

IF IT HAPPENS TO YOU: RECOVERING FROM SEXUAL ASSAULT

SEXUAL ASSAULT CAN HAPPEN TO ANYONE

Many people have been victims of rape and other sexual assaults; you are not alone. It is important to remember that it is not your fault. No matter the circumstances, you did not deserve to be raped.

Sexual assault is difficult to think about, much less talk about. You may be feeling shocked, upset, confused or even numb. A sexual assault creates a crisis, for both you and the people closest to you. People handle crises in a variety of ways – there is no right way.

Some people are very outwardly expressive with their feelings and have a need to talk about the assault, while others process their thoughts and feelings in a more inward and private manner. You may choose to talk about it with many people or seek out a few trusted individuals. Talking to someone may help to sort out your thoughts and feelings. For some, talking about the assault is difficult because it makes you anxious and tense. However, we have learned that people who are able to talk about the assault feel the strong emotions and get through them feel better in the long run.

You may experience a range of emotional and physical reactions as a result of the assault. Being sexually assaulted causes a great deal of stress. Our bodies recognize this stress and respond with a wide variety of physical, emotional and behavioral reactions. Typically, the extremely heightened response will slowly diminish over time. When this happens, it is common for survivors to want to distance themselves from any reminder of the sexual assault. This is often referred to as going “underground.” Finally, in the reorganization stage, survivors may return to a period of emotional turmoil and find the need take action to adjust to the reality of the impact of sexual assault.

Researchers Burgess and Holmstrom¹ categorized these common reactions to sexual assault as the Rape Trauma Syndrome:

ACUTE PHASE

You may be very confused and feel that your life is disorganized. You may have difficulty solving problems or making decisions. Though you may feel that there are too many things on your mind right now, remember that this is a time to take special care of yourself. You might want to do something that comforts you, such as making your house more secure or spending time with people who care about you. Physical comforts may also help. Remember not to be hard on yourself and to take each day as it comes.

Nightmares and crying out in your sleep may be very frightening but are normal. Difficulty getting to sleep, or waking up in the night and being unable to get back to sleep are also common. A couple of days without a good night’s sleep can be very trying and will probably increase your irritability and stress. Fatigue and depression may also bring on a general soreness all over your body and a susceptibility to illness.

Many survivors find that it eases their mind to take some kind of action. We all have ways of dealing with stressful situations; you can use the same skills that have helped you through other difficult problems to help you through this one. You might also develop new ways of coping with difficult situations.

It’s likely you have heard statements that blame victims of rape for what happened like, “She asked for it,” or, “It happened because...” Such remarks can make you feel humiliated and ashamed. You may react with feelings of guilt; you might begin to blame and question yourself about what you should or shouldn’t have done to avoid being raped. These are common thinking errors that have an immediate corrective response: the responsibility for sexual assault lies only with the person who sexually assaulted you.

UNDERGROUND PHASE

You may find yourself wanting to avoid any discussion of the assault and wanting to forget it ever happened. Some people make major changes in their lives at this time; others resume usual activities.

There will be times when you feel fine; it will seem that things are going well and you are handling the crisis in the best possible way. The next moment, however, you may find yourself in tears for no apparent reason. Crying spells may worry you but are a good way of releasing tension. Because of the intensity of these feelings, you might experience wide mood swings. As a result, you may be short-tempered with the people you care about most.

ADJUSTMENT PHASE

As you begin to feel that you are back in control your life, you may suddenly be reminded of the assault. This reminder can come weeks, months or even years after the assault. You may feel depressed, anxious and fearful again. Seeing someone who looks like the assailant or receiving a court subpoena can trigger your previous emotional upset. You may develop specific fears related to details of the assault, and have powerful reactions to particular smells, sights or sounds that remind you of what happened. You may be more sensitive to the subject of rape and more aware of the frequency of sexual violence. In this stage, you will find yourself reorganizing your life to accommodate the lingering impact of the assault.

LINGERING SYMPTOMS FROM SEXUAL ASSAULT

You may continue to be afraid long after the initial shock has faded. Fear is a healthy response to being threatened or betrayed. If the assailant was someone you knew, feelings of betrayal may make you fearful of trusting others. If the assailant was a stranger, you can expect to feel angry for a number of reasons. Your anger may be toward the person who hurt you. You might feel bitter at the injustice, or you may feel as though God (or a higher power) has abandoned you. It may seem that the situation is out of your hands. Sometimes anger and fear work together, which may make you wary of other people, as though you are expecting the rapist to be everywhere. Much of your anger may also be directed at yourself and those around you.

Although you may initially be preoccupied with matters related to the assault, later you may be surprised to notice that you have not thought of it for a while. This is an ongoing process. Although you cannot change what has happened, there are ways of integrating the assault into your life experience. You probably will relate differently to people now. You may be more aware of the need for respect and caring between people, particularly in sexual relationships. Your increased sensitivity to coercion or force may change your sexual responses. You may have mixed feelings about intimacy and control, especially in sexual relationships.

If you have never talked with anyone about what happened, you may decide that this is a good time to start. King County Sexual Assault Resource Center provides professional counseling services designed specifically to help people who have experienced sexual assault.

Reducing or eliminating the symptoms that are created as a result of the sexual assault is possible. While the passage of time often lessens the pain, many people have lingering symptoms of trauma or are triggered by things related to the assault. Having difficulty does not mean you have developed serious mental or emotional problems. People adjust from the impact of sexual assault in much the same manner as they adjust from other crises. Therapy, specifically targeted to treat the symptoms, is very effective. Remember, your feelings and experiences are normal – and you are not alone!

ⁱ Burgess, Ann Wolbert; Lynda Lytle Holmström (1974). "Rape Trauma Syndrome". *Am J Psychiatry* 131 (9): 981–986