

After Sexual Assault

You Have Survived a Trauma

Rape and sexual assault are traumatic experiences that may interrupt your life at home, at work, and at school, affecting your relationships with friends, family, and coworkers. You have survived, and now you can begin to recover. Although this process is often slow and confusing, with understanding and persistence you can accomplish a great deal. You have control over how you recover.

The reassurance and support of friends, family, or significant others is very important during this time, but their reaction to your experience may not be what you anticipate or would like it to be. People in your life will react in different ways; some may express blame, others may give you their full support. If you feel ready, you should allow those who offer their support to help you through this period—it will aid you in your recovery process. But the decision to talk about your experience is a personal choice. You do not have to share your experience with anyone until you feel ready.

Facts about Sexual Assault

The first step in recovery is to know the facts. “Sexual assault” is a general term that includes: rape, incest, child molestation, marital rape, date rape, sexual harassment, sodomy, sexual abuse, voyeurism, and indecent exposure. Sexual assault is a violent act committed primarily by a perpetrator who needs to feel powerful and in control by forcing someone else to participate in unwanted sexual activity. Often, the victim fears for his or her life or physical well-being and feels that there is no choice but to do what the attacker wants. But submission does not equal consent. If you submit, it does not mean that you agreed to or accepted the situation. A victim is never responsible for being sexually assaulted. The responsibility for the assault lies with the attacker.

What to Do to Help Yourself

Sexual assault can cause significant trauma and disrupt your physical and emotional health. Your recovery path will take many stages, but the important thing is to take care of yourself.

IMMEDIATE ACTION AFTER BEING SEXUALLY ASSAULTED

After you have been sexually assaulted, it is important to see a doctor before washing or taking a shower so that physical evidence can be collected. Even though you may not feel ready at this time to consider pressing charges against your attacker, the physical evidence will be preserved in case you decide to press charges at a later date.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF PHYSICALLY

The idea of seeing a doctor may seem unpleasant, but it is important for you to see a medical professional. Medical attention will help your immediate physical health and may prevent further damage to your health. You don't have to go alone. Having a family member or friend with you during the examination can help you feel at ease during the procedures. Your Rape Crisis Program counselor may also be able to arrange for an advocate to accompany you. Ask your medical professional to explain what he or she is doing before the examination so that you know what to expect. Make sure your doctor understands your situation. You may be more sensitive than a person who hasn't been assaulted and may need more time and reassurance during medical procedures, no matter how routine. You have the right to interrupt or refuse any medical procedure you do not wish to undergo. You can get treatment for your physical injuries and be tested for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, either at a hospital or by your private doctor. Early detection of STDs is very important. Discuss any medical concerns you have with your doctor or counselor, but do not let concerns and fears prevent you from receiving the medical treatment you need and deserve.

Many rape survivors find that receiving medical attention helps them to regain a sense of control over their bodies.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF EMOTIONALLY

Many rape survivors feel isolated in the aftermath of the assault. In order to reduce those feelings, reach out for support to those who are close to you: call family members, friends, or a Rape Crisis Program counselor. It might help you feel better to have someone to talk to, and you might want people around you so that you feel safe. Consider professional support or counseling. Having someone to talk to about how you are feeling may help you to deal with the emotions you are experiencing. Additionally, a counselor can help you express your needs to others and learn how to get those needs met.

CONSIDER YOUR LEGAL RIGHTS AND KNOW WHAT SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE

One of the most important decisions you may struggle with is whether or not to report the crime to the police. Whether or not you decide to press charges, you deserve support and should know about the range of services available to you. You may report the crime and still decide not to prosecute. You have the right to be notified of judicial proceedings against the accused if you decide to prosecute, and you may submit a victim impact statement when the defendant is sentenced.* There are many other general rights that a victim has, and you should explore these with a counselor or someone you trust who knows the law. * The Rights of Crime Victims, New York State Crime Victims Board (1999)

Your Response to Sexual Assault

Your response to an assault may cover a wide range of physical and emotional symptoms, even some that may not seem to result directly from the attack. Learning to recognize these responses will help you gain control of them. You may experience these symptoms immediately or later in your life, or you may never experience any of them. Every survivor responds differently. You may even experience some symptoms that are not on this list.

POSSIBLE PHYSICAL RESPONSES AND SYMPTOMS

Muscle tension	Shortness of breath	Gynecological disturbances
Flashbacks	Nightmares Fatigue	Involuntary shaking
Sexual dysfunction	Pain Injury	Changes in sleeping and eating patterns

POSSIBLE EMOTIONAL RESPONSES AND SYMPTOMS

Feeling dirty	Anxiety	Shame	Feeling of loss of control over one's life
Relief	Fear	Grief	Irritability
Suicidal thoughts	Denial	Anger	Preoccupation with safety
Guilt or self-blame	Apprehension	Feeling stuck	Changes in perception of the world
Crying or inability to cry	Shock/numbness		Depression
Loss of trust	Indecision		Embarrassment

Counseling

Sexual assault can change your feelings about yourself and those around you. You may not feel the way you did before the assault—physically, emotionally, socially, or sexually. Counseling can help you deal with these issues and aid you in your recovery.

INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING

Safe Horizon's Rape Crisis Program counselors will listen, clarify, support, and explore options with you. Individual counseling sessions with a supportive counselor can help you identify issues you would like to resolve surrounding the assault. Together, you will develop appropriate and attainable goals for yourself.

GROUP COUNSELING

Group counseling will give you the opportunity to share your feelings with other survivors, and although each person recovers at a different pace, group counseling provides an environment in which survivors can share their experiences along with their techniques for recovery. Many group members find inspiration and motivation in the stories of other victims and get a unique kind of support that helps them return to the lives they led before the assault.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

If you have experienced a sexual assault, you may be left with painful wounds that are invisible to others but very real to you. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can occur when people experience terrifying situations that they cannot control. In cases of sexual assault, symptoms can include all of the responses listed previously. These symptoms can intrude into your daily life and prevent you from working, maintaining relationships, or completing everyday tasks. If you feel this is happening, you may want to seek help. A counselor can help you identify and overcome PTSD, which is a normal reaction to a violent assault.

VICTIMS WITH PTSD MIGHT ENCOUNTER:

- Intrusive flashbacks, dreams, dwelling on the assault
- Persistent or intense distress, anxiety, panic attacks, stress, sleep disturbance, irritability, fear, including anger, apprehension, indecision, difficulty in concentrating, being easily startled, heightened awareness, and sensitivity
- Feelings of detachment, feeling like you are a different person now
- Persistent avoidance of people, places, things associated with the assault
- Ambivalence or uncertainty about the future
- Avoidance of normal daily activity
- Depression
- Reliving the event as if it were still occurring

Some Additional Information

The following list may help you feel better about your experience since the assault:

- Accept that many of your responses are normal even if they do not feel comfortable. • Coping means different things to different people. Develop a routine that is comfortable for you and that has a positive outcome. Having a routine can be very stabilizing in the face of traumatic stress.
- Recognize that your assault will also affect others around you and that their reactions may vary.
- Take care of your health. A regular diet can lead to well-being. Sugar and caffeine can increase your stress level. Alcohol and drugs may delay some reactions and ultimately make them worse.
- If you find you are abusing alcohol or drugs, you should see a counselor immediately.
- Allow time for adequate amounts of rest and relaxation. Some techniques to consider are meditation, deep breathing, listening to music, reading, religious rituals, or anything that focuses and relaxes you.

- Physical activity is a great stress-reducer, even a short walk. Try to work some exercise into your daily routine.
- We all need people. Social contact can make you feel less isolated and more connected. Supportive listeners can include friends, family, religious leaders, teachers, professional counselors, or counseling groups.

Recovery takes time. Patience and understanding are important in the recovery process. In addition to the support of friends, family, and loved ones, there are also professional counselors and Rape Crisis Program personnel who can assist you. Safe Horizon's Rape Crisis Program has trained counselors who can play an important role in your healing process.

Survivor's Measure of Growth*

Use the checklist below to measure your recovery and to help you develop your own list of goals.

I acknowledge that something terrible happened to me.

I am beginning to deal with my feelings about the assault.

I am angry about what was done to me but recognize that my anger is not a constant part of my feelings. It intrudes into other parts of my life in a negative way.

I can talk about the assault experience with a counselor or a therapist.

I am beginning to understand my feelings about the assault.

I can give responsibility for the assault to the person who attacked me. The responsibility is not mine to accept.

I could not have prevented the assault, and I recognize that I did the best I could to get through it.

I am developing a sense of my own self-value and am increasing my self-esteem.

I am comfortable with choices I make for myself.

I am developing a sense of being at ease with the subject of my assault.

I recognize that I have a choice about whether or not to forgive my assailant(s).

I recognize that I have begun to get back control in my life, that the assailant does not have power over me.

I recognize that I have the right to regain control.

*From the New York City Task Force Against Sexual Assault