



# Sexual Abuse

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Thursday, January 25, 2018

## We want conversation, not conflict!

By Alissa R. Ackerman, PhD, Kieran McCartan, PhD, & David Prescott, LICSW

Tarana Burke first used the term “Me Too” to 2006 to elevate the conversation around sexual violence. The conversation around the ubiquitous nature of “sexual misconduct” came to a head in late 2017, when Alyssa Milano tweeted that anyone who has been sexually assaulted or harassed should reply to the tweet with “Me Too”. This marked a changing tide that empowered individuals who had experienced any form of sexual misconduct to speak up. We should celebrate the fact that so many people have found their voice and are willing to share their story. We should also understand the nuances inherent in the movement, which is a debate involving feminism, equality, collaboration, and interventionism as well as sexual abuse, harassment and victimization. Each of these areas have seen long standing battles being fought on many fronts, therefore it’s important to realize that #metoo has not come out of nowhere.

We must recognize that there are many forms of harassment, and that the impact, consequences, and legacy of harassment change with the individual people in question. Like sexual violence, harassment does not take the same emotional, psychological, and behavioral responses toll on those affected by them. While recognizing the that we cannot dictate the impact of sexual harassment, we must recognize that while all sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and sexual assault carry an unacceptable risk of harm, they are not the same thing. We can honor the voices, stories, and pain that stem from all forms of misconduct, while also recognizing that, perhaps, they are parts of different, but equally important conversations. Therefore, we need to think about context, situation, personality, resilience, and support in all cases.



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### SAJRT Bloggers' Profile

We are longtime members of ATSA dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.

*The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers* is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse. Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are at risk to abuse.

*The views expressed on this blog are of the bloggers and are not necessarily those of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research & Treatment, or Sage Journals.*

This past week, the website Babe.net, which uses the tagline “babe is for girls who don’t give a fuck”, published an account of an alleged nonconsensual sexual interaction between a young woman named “Grace” and comedian Aziz Ansari. A few days after the Babe account was published, Ansari responded. In part, he stated that he believed that the encounter was completely consensual and that when he heard this was not the case for her, he was surprised and concerned.

Some are calling the Babe account nothing short of “revenge porn”. Importantly, the published account has sparked debate about what constitutes sexual assault vs. a “bad date”. Perhaps this is the wrong conversation. Perhaps this type of conversation is what keeps people stubbornly in their silos, screaming over one another, or passionately stating that this is a “war to be won”. In addition to this we need to continue to think about what we pay attention to in respect to consent, because we often think in terms of recognizing verbal cues, but what about non-verbal cues (i.e., a change of tone, silence, different body language, etc)? Quite often we look to hear “no” or “stop” rather than recognizing disengagement, a change of tone or a lack of interest.

It is true that the #metoo movement has sparked debate, as well as dialog. It has opened doors to conversations and disclosure that otherwise would have remained unheard and unaddressed. Sadly, movements like this will not end sexual victimization. Calling people out and shaming them for their behavior does not change that behavior if there is little to no understanding about what the wrongdoing is. Calling attention to the issue does not prevent the issue from occurring. Education, connection, and mutual understanding will cultivate a shift toward prevention. We need to change the conversation, we need to start it earlier and use a different means to have it. We need to think about how we educate children, families, peers and communities more effectively. In addition, we need to look at the narrative coming from the media and what TV, Film and the press say about these issues.

Were Ansari’s actions potentially harmful? Yes. Did Grace provide verbal and non-verbal cues that she wanted to stop the sexual activity? Yes. Does that mean Ansari understood those cues? No. This is where the conversation needs to shift.

So often, we hear young people, particularly young men, stating that they thought sexual activity was okay because, “she didn’t say no”. Our conversations about consent must go beyond the fact that not saying no does not mean yes. One way to shift the conversation to help young men understand this better is to talk openly about why someone might not say no.

In the end, however, it is our fervent hope that the #metoo dialog will move beyond those most immediately affected by harassment and abuse and include marginalized populations. After all, rates of abuse and harassment in and around marginalized and underprivileged communities, including Native American and other ethnic minority communities. Likewise, LGBTQ people experience higher rates of sexual violence. Conversations within and between these communities must be elevated in the conversation. If we are ever to truly approach sexual violence and harassment as a public-health issue, these voices need our attention as well. Hatred and vitriol get us nowhere.