

After Sexual Assault

Sexual assault is a trauma that threatens our sense of safety in the world. There are a range of responses that survivors have, and these can cause survivors to fear that they're going crazy. There is nothing wrong with you; these are normal responses to abnormal situations.

If you were sexually assaulted years ago, you may question why your reactions are still strong, or may have been told you should be "over it" by now. There is no time limit on the trauma caused by sexual assault, however, and you can ask for help in healing and managing the effects on your life. Sharing with other survivors can help to "normalize" the effects and reduce the sense of isolation, as well as being a source of suggestions for coping and healing.

You are most welcome to join and post on Pandora's Aquarium (www.pandys.org/forums) about effects you've experienced - chances are somebody else has been there and come through! Counselling can also help you, and there are a range of good books on recovering from sexual assault.

Survivors in general may experience some of the following:

- Nightmares about the sexual assault, or that contain the same feelings of dread and powerlessness
- Flashbacks - mental pictures, emotions, smells or physical feelings associated with assaults
- Triggers - situations, words, objects or other that remind you of the sexual assault and may cause you to feel as if it's happening all over.
- A sense that they will never feel clean again
- Fear and mistrust of men if the perpetrator was male, ditto for women or members of ethnic groups to which the perpetrator belonged
- A range of physical symptoms, such as headaches, nausea or back pain
- Powerlessness and sense of a loss of control over your world
- Sexual dysfunction
- Eating disorders such as Anorexia or bulimia

Male Rape

Despite myths that deny the problem of sexual assault against men and boys, one out of six survivors feel the effects for decades later. These boys will be sexually assaulted by the time he is 18. Male survivors of child sexual abuse or adult rape may have specific responses such as:

- Fear of telling – even if the abuse happened a long time ago, the abuser’s threats about telling can still feel very real
- Shame as a result of society’s expectations that boys and men “should” be able to protect themselves
- Isolation because of myths that sexual assault doesn’t happen to boys or men □ Fear of ridicule and disbelief if the abuser was a woman.
- Fear that people will think they’re gay and somehow invited the assault if the perpetrator was male

Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is a sadly common phenomenon. It may have been once or many times, and some survivors feel the effects for decades later. These effects may include:

- A feeling of being childlike
- A feeling that abuse is a necessary cost of being loved, if an abuse cloaks the abuse in affection
- A feeling that sex is all they’re good for, or that they should have indiscriminate sex with people who don’t value them
- A feeling of worthlessness that they were not protected
- Teenage pregnancy
- Aggressive “acting out” as a way of proving themselves