Dear Alice,

In the beginning, I told my boyfriend that I don't want to have sex outside of marriage and he accepted that.

But then, about a week ago, I made a very big mistake and allowed him to take my clothes off completely and enter my vagina slightly. I know it was wrong and the following day I told him that I didn't feel right about it and I didn't want us to do that again.

Unfortunately, the very next day, we were alone together, and we got a bit carried away again. But when he tried to "enter" me, I said: "I think we should stop now, let's stop? ok? Please, let's stop now. I don't feel right about this." But he didn't... he spread my legs anyway and got on top of me. And he penetrated me quite deeply. As he was doing it, I was saying, "Stop, please, I really think we should stop," but I didn't push him away. I didn't physically PUSH him or something to make him stop.

I was quite shook up afterwards but I didn't know if I should be angry with him or not. We are still together and I don't even think he thinks he did anything wrong... DID he do anything wrong? Or is what he did alright because my body wasn't saying "no"? I didn't fight him physically. Do you think I was raped? I'm so confused and I've lost all my self-respect!

Answer

Dear Reader,

It is never okay for someone to pressure or force another person to have sex when s/he doesn't want to. After an experience like the one you had, it's understandable that you feel confused about your feelings and how you see yourself. Reaching out for information and support is an important, and often difficult, next step.

Sexual assault committed by someone the survivor is familiar with is sometimes referred to as acquaintance rape. (A survivor is someone who has been assaulted and is actively recovering from the experience, rather than feeling victimized.) Up to 95 percent of all sexual assaults are committed by acquaintances. Because assaults of this nature often involve a friend or significant other, the experiences can be especially upsetting.

Based on your description of events, your boyfriend did not have your consent for his actions. Consenting to sexual activity means that a person willingly and knowingly agrees to the
behavior. Open and explicit communication and mutual approval are needed for consent on both parts. Your words, "I think we should stop now, let's stop? ok? Please, let's stop now. I don't feel right about this," conveyed that you did not consent or agree to your boyfriend's actions. It was his obligation to acknowledge and respect your verbal "no" by stopping his actions.

You say that you didn't physically push him away. Maybe you are worried about possibly having given your boyfriend conflicting messages. There are many reasons, however, why a person might not physically resist or push someone away during an assault. S/he may be scared, shocked, and/or numb, since it's difficult to comprehend that anyone would coerce someone else into having sex, especially when that anyone is someone whom we care for or trust. A person may also fear escalating the assault and therefore choose to cooperate in order to reduce injury. Contrary to what people may think, someone does not have to physically fight-off a person's advances to convey that s/he does not want to have intercourse or participate in any other sexual activity.

Regardless, it is not your behavior that determines whether or not this was an assault; it is your boyfriend's.

You have asked whether or not Alice thinks you were raped. In spite of what anyone else thinks, Alice supports your defining your own experience in your own way. Definitions are here as reference points. Rape is a form of sexual assault that involves unwanted penetration of a person's mouth, vagina, and/or anus by a penis or object. Rape is also having sex with a person who is unable to give consent because s/he's impaired or unconscious (i.e., drunk or drugged), physically or mentally challenged, or under the age of 17 years (the age varies from state to state). In the context of New York State law[2], your boyfriend's actions meet the definition of what is considered rape.

Even when inappropriate sexual conduct can be legally defined as rape, many people do not define their experiences as such. A person may be reluctant to define her/his experience as rape for several reasons, including, but not limited to: pressure from the perpetrator to chalk the experience up to "a misunderstanding"; societal messages about gender, sexual roles, and "acceptable aggression"; and, a survivor's discomfort with accepting that s/he has been victimized. Similarly, many people do not tell anyone about their experience, and even more rarely is it reported. Also, many who commit acquaintance rape or sexual assault do not define it as wrong; however, ignorance or lack of intent on the part of the "assaulter" is not an excuse.

Defining what happened and taking care of yourself are crucial parts of the healing process. Of course, the two may be related. To begin the healing process, you might try any number of the following actions:

**Finding a safe, trusting environment**
Give yourself space to sort things out away from your boyfriend. Choose and reach out to a trusted friend, family member, clergyperson, rape crisis advocate, counselor, or teacher/professor who can keep you company, listen to you, and lend support.

**Calling a counselor or support person**
Someone trained in supporting survivors of sexual assault can help you come to terms with your feelings and make informed decisions about next steps. A trained counselor or support person can listen to you, help you understand what happened, explore your
feelings, and identify the impact of what happened. S/he also can help you explore your options concerning reporting and any legal action you might take. A trained counselor or support person also can provide advocacy or accompaniment if you choose to report this incident to the criminal justice system. If you’re at Columbia, you can contact the Barnard/Columbia Rape Crisis/Anti-Violence Support Center [3] and/or make an appointment to speak with a counselor at Counseling and Psychological Services (Morningside) [4] or the Mental Health Service (CUMC) [5].

Seeing a health care provider as soon as possible after the event
Seeking medical attention is strongly recommended following a sexual assault, to address any risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and pregnancy (for female survivors). [Emergency contraception (EC) [6], for example, may be taken within 120 hours of unprotected, unanticipated intercourse to help prevent pregnancy.] Also, sexual assault that involves any form of penetration may result in injuries that are not immediately apparent, so medical attention is definitely encouraged. Furthermore, a health care provider can document injuries and/or collect any forensic evidence.

Remembering that it wasn’t your fault
Survivors tend to blame themselves following an assault. Some people feel guilty, harshly judging their own behavior. Although it makes sense that you might feel ashamed or guilty, it was not your fault. You said, using your words, in many sentences, that you did not want to have intercourse. Your boyfriend chose to violate that boundary. His behavior was not only disrespectful, but it was also criminal by New York State law. Everyone has the right to say "stop" or "no" to any form of sexual activity, even if you are naked, have done it before, or are in a relationship. Whether or not your boyfriend takes accountability for his actions, it is not acceptable to force someone else to have sex.

Dealing with a sexual assault can be hard, yet by asking for assistance and support, sorting through your emotions, and deciding on your next steps, gradually you will feel more in control and regain your self-respect. It is your boyfriend who does not deserve your respect. Do not blame yourself.

On a final note, men are more often the perpetrators of sexual violence than women. Challenging men's (and women's) beliefs about sexual violence and unhealthy relationships, as well as getting men (and women) more involved in looking out for one another in high risk situations, such as social settings involving alcohol use, can potentially help protect men from becoming perpetrators (and women from becoming survivors).

Alice!
Category: Relationships [7]
Nonconsensual Relationships [8]

Related questions

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