

# Helping women overcome the anguish of unwanted sexual advances

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Some young women simply have more resilience and better coping skills and can shrug off the effect of unwanted cat calls, demeaning looks and sexual advances. Women with low resilience struggle and could develop psychological problems when they internalize such behavior, because they think they are to blame. So say Dawn Szymanski and Chandra Feltman of the University of Tennessee in the US, in Springer's journal *Sex Roles*, after studying how female college students handle the sexually objectifying behavior of men.

According to the popular feminist Objectification Theory, [women](#) of most cultures are seen as sexual objects that are there for the pleasure of men's sexual desires. Examples of such conduct include men's visibly scrutinizing a woman's figure or making comments about her body parts, giving whistles or cat calls, [sexual harassment](#), unwanted sexual advances or sexual assault. The media also play a role in these practices when they depict women as mere sexual objects. These experiences contribute to some women's developing mental health problems, such as eating disorders, depressive symptoms and substance abuse problems.

To study how women cope with such sexually oppressive experiences, Szymanski and Feltman studied the responses to an online questionnaire of 270 young adult heterosexual undergraduate women from a university in the Southeastern region of the US.

Their findings show that [young women](#) experience increased [psychological distress](#) when they are being sexually objectified. Women with low resilience are especially vulnerable, and tend to internalize such behavior. Some women feel confused and shameful, and reason that their own inferiority is the cause of such bad experiences. They therefore blame themselves, rather than the perpetrators, and this causes psychological distress.

Szymanski and Feltman surmise that resilient women are more successful at managing adverse experiences because they are able to cope and adapt. They can manage stress and rise above disadvantage. Resilience is both a style of personal functioning and a way in which people ably adapt to stressful situations.

"Resilient women may see gender-related oppressive experiences as challenges - rather than barriers – that can be overcome," says Szymanski.

The University of Tennessee researchers stress that clinicians should explore how their female clients experience and cope with sexually oppressive behavior. Clients can be taught the value of supportive social networks, and how to assign meaning to adversity. Clients should be taught that being objectified is nothing personal, but rather a flawed cultural practice.

"Psychologists can help their female clients to identify and explore various ways by which they can better cope with sexually oppressive behavior. In addition, we need interventions aimed at decreasing individual and cultural practices of

sexually objectifying women," advises Feltman.

**More information:** Szymanski, D. M. & Feltman, C.E. (2014). Experiencing and Coping with Sexually Objectifying Treatment: Internalization and Resilience, *Sex Roles*, [DOI: 10.1007/s11199-014-0392-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-014-0392-6)

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