

# How friends can work together to protect against unwanted sexual experiences in the first year of college

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A new study from the University at Buffalo is helping researchers understand how women in their early college years can use friends-based

strategies to help avoid unwanted sexual experiences.

Friends are protective by nature, but this study looked specifically at something called "capable guardianship"—one aspect of friendship that can be especially helpful. Capable guardianship can include having more [friends](#) present in [social situations](#), and not consuming alcohol. These strategies might reduce the possible occurrence of nonconsensual sexual acts, ranging from unwanted touching to rape.

Sexual victimization is a widely studied phenomenon on [college](#) campuses, yet surprisingly little is known about how first-year college [women](#) navigate and respond to this risk. The study's results are particularly significant, considering that perpetrators might target women in this group for a variety of reasons that include inexperience with alcohol, and being new to many of the [social settings](#) that are common in college, according to Jennifer Read, Ph.D., a professor and chair of the University at Buffalo Department of Psychology.

Previous work has explored bystander intervention, which focuses on how others in the social environment might respond to and come to the aid of someone in distress. Yet, the current research shifts that perspective to focus on friends in particular, rather than others in the [social environment](#). Read says friends are more likely to take action than other bystanders, because acting to help someone depends largely on someone's relationship to a potential target and a perceived responsibility for that person's well-being.

"It is enormously important that women understand that by working together they can maximize their protection and safety in these contexts," says Read, co-author of the study led by Jessica A. Blayney, a UB doctoral student in psychology at the time that the research was conducted. "This study can take what women are doing naturally and refine this so that these strategies are being implemented more

consistently and effectively."

The findings published in the journal *Psychology of Women Quarterly* are already being applied in Read's lab for another study involving pairs of friends.

"We're talking to participants about what they see as risks and how they protect one another," says Read. "We're sharing ideas from this current study about interventions that draw on our findings that target situational vulnerabilities and using guardianship factors and friends-based strategies."

The study relied on 132 first-year college women who completed a daily diary that detailed their social activities and the strategies they used to keep themselves safe.

Sticking together, checking on one another and leaving social gatherings together represented the most widely reported protective strategies. Interestingly, monitoring friends' alcohol use was a far less commonly used strategy, a critical finding since alcohol is involved in half of all sexual assaults, according to Read.

The study also found no association between [group size](#) and strategy use, suggesting that the composition of the group may be more important than its size, such as having a greater proportion of female friends in the group.

Read says the strategies that emerged from this study can be used to better understand when and how friends can use protective strategies.

"The other point I'll stress is this misrepresentation that taking steps to reduce the risk of victimization somehow implies the woman is at fault. That is completely false," says Read. "This research is about

understanding a [social context](#) where men are known to act as perpetrators, and what women can do together to be safe.

"This is about empowering women."

**More information:** Jessica A. Blayney et al, Friends-Based Protective Strategies and Unwanted Sexual Experiences: A Daily Diary Examination of First Year College Women, *Psychology of Women Quarterly* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/03616843221085219](https://doi.org/10.1177/03616843221085219)

Provided by University at Buffalo

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