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Understanding the Issues

During the Haven course, students will learn about the issues of sexual assault, relationship violence, sexual harassment, and stalking. They will have opportunities to explore how and why these issues exist, and think about their role in prevention. Below are some contributing factors that students will explore during Haven.

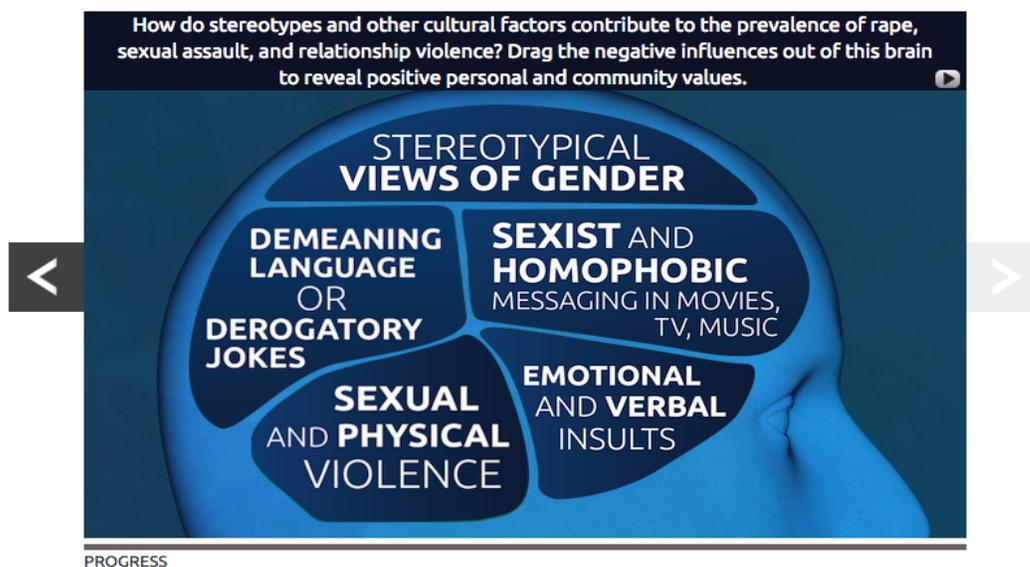
Gender Socialization

Sexual and relationship violence often relate to socialized identities and expectations. Messages about gender roles and expectations come from all around us, whether it is how children are treated differently when they cry, gender-related roles in movie scripts, or peer group pressures.

During Haven, students are encouraged to think about the roles they associate with masculinity and femininity and how these roles may manifest in relationships. While most students are not engaging in acts of physical or sexual violence, we must also teach them to make the connection between things like sexist or homophobic language in perpetuating a culture that condones this behavior.

The slide below, taken from Haven, explores how prevalent stereotypes that exist in our society contribute to sexualized violence. Do we excuse risky behavior through making comments such as, “boys will be boys” or “quit acting like a girl”?

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The Role of Alcohol

Through participation in Haven, students will recognize the ways that alcohol can be used to incapacitate victims, learn about alcohol risk-reduction strategies to keep themselves and other safe, and develop skills for being an active bystander in risky or dangerous situations where alcohol may be present.

While research shows that the majority of sexual assaults involve alcohol, it is important to remember that alcohol consumption **does not cause** sexual assault. Alcohol is used as a tool by perpetrators to increase vulnerability in potential victims. In Haven, students will learn that someone who has consumed a lot of alcohol is not capable of giving true consent, and that intentionally using alcohol to take advantage of someone sexually is sexual assault.

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Above: A slide from the Haven course, during which students learn about the effects of alcohol on judgment, motor control, and communication.

It is vitally important to remember that while people are more likely to be assaulted when they are drinking, an assault is never the fault of the survivor. Placing blame on sexual assault victims for what happened to them—for any reason—is unacceptable and contributes to the very lack of perpetrator

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responsibility and accountability that lends to such high rates of sexual violence to begin with. As friends and loved ones of survivors, students can help support their healing by believing them, assuring them that what happened was not their fault, and sharing resources.

The College Effect

College is often portrayed in the media as a time for new experiences and experimentation, often with regards to partying and hooking up. Although the majority of students enter college with healthy attitudes and behaviors regarding alcohol and relationships, the transition to a new environment and exposure to new peers and experiences can lead to what researchers call the “college effect.”

As mentioned earlier, the first few weeks of college pose the highest risk across a variety of behaviors, and the transition to college can be particularly detrimental to a subset of students. Students may be dealing with issues such as homesickness, financial constraints, loneliness, academic pressures, and stress, which can lead to additional negative consequences and behaviors. Given the new environment, misperceived expectations around alcohol use and sexuality, and the social pressures facing students, the first six weeks of college tend to be a particularly high-risk period for sexual assault.

Why is there such a sudden focus on this issue?

While it may seem that sexual assault has suddenly come to the forefront of higher education, the reality is that this issue that has been occurring for decades. Until fairly recently, issues of sexual and relationship violence were not discussed openly, and as such, victims felt (and often experienced) that they would not be supported if they came forward. While legislation has been put in place over the past thirty years to assist with reporting and response, these measures were not as focused on primary prevention. As these issues continued to persist, many college students felt that institutions were not doing enough to prevent issues of sexual violence and respond appropriately when issues were reported. Activism efforts, largely on the part of college students, led to additional legislation for colleges and universities with an increased focus on prevention. Additionally, as these issues have come to the forefront of the nation’s agenda, individuals and groups all over the country are encouraged to play a role in preventing and responding to sexual and relationship violence.