The Enhanced Assess, Acknowledge, Act, Sexual Assault Resistance program


Overview:

This was a well-conducted RCT of a rape prevention program for college students which found that the program produced a sizable, statistically-significant reduction in completed rape over a one-year follow-up period. Specifically, the study evaluated a brief, educational program for first-year female students at three Canadian universities, aimed at reducing their likelihood of experiencing rape, attempted rape, or other forms of victimization. The study found that women in the treatment group were about half as likely as control group women to report having been raped during the first year after random assignment (5.2% of treatment group women reported being raped vs. 9.8% of control group women). A longer-term follow-up study is underway to determine whether these impacts persist beyond one year.

Description of the intervention:

The Enhanced Assess, Acknowledge, Act, Sexual Assault Resistance program consisted of four 3-hour units that involved games, lectures, discussion, and application and practice activities. The Assess unit focused on improving women's assessment of the risk of sexual assault by male acquaintances and developing strategies to minimize that risk; the Acknowledge unit focused on acknowledging danger in situations that have turned coercive; the Act unit offered instruction about effective options for resistance and included two hours of self-defense training; and the Sexuality and Relationships unit provided information on sexual health, safer-sex practices, strategies for communicating about sex, and an opportunity for participants to explore their sexual attitudes, values, and desires.

Study design:

Over 3,000 first-year female students, aged 17 to 24, from three Canadian universities were invited to participate in the study; 916 were eligible\(^1\), agreed to participate, and were randomly assigned to either receive the resistance program (the treatment group; n=452) or to a session providing access to brochures on sexual assault as is the universities' usual practice (the control group; n=464). Outcomes were measured with a computerized version of the Sexual Experiences Survey – Short Form Victimization (SES-SFV)\(^2\) 12 months after randomization.

Key findings:

In the first year after random assignment, 5.2% of the group eligible to receive the resistance program reported being raped compared to 9.8% of the control group. This effect was statistically significant (p=0.02).

\(^1\) To be eligible, students had to be able to attend one of the four scheduled sets of intervention sessions during the semester in which they enrolled in the study.

\(^2\) According to the authors, this tool is the most widely used measure in sexual assault research and has high reliability and validity.
The program also significantly reduced the incidence of attempted rate (3.4% in the resistance program group reported experiencing an attempted, but not completed, rape vs. 9.3% in the control group; p<0.001).

**Summary of study quality:**

Study attrition was low and balanced between the resistance program group (7.1%) and the control group (7.3%), and the two groups were highly similar in their baseline characteristics (e.g., demographics, rates of prior sexual victimization). The outcome measures taken from the SES-SFV are validated and clear cut questions not requiring interpretation by the respondent or the enumerator. While the study only had a one-year follow-up, a longer term follow-up is planned to determine whether the above effects are sustained.

The main limitation of this study is that it relies exclusively on self-reported outcomes, which could potentially introduce reporting bias, although as the authors note it’s not clear whether this would cause an under- or over-statement of the program’s effects. For example, women in the resistance program group might have been inclined to underreport sexual assault believing they should have been able to resist it. Alternatively, they might have over-reported it, having been sensitized to sexual assault as a result of the program.³

³ Another minor limitation of the study is that it did not track outcomes for women who withdrew from the study between random assignment and when their respective groups’ sessions began (i.e., the study did not use a strict intention-to-treat approach). In practice, this was not a major threat to the study’s validity since less than 1% of the sample withdrew prior to the sessions getting underway.