

Chrisula Tasiopoulos on WOMEN'S HEALTH

Chrisula Tasiopoulos is the Program Coordinator for Sexual Assault Support Services, a program through Women's Health & Counseling Center in Somerville. Tasiopoulos provides individual and group counseling, crisis intervention and training to local professionals. SASS provides to Somerset County residents a 24-hour hotline, hospital and police accompaniments, information and referrals, outreach programs to area schools and other agencies, volunteer opportunities, as well as raising awareness to help prevent sexual violence.

Protecting yourself and friends from drug-related sexual assault

appeared Sunday, December 5, 2004

During the holiday season, family gatherings, New Year's Eve parties and time spent with neighbors and friends give us the opportunity to share the holiday spirit. Teens and young people enjoy gathering during this time of year and while most parties occur without incident, excessive drinking and partaking of drugs can lead to sexual assault.

Many people underestimate the prevalence of sexual assault in our society. Each year approximately 250,000 women and men are sexually assaulted in the United States. Sexual Assault Support Services, Somerset County's rape care program, receives over 1,000 calls from survivors and their loved ones each year. These statistics highlight how pervasive the problem is. Based on these statistics, please share this article with your teens so they do not unknowingly fall victim to violence.

Sexual assault is one of the most underreported crimes in the United States with only one-third of victims reporting, mostly due to the stigma surrounding victims of sexual assault and the myths many of us believe. One such myth is that sex offenders are strangers who brutally attack their victims. In fact, the majority of sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone the survivor knows and trusts, and the closer the relationship between the victim and offender, the less physical force is used. The lack of outward physical signs of sexual assault can cause many victims to remain silent.

Alcohol and other drugs are used to help facilitate sexual assaults. This phenomenon of incapacitating a victim is not new. Alcohol is the most common date-rape drug, and like all date-rape drugs, is used to render victims powerless. Excessive drinking can lead to extreme intoxication, making it easier for a perpetrator to overpower a victim. No matter what the situation, if a person has become incapacitated due to alcohol or other drugs, they are unable to give consent.

In recent years, a growing number of drugs have been used, either alone or in combination with alcohol or other drinks, to render victims powerless. Ecstasy, GHB, and "Special K" are the most common. At one time, "Roofies" were the most common date rape drug, but today research has shown that GHB use is on the rise.

Many of the date-rape drugs are colorless, odorless, and tasteless; therefore it is easy to slip them into someone's drink virtually undetected. When mixed with alcohol, the effects can be deadly. In most cases, the victim becomes unconscious, at which point a sexual assault occurs. Common signs or symptoms of having been drugged and possibly assaulted

are: a feeling of intense intoxication when minimal or no alcohol has been consumed, nausea/vomiting and severe headache the next day, disheveled or removed clothing, loss of memory and/or time, and pain in the genital and/or anal area.

What to do if you suspect a date-rape drug has been added to your drink or a friend's:

Many of these drugs take effect within 15 minutes, therefore it is important to recognize the signs as soon as they occur and get help right away. Try to have a close friend stay with you at all times and get to a safe place.

Obtain medical attention immediately, and if possible keep the beverage you were drinking and give it to the attending medical staff. Many of these drugs metabolize quickly and cannot be detected in the blood or urine for very long.

It is important to remember that no matter what the situation is, the victim is never to blame for being raped. We can educate about reducing our risk, but an individual can never truly prevent a sexual assault from occurring. Self-blame and feelings of shame and guilt resulting from a traumatic experience such as this can lead to years of complications. Next month, we will be discussing rape trauma syndrome, and how this affects survivors and our community at large.

Tips for identifying the most common date-rape drugs and how they affect an individual:

Name: Gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB)

Street Name: GHB, GBL, G, "Grievous Bodily Harm," "Liquid E," "Scoop," "Easy Lay"

Form: Clear liquid or white powder

Immediate Symptoms: Sweating, tremors, weakness, drunken-like state, nausea, drowsiness, confusion, memory loss, sedation, burning sensation in throat and around mouth (liquid)

Name: Ketamine

Street Name: "K", "Special K," "Kat"

Form: Clear, odorless, tasteless liquid or white powder

Immediate Symptoms: Euphoria, quick burst of energy, drunken feeling, shortness of breath, loss of balance, loss of time, seizures, coma, vomiting when mixed with alcohol

Name: Ecstasy (Methylenedioxymethamphetamine, or MDMA)

Street Name: "E", "X", "love drug"

Form: Pill (often stamped with a picture or logo)

Immediate Symptoms: Dilated pupils, sweating, teeth grinding, jaw clenching, blurred vision, tremors, palpitations, euphoria, energy, heightened feelings and/or senses, elevated body temperature

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