

RESEARCH



Knowledge as power

BY STEPHEN FIELDS

STOPPING SEXUAL ASSAULT

Charlene Senn is paving the way for Canadian university campuses to be among the safest in the world for young women.

A psychology professor, Dr. Senn leads a team of researchers testing the effectiveness of a new sexual assault resistance training program designed to help women fend off unwanted advances by combining the best methods for preventing attacks with a greater awareness of their own sexual preferences, needs and desires.

“If women have a clearer understanding of their own sexuality, as well as some basic methods of self defense, they’ll be better at resisting unwanted sexual contact from men they know,” she said.

The program will be implemented and studied over the next five years at the University of Calgary, the University of Guelph and the University of Windsor, thanks to a \$1.3 million grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. It contains four three-hour sessions that provide concrete methods for women to assess risks, recognize dangers and overcome emotional obstacles to using physical self-defense to prevent attacks by men they know. The enhanced portion includes a three-hour session called Sexuality and Relationships, which helps women define their own sexual boundaries, assert their desires effectively and improve their understanding of what a healthy sexual relationship means to them.

“A woman leaving one of these sessions should believe she has the right to expect that her sexual needs will be taken into account,” Senn said. The theory behind the program came out of her understanding of the way most sexual assaults occur.

“It made sense to me that because most sexual assaults are committed by acquaintances, and they don’t involve a knife or a gun – a lot of them are by verbal threats and coercion – then the more

“IF WOMEN HAVE A CLEARER UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR OWN SEXUALITY, AS WELL AS SOME BASIC METHODS OF SELF DEFENSE, THEY’LL BE BETTER AT RESISTING UNWANTED SEXUAL CONTACT FROM MEN THEY KNOW.” **DR. CHARLENE SENN**

knowledge a woman has about her own wants, the more firm her sense of self would be, which would provide her with a firmer sense of resistance,” she said.

According to statistics, more than one in six women will be sexually assaulted in their lifetimes, most by men they know, and the risk is greatest between the ages of 14 and 24, making this a critical time for intervention, she said.

Recent research suggests many young women delay their resistance to unwanted sexual advances because they’re not sure they’re reading the situation correctly, she says. They don’t

want to hurt the man’s feelings, or they’re unsure whether they have the right to say ‘no’ to some sexual activity and say ‘yes’ to others.

Between 2005 and 2008, more than 200 female students at UWindsor received a variety of sexual assault resistance training. Between 2006 and 2007, Senn’s research team compared the effectiveness of the basic sexual assault resistance training program with the enhanced program. The study revealed that combined, both programs cut the number of attempted and completed rapes in half, according to results published last year in the academic journal *Psychology of Women’s Quarterly*.

This fall, the research team will begin to enroll participants at all three universities, with a goal of including more than 1,700. The objective is to establish whether the training can reduce the annual incidence of sexual assault by at least 30 per cent.

“I’m confident that we’ve got the program in good shape,” she said. “We’ve already helped a lot of women here at the University of Windsor. At the end of the five year study, we hope to be able to say this works and that it should be offered to every Canadian campus.” ■