

Feelings after sexual assault

Each individual victim of sexual assault has their own personal and private experience. The way they respond to the assault is determined by a multitude of factors. However, just as there are common patterns of sexual assault, there are common responses to sexual assault. These responses will be experienced by most victim/survivors at some point in time.

Powerlessness and loss of control

"I feel so helpless. Will I ever be in control again?"

All forms of sexual violation involve a wrestling of power from the victim.

Emotional numbness

"I feel so numb. Why am I so calm? Why can't I cry?"

After an assault has occurred, many victims experience periods of emotional numbness which is a shock response. This response is often misinterpreted by those around them. For example, it may be taken as an indication that they are in control of the situation, are calm and relatively unharmed, or even that they are fabricating their experience of the assault. However, emotional numbness is not an uncommon reaction to severe trauma. It should be interpreted as a victim's 'front line' defence against the overwhelming reality that they have been sexually assaulted.

Denial

"Was it really sexual assault? I'm okay. I'll be alright."

Following the initial shock of the assault, or even months later, a victim may deny to others or to themselves that they have been assaulted. They try to suppress the memory of what has happened in an attempt to regain the previous stability of their lives. Denial also plays a part in the ranking of types of sexual assault. For instance, some victims may feel that if the offender did not penetrate them they were not sexually assaulted, or alternatively, if the offender did not ejaculate then it was not as bad etc. It must be remembered that sexual assault exists on a continuum and that all forms of sexual harassment and violation are experienced as threatening and can have devastating consequences for the victim.

Disturbed sleep

Survivors of sexual assault often experience sleepless nights and/or nightmares. The nightmare may involve reliving the assault/s which indicates that they have unresolved issues pertaining to the assault. As the healing process continues, the nightmares or sleepless nights will become less frequent.

Flashbacks

Memories of the assault often return without warning. Sometimes these flashbacks will be so vivid that the victim feels as if they have re-lived the experience of assault. This is not the result of irreversible psychological damage or an indicator of insanity. They represent a trauma response which, like nightmares, will decrease as issues are resolved and the healing process progresses.

Guilt/self blame

"I feel as if I did something to make this happen. If only I hadn't....."

Victims of sexual assault may feel that they could have avoided it by acting differently. These sort of reactions are often strongly linked to the myths about sexual assault that prevail in the community which frequently blame the victim rather than the offender. The behaviour and reactions of friends, family, police, lawyers and social workers may reinforce the victim's own feeling that s/he 'asked for it'. The victim may also feel guilty that they have brought shame on their family and themselves by talking about it or reporting it to the police. Similarly, if they believe they could have resisted more forcefully they may also feel at fault. This is particularly true for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse who tend to see themselves as they are now, as adults rather than as they were at the time of the abuse.

The offender is always at fault, never the victim. Nothing a victim does is 'asking for it'. Equally, the victim's strategies for surviving the assault are issues for affirmation, not condemnation.

Feelings after sexual assault

Embarrassment/shame

"I feel so dirty, like there is something wrong with me now. Can you tell that I've been raped? What will people think?"

Many people who have been sexually assaulted feel intensely ashamed and embarrassed. They often feel dirty and in some way 'marked for life'. This reaction may prevent victims from speaking out about the assault. Cultural background factors can intensify such feelings. Underpinning these reactions is the internalisation of the myths pertaining to sexual assault.

Loss of confidence

"I feel I can't do anything any more....even the simplest things."

The experience of assault exposes the victim to the stark reality that they cannot always protect themselves no matter how hard they try. The assault is not only an invasion of the victim's physical self but also the intellectual, social and emotional self. The experience of assault brings vulnerability issues to the fore, which can devastate self-confidence and destroy assumptions about the world and your place within it.

Mood changes

"I feel like I'm going crazy!"

After the assault the victims emotions may swing from intense emotional pain to complete numbness. They may feel depressed, restless or deflated, confused or stridently angry. Feeling at the whim of emotions over which they have no control may make them believe they are psychologically unstable or crazy. These mood changes are 'normal' and understandable responses to trauma. As you continue to work through the issues arising from the assault these reactions will subside.

Low self-esteem

"I'm disgusted by myself, by the memories. I'm just worthless."

Given that sexual assault disempowers, humiliates and degrades victims's it is not surprising that victims often experience low self esteem.

Depression

"How am I going to go on? I feel so tired and hopeless."

Many victim's of sexual violation suffer periods of depression. It may take the form of inertia, fear, anxiety or self hatred, numbness, loss of appetite, disturbed sleep or include other physical indications of stress. Often associated with depression is a sense of meaninglessness. After being assaulted many of a victims previous assumptions about themselves, their rights and expectations lose their meaning leaving them feeling totally undermined.

Fear

"I'm constantly jumpy. A sudden noise, an angry voice, moving bushes and I am afraid."

During an assault many victims fear for their lives. Often this fear is a direct result of the offender's threats. After the assault, a victim may be fearful of the dark, being alone or going out by themselves. They may experience fear generated by the possibility of pregnancy or STD's or live in fear of running onto the offender again or facing them in court. All of these fears are very real concerns.

Anxiety

"I feel so tense. I'm a nervous wreck."

Survivors of sexual assault often experience severe anxiety which may manifest in physical symptoms such as difficulties in breathing, muscle tension, nausea, stomach cramps or headaches. These symptoms can be eased as they gradually deal with the issues underlying the stress, and employ relevant stress management strategies.

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Hostility

Many victims of sexual assault experience feelings of hostility towards the gender of their offenders. For example, women who have been sexually assaulted may experience feelings of hostility towards, and a fear of men. These feelings may be directed against a specific person, such as the offender, or generalised to other men. Feelings of hostility may also include a friend or relative whom the victim feels should have protected them or given them more support. It must be recognised that given their experiences, the victim's reactions are quite justified and often these feelings of hostility represent the beginning of a natural, positive emotion rather than a negative one. It indicates that the victim is beginning to view the world and themselves in a different way, consequently placing less trust in what could be abusive relationships. It also indicates that the victim is not placing the entire blame for the assault on themselves but is recognising that the offender was responsible.

Anger

"I want to kill him; I hate him, everything, everyone."

Anger is a difficult emotion for most people. Culturally, we are discouraged from expressing anger and it is most frequently displaced rather than directed at the appropriate target. The victim's anger towards their offender is more than justified. They may also be angry at the response they receive from others to whom they disclose.

Sexual confidence

"I just can't bear to be touched"

The experience of sexual assault has a direct impact on a victim's sexual confidence and interest. They have experienced sexual expression linked to aggression, hostility, derision, arrogance, force, domination, insensitivity and coldness. Often it is difficult to free one's mind of these associations and feel comfortable enough to re-establish or begin a sexual relationship. It is important that the victim's partner understand that they will need to allow the victim to be in control of any sexual activity and therefore, the one to initiate it. It is essential to long-term recovery that the victim is not pressured into sexual intimacy.

Alienation/isolation

Feelings of differentness, alienation, isolation and despair are often experienced by sexual assault survivors if they are unable to share their experiences with others. Societal norms prevent many victims from speaking out about their experience of sexual assault and many victims, women in particular, have few avenues for personal communication. This is particularly the case for victims assaulted by their partners or acquaintances. Likewise, victims from Non English Speaking backgrounds may be denied access to mainstream support systems. Victims with a disability may also be unable to voice their experience to others due to the nature of their disability.