

# Men with 'toxic masculinity' are more likely to make sexual advances without consent, study finds

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No means no when it comes to sex. But what happens when a woman makes a more passive response to a sexual advance? According to new

research from Binghamton University, men differ in how they interpret these types of responses, and men who display hostile masculinity, known commonly as "toxic masculinity," tend to act on them regardless of whether or not they think it's consensual.

A team of researchers, including Binghamton psychology professor Richard Mattson and graduate student Michael Shaw asked men between the ages of 18–25 to respond to hypothetical sexual hookup situations in which a woman responds passively to a sexual advance, meaning the woman does not express any overt verbal or behavioral response to indicate [consent](#) to increase the level of physical intimacy. The team then surveyed how consensual each man perceived the situation to be, as well as how he would likely behave.

The work is [published](#) in the journal *Sex Roles*.

"A passive response to a sexual advance is a normative indicator of consent, but also might reflect distress or fear, and whether men are able to differentiate between the two during a hookup was important to explore," said Mattson.

The team found that men varied in their perception of passive responses in terms of consent and that the level of perceived consent was strongly linked to an increased likelihood of continuing or advancing [sexual behavior](#).

"The biggest takeaway is that men differed in how they interpreted an ambiguous female response to their sexual advances with respect to their perception of consent, which in turn influenced their sexual decisions," said Mattson.

"But certain types of men (e.g., those high in toxic masculine traits) tended to view situations as more consensual and reported that they

would escalate the level of sexual intimacy regardless of whether or not they thought it was consensual."

The researchers noted that hostile masculinity is distinct from toxic masculinity. Hostile masculinity is a specific pathological profile of masculine attitudes and [personality traits](#) that has been repeatedly linked to sexual misconduct.

"Generally, this form of masculinity refers to individuals who experience a need for sexual dominance over women, who are inclined towards violence and hostile attitudes regarding women, and accept rape myths, which are stereotypical beliefs about sexual assault and why it occurs," said Shaw.

"Individuals with high levels of hostile masculinity are distrustful of others in [romantic relationships](#) and prioritize aggressive and 'masculine' interpersonal behaviors for their own security. Other traits such as psychopathy, narcissism, and callous or unemotional orientations towards others tend to regularly present in individuals with hostile masculinity. As a result, individuals with hostile masculinity are at high risk of engaging in sexual assault."

Though passive responses indicating tension or the use of alcohol led to more conservative estimations of consent, men did not seem to entirely rule out escalating the level of sexual intimacy in either case, said Mattson. Moreover, greater levels of intimacy already attained and shared [alcohol consumption](#) were associated with greater estimates of consent, suggesting that how a passive response is interpreted can be influenced by characteristics of the situation.

"Perceptions of consent had less to do with the extant circumstances, and far greater to do with the type of man making the decision," said Mattson.

More specifically, those elevated on toxic masculine traits or that favored impersonal sex tended to perceive the situation as more consensual irrespective of what was specifically occurring. Moreover, toxic masculine characteristics strongly predicted men's decision-making regardless of whether or not they perceived the situation to be consensual.

"Considered together, a passive sexual response from a woman may be interpreted very differently in terms of consent by different kinds of men and in different situations. This is important because these perceptions appear to influence men's sexual decision-making, but our findings support the notion that—in many cases—the men are knowingly transgressive," said Mattson.

Mattson also said that it is important to differentiate traditional masculinity from its toxic counterpart.

"The former entails a host of traits (e.g., emotional resilience) and role expectations (e.g., provider) that can be quite positive; whereas the latter is a narrow set of characteristics including psychopathic tendencies, hostility towards women, and the man's need for affirmation of his masculine bona fides through the domination of weaker or more vulnerable individuals," said Mattson.

"Considered together, it is the preference for self-serving hierarchical relationships, a lack of concern for the well-being of others, and the need to demonstrate one is a 'real man' that link [toxic masculinity](#) to all forms of aggression, including sexual assault."

The researchers are conducting more work in this realm going forward. Shaw is undertaking research that uses brain stimulation and imaging approaches to experimentally test theoretical models of sexual decision-making with a focus on emotional pathways.

**More information:** Samantha L. Anduze et al, Men's Perception of Women's Passive Sexual Responses Impacts Their Decision-Making During Simulated Hookups, *Sex Roles* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s11199-024-01468-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-024-01468-z)

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