

## CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

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# Doing Anti-Rape Work: One Man's Perspective

by Dave Kosson

**F**or me, doing anti-rape prevention work with men means trying to reduce the likelihood that the men who attend a workshop will behave in ways that are assaultive. There is no shortage of ways to approach this kind of work, because, as we grow up in America, most of us are exposed to numerous messages that encourage assaultive behavior. As educators and change agents we are in a position to help men to reexamine these messages, and to look at, for instance, the consequences of our actions for others, the links between various societally sanctioned behaviors and rape, and what we really think it means to be a man.

There are a wide variety of ways of acting and reacting that many of us never saw modelled by other boys or men. Consequently, there are also many skills that can be introduced and, to some extent, taught to participants in anti-rape workshops, including listening to others, interrupting our behaviors at the request of others, talking about sexual expectations, and being in touch with and using our feelings without being overwhelmed by them.

Many of these issues are related and can be linked together if you think through their relationship. The specific selection of issues and techniques you address in a workshop depends primarily on what you know about and what you feel is most effective given your style as a facilitator. As you become comfortable doing this sort of work, you should try different

kinds of exercises to see what works best for you.

What is the big deal about self-examination? Why my emphasis on feelings and communication? Because this approach to antirape work is psychoeducational. It assumes that our attitudes and behaviors toward women and toward men are learned over many years and are deeply ingrained. They are not likely to change simply because we are confronted with facts and statistics about rape. They will change only after we accept that we are not bad people because we have some of these attitudes or behavior. It is not our fault that we were exposed to misogynist messages as children. Rather, it is up to us now as adults (or young adults) to think things through for ourselves, to decide how we wish to think and act.

However, this rethinking is not easy. All of us have resistances to dealing with those aspects of our identities and behavior associated with rape. We may simply wish to avoid the pain or anger we experience when we empathize with those who are raped (or with the friends, partners, and relatives of those who are raped). We may have enough difficulty already feeling good about ourselves, and may be suppressing much of our distrust or fear of women (and of men) so that we can continue to see ourselves as good guys. We may be afraid that if we look at these issues, we will have to give up behaviors that we like, that we have grown up with, that are an important part of who we are.

But there are at least two other factors that makes it hard for us as men to consider the connections between our attitudes and rape. First, we tend to grow up separated from these issues (unless we are raped or are aware of people we know who are raped). Rape is not something our fathers or teachers have warned us about. Even if we have been exposed to antirape information, it is usually directed at women. So, although the majority of rapists are men, we think that rape is a woman's issue. We do not realize how rape affects us as

men. Second, as we are learning that sex is the most important thing in our lives, most of us have behaved inappropriately at some points in our life. Perhaps we pushed too hard for sex or ignored someone's feelings. But even if we have not, we have been criticized and treated as if we have. As a result, we feel both guilty and defensive. Because of these factors, we are disempowered with respect to rethinking rape. In this context, antirape work is empowerment work: empowering men to take on the responsibility of not raping. In other words, helping ourselves and other men to take control over our own actions so that we do not control and dominate women without realizing we are doing so.

I use "we" instead of "they", because we who do anti-rape work have grown up in the same culture as those we work with. It is absolutely essential that we examine our own behavior and attitudes if we expect to be effective at helping others to grow and change. This does not mean that we become highly self-critical and change any aspect of our behavior that meets with disapproval, but we should be willing to look honestly at our interactions with women and with other men, and we should pay attention to when we are comfortable and uncomfortable with our behavior. To the extent we can, we should seek out feedback from others about when they are comfortable and uncomfortable with what we say and do. To this extent, we take on the process of self-examination that we encourage other men to take on.

And as we become sensitive to feedback from others and sensitive to our own feelings, we become able to use antirape workshops to model the skills we want to promote, whatever specific exercises and formats we choose. This modelling may be a more powerful way of reaching men than the specifics of our workshop. We can listen to the people we are working with; we can tune in to our own emotional responses during the workshop and use them where appropriate; we can

practice communication skills in checking out our expectations for the workshop with our audience and in the way we address conflicts that arise. We can acknowledge mistakes we make during workshops and move on.

The primary goal is to empower men to begin to take on the process of examining their own behavior, attitudes, and feelings as they relate to sexuality, intimacy, and rape. Given that it is not easy for men to confront these issues with strangers, it is important from the outset that we try to create a safe environment. We can set groundrules for confidentiality, respect for what others say, and each person's right to think for themselves. We can show appreciation for the courage men are showing just by attending this sort of workshop, and give them further credit for their participation. As suggested above, even if we take great care to avoid presenting ourselves as moral experts, many men who attend our workshops will feel defensive. As presenters, we must be aware that defensiveness interferes with hearing, thinking, feeling, and remembering. If we are sensitive to defensiveness, we are less likely to heighten it. I also recommend saying a few words about who you are. Everyone is probably wondering that anyway. If you don't, they may be distracted by wondering why not.

After creating a safe place, our next goal is to maximize participation. It is easy for audiences to adopt a passive posture. If we let them, the workshop will be less personally meaningful for them. Use exercises that get men talking, and ideally, that you think will promote discussions. One easy way is to have everyone read sentences written by others. Another way is to ask people to complete sentences you have begun, e.g., "What I like about being a man is ...". Or just ask the group questions, e.g., "How many of us find it easy to talk to women? What can (and can't) we say to them?" The amount of structure needed depends on the audience's familiarity and nondefensiveness with the issue of rape, their comfort with

each other, and their age. In general, I find that more structure is useful with younger men and boys, and with defensive or noncohesive groups of men. Of course, you should feel free to experiment with different structures, to find out what works best for you with specific audiences.

Almost everyone wants to feel free, to be in control of our own bodies and what we say and do. Most men want it, and most women want it. As men, we often feel constrained by traditional stereotypes of what a man is. We feel we have to act in certain ways to fit in or to protect ourselves (we think), and we resent the loss of freedom. Women are severely constrained by the reality that more than one in three women are raped during their lives. The fear of rape keeps women from travelling alone, from going out after dark, from feeling comfortable in a variety of situations we as men take for granted. Much of what we do in antirape work comes down to the very basic distinction between control over ourselves and control over others. We can facilitate men's feeling free of the social rituals and norms that often control us, while increasing their empathy for women's right to control of their bodies, behavior, and relationships.

To do this kind of work effectively, it is important for us to give up fantasies of having control over our audience. They are not going to suddenly change their behavior because we encourage them to, nor should they. If we believe that there is one right way and that we know it, then we are no longer doing empowerment work: we are trying to control other men, trying to get them to follow us instead of Rambo. But if we can trust in men's ability to think and make good decisions for themselves, then we can help them to take on the process of growth and change that we have already begun in our personal lives. And if we are truly open to the men we work with, many of them will sense this. They will learn more from us, and we will learn more from them.

One final point: you may encounter some men who genuinely want to control and dominate women. These men have no empathy for women and do not wish to develop it. They are unlikely to reconsider their attitudes and behaviors. In fact, the best you may be able to do to steer them in that direction is to raise their anxiety. In this case, you can ask other men (or women) how they feel about what these men have said. Help such men to see that theirs is not a mainstream view. If necessary, remind them that what they are advocating constitutes rape, is against the law, and the penalties they may expect if convicted. In general, do not spend a lot of your attention on these men unless they are already dominating or trying to control the workshop itself. As a last resort, point out that they are preventing you from doing what you were invited to do, and ask them to hold further comments until after the workshop.

(See related resource Men's Anti-rape Exercises, in this same issue)

*Ed. Note: This Article was originally published in the ENDING MEN'S VIOLENCE NEWSLETTER in the Fall of 1989. The EMV Newsletter was edited by Bill Warters. Author Dave Kosson was a member of Man-to-Man, a pro-feminist men's organization that educates on issues of preventing violence and abuse in Syracuse, NY at the time this was written. Dave is also an emeritus member of Men Stopping Rape, in Madison, WI.*