

Rape culture is real and coercion is its language

“Don’t take ‘no’ for an answer!” “If you want something, go out and get it. Don’t let anything get in your way.”

I heard phrases like this a lot when I was growing up, I think many of us do. And while being persistent with our wants can be a good thing when looking for a good job or dealing with a salesperson, it can be a minefield when it comes to relationships, especially where sex is involved.

Rape culture is an often controversial term that we employ at HCWC, but there are many ways in which sexual violence is woven into the fabric of our culture. Some of you may disagree, as I’m sure you have met very few people (likely none) who vocally champion sexual assault. Someone who is “pro-sexual assault” we would consider a psychopath. But that’s not what we mean by “rape culture”; we’re really talking about the way in which sexual aggression is normalized all around us. Many people might think of rape involving lots of physical violence and force, but what’s employed much more frequently is coercion, and coercive behaviors are a big part of our culture.

Coercion is a blanket term for a variety of behaviors that aim to get someone to have sex with them when they don’t really want to, but not by using physical force or the threat of physical force. It can include manipulation (“if we aren’t going to have sex, we can’t be together”), guilt (“I treat you so well, why won’t you do this for me?”), an abuse of power (maybe a large age difference or disparity of power at work), using alcohol or drugs to bend someone to your will, and countless other emotional influences. The idea is that if one person doesn’t want to do something sexual and you do, there are ways to “convince” them. And unfortunately, these coercive practices are often treated as a normal part of many sexual encounters. So many of us are taught that if a person rejects your advances, you should be persistent and keep trying to seduce them. Keep complimenting them, keep buying them drinks, or maybe give them a backhanded insult to wear down their self-esteem. The popular myth we are taught is that women are supposed to say no even though they really do want to have sex, or that women don’t know what they want so it’s up to you to tell them. If women seem too eager, they will look like a “whore” (or any of the other hundred negative terms we use to refer to a woman who has sex). Dating and hooking up is literally seen as a game, where if you just press the right buttons, say the right things, or try enough times, you are entitled to your prize. But games have winners and losers, and sex isn’t a prize. Shouldn’t the ideal be that everyone is a winner when it comes to sex?

Again, this system of unwritten rules around hooking up is part of our culture. Do you see how this coercive rape culture is woven into the mainstream? Luckily, most of us have learned now that “no means no,” but there is still some hesitation out there to accept “an enthusiastic YES! means yes,” as if it’s too much work to make sure that everyone involved in a sexual situation is excited about what is happening and that the pleasure is mutual.

I won’t argue that it is work. Communication around sex isn’t always easy, but it is necessary. We have to be willing to talk about the things that we are comfortable with and not comfortable with, and accept other people’s boundaries without question. Because no one should have to be “convinced” to do anything sexual, and until we are willing to do the work, the culture will never change.

The following article is the third article of a five-week series focusing on raising awareness about sexual assault and child abuse.

“Communication around sex isn’t always easy, but it is necessary. We have to be willing to talk about the things that we are comfortable with and not comfortable with, and accept other people’s boundaries without question.”

*by Brandon Pendleton, HCWC Prevention Education Coordinator
Written for Hays Free Press*