Female students (33.7%) were much more likely to say that a friend had disclosed to them than were male students (21.4%). Nonetheless, this indicates that 1 in 3 female and 1 in 5 male undergraduates were told by a friend that they were a victim.

Participants were then asked about their reaction to their friend's disclosure. Table 1 (see next page) shows average student responses based on the percentage that indicated "agree" or "strongly agree" to each item (calculated from the responses of 354 who reported a disclosure). Across the 22 items on this measure, there were sex differences in 12 items. Overall, men reported higher levels of discomfort talking to disclosing friends, greater concerns they were causing harm to their friend, greater worries they were not supportive enough, and greater sense that they felt burdened by their friend's disclosure. Women were more likely to report agreeing that they became more afraid for their own safety and afraid they would be assaulted, were angry at society for the problem of rape, being fearful of doing things they used to do and feeling greater loss of a sense of security than did men. Women were also more likely to agree that as a result of the disclosure they felt they were a good source of support for their friend, felt more knowledgeable about the issue, and felt they did a good job helping.



Table 1: Responses to Disclosure of Unwanted Experience by a Friend (N=354)

Response to disclosure	Percentage of students (disclosed to) who agreed or strongly agreed
Felt I was good source of support for friend	64.5*
Became angry at society about rape	46.6*
Felt good about myself for helping	45.9
Felt appreciated	44.8
Felt I was doing a good job helping friend	44.5*
Felt upset dealing with friend's experience	43.1
Felt more knowledgeable about this problem	42.2*
Unsure what they needed	37.7
Felt a need to become involved in efforts to deal with broader problem	37.2
Became afraid for own safety	21.8*
Felt efforts didn't help	21.5
Didn't know enough about unwanted sexual experiences to help	20.0
Didn't know what to do	20.0
Became afraid of being assaulted	18.0*
Felt loss of sense of security	17.3*
No longer felt world was safe place	17.3
Felt uncomfortable talking to him/her	16.1*
Felt at ease dealing with friend's experience	16.0
Felt wasn't supportive enough	15.3*
Felt afraid was causing more harm	14.3*
Became afraid to do things I did before	11.7*
Felt burdened by friend's needs	9.2*

* indicates a statistically significant difference between women and men on this answer.

Disclosures by Victims

The full sample (from both the web and in-class surveys) was asked questions about whether they told anyone about their unwanted sexual experiences. These percentages appear in Table 2. The main finding was that 1 in 4 students experiencing unwanted sexual contact and 1 in 3 experiencing unwanted intercourse *did not tell anyone* about what had happened. If they did disclose to anyone, they were most likely to tell roommates and friends. Rates of non-disclosure were higher for unwanted intercourse. It is also notable that men who reported unwanted contact were more likely than women to tell no one (48% compared to 22%). These gender analyses could not be run for unwanted intercourse because of very low numbers of men reporting unwanted intercourse.

Table 2: Disclosure by Those Reporting an Unwanted Sexual Experience

Item	Unwanted contact victims (N = 504)*	Unwanted intercourse victims (N = 141)
Told friend	58.8	55.0
Told roommate	45.6	46.2
Told no one	27.0	32.5
Told romantic partner	16.0	14.5
Told parent	3.7	4.1
Told other family	5.0	5.7
Told counselor	1.1	2.4
Told faculty/staff	0.9	0.0
Told RA staff	1.5	0.0
Told police	1.3	1.6
Told SHARPP advocate	1.8	2.4
Told other person	3.1	1.6

*There is missing data of various amounts for each variable so the N is lower than this for some items.

Students who filled out the in-class surveys were also given an additional series of questions asking why they did not disclose. Only small numbers of participants reported an unwanted experience and reason for no disclosure of their experience (N=50 for unwanted contact and N=25 for unwanted intercourse). Thus, some caution should be used when examining these results.

Table 3: Reasons for Non-Disclosure among Those Reporting an Unwanted Experience

Reason for non-disclosure	Unwanted contact (N = 50)	Unwanted intercourse (N = 25)
Ashamed/embarrassed	11.1	78.3
Felt it was private matter	38.5	76.2
Concerned others would find out	14.8	61.9
Didn't want perpetrator to get in trouble	8.0	47.1
Fear of retribution from perpetrator	4.0	31.3
Fear of not being believed	7.4	41.2
Fear of being blamed	10.7	35.3
Didn't think incident serious	77.8	55.6
Thought people would tell what to do	9.0	26.7
Would feel like admission of failure	7.7	35.7

Disclosures by Perpetrators

In contrast to the above, a final question about disclosure asked participants “since you have been at UNH, has anyone ever told you that he/she had a sexual experience with someone when the other person didn’t want to or was incapacitated (e.g. drunk, drugged) in any way?” Of the 1182 participants who responded to this question, 25% said they had been told this. This is a critical figure because these students may be key bystanders to unwanted sexual experiences indicating a need for community-based prevention programs. Moreover, this number calls for increased education about what constitutes sexual consent.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- ▶ Nearly half the respondents reported that they felt they were able to be supportive and helpful, and most found it a positive experience that they were able to help or to be supportive when a friend disclosed to them. The findings indicate the need to develop and implement educational materials and programming that give friends and other informal helpers greater knowledge, specific information, and concrete suggestions about appropriate or helpful language to use or things to do when a friend discloses to them.
- ▶ A large number of students indicated that they felt anger or distress after someone disclosed to them. This finding reminds us that unwanted sexual experiences have consequences for people beyond individual victims, and that communities ought to provide education and support to recipients of disclosure about unwanted sexual experiences. They need information about where to go or whom they can talk to in confidence about their feelings.
- ▶ Twenty-five percent of 1182 participants reported that a friend disclosed that they had a sexual experience with someone who did not want to or was incapacitated. Such a large number of disclosures indicates that sexual consent was not or could not be obtained and signifies a critical need for more education about what constitutes sexual consent.
- ▶ These findings alert us to the need for programming aimed at women and men as well as widespread education on campuses, especially programs that focus on bystanders.

Project collaborators

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