



Common Reactions of Sexual Assault Survivors

There is no “typical” response to sexual assault. Survivors of sexual assault may vary dramatically in their response to other people. Some survivors may appear very calm and describe the assault with little or no emotion. Other survivors may express feelings verbally or by shaking, crying, restlessness, or tenseness. Remember, sexual assault survivors have just experienced a traumatic event. Any response to the assault—whether it looks like the right response to you—is their way of dealing with the sexual assault. Survivors of sexual assault report feeling a number of different emotions after the assault.

Shock

Many people experience a state of shock after being sexually assaulted. They may go through a period of numbness, disbelief or denial, feeling detached from their lives etc. They may exhibit these feelings by laughing or crying uncontrollably, shaking or just feeling completely overwhelmed.

Fear

Most people who are sexually assaulted—whether by a stranger or an acquaintance—just want to live through the experience. During the attack, many report feeling that their life was in danger even if physical force or a weapon were not used. Rapists often scare their target into silence by threatening to kill them or returning if they tell anyone what happened. Fear of another attack under these circumstances is both rational and normal. They are not crazy or paranoid to fear the rapist or the possibility of being assaulted again. Encourage them to develop a plan on what to do if the rapist returns. Do they think he’ll come back? If so, how can they protect themselves (e.g. possible escape routes from every room in the house, talking with neighbors to have them call the police if they hear screams or see his vehicle, etc.). The more they talk about their safety plans, the better off they will be. Many sexual assault survivors begin to fear people in general. The process of restoring self-confidence is particularly difficult for the victim when the attacker was someone they trusted or loved. In this case, their faith and trust in their own judgment may also be threatened by the sexual assault. Over time and with support, they will regain trust in themselves and others.

Guilt

A survivor’s feelings of guilt and self-blame will have an effect on their decision to reach out for help. Many people have internalized the idea that the victims are to blame for sexual assault. No matter how strongly you believe sexual assault is not the victim’s fault, it is important to let them talk and help them define in precise terms what they feel they did “wrong.” They may feel they provoked the attack through appearance or behavior. They may also feel responsible for ‘not knowing any better’ or not paying attention to “gut instincts” they may have had prior to the sexual assault. They may not even identify what happened as sexual assault. Regardless of their actions, they are not to be blamed for the crime committed against them.

Feelings of guilt seem to vary depending on the extent of physical injury and the type of prior relationship with the rapist. People who have experienced severe physical injury during the sexual assault may feel less responsibility because there is obvious evidence of their injuries and/or resistance. These survivors may resolve their guilt more quickly. Survivors of a stranger sexual assault may also have diminished feelings of guilt.

Loss of Control Over Their Life

Before the assault, they may have believed that sexual assault could never happen to them, that they would be able to resist, or that they could take care of themselves. Since the rapist overcame their resistance by coercion, force or fear, they may no longer feel confident about themselves or their ability to protect themselves.

Survivors could experience changes in eating or sleeping habits, depression or anxiety, flashbacks, nightmares, etc. This becomes a disruption of their daily lives and routines. Helping them identify these changes and seeking help for them can help them regain control over their lives. Sometimes even little decisions become momentous. The survivor has to reclaim themselves and reassert the value of doing things for themselves. They have to insist that they are worthwhile and that they still have control over their life.

Embarrassment

In American society, our body and sexual activity have always been regarded as private. This privacy has been stripped from them by the rapist. Not surprisingly, many survivors feel embarrassed about the assault. Many rapists use offensive sexual language. They may be uncomfortable or embarrassed to say these words. If the sexual assault involved sexual acts that they may perceive as being “deviant” (e.g., anal or oral penetration), they may have a harder time finding the words to describe what has happened to them.

The medical exam can be especially violating and traumatic. Their body is again exposed and is an object of attention and inspection by strangers. They are likely to feel that their body, appearance, and even whole being is offensive and disgusting. They may be too embarrassed to admit their uneasiness and discomfort during the exam. Help them recognize that any person would be embarrassed under these circumstances. What they are feeling is normal.

Anxiety, Shaking, Nightmares

After the attack, many survivors react by shaking and appearing anxious. The relief of having survived and the thought of how close to death they were are expressed in this way. They may have nightmares and relive the incident. They rethink what they could have done and what the rapist could have done. Continued support and reassurance that they are physically safe will help reduce these feelings.

Concern for the Rapist

If the rapist was someone the victim knew or cared about, they may express concern about what will happen if they report the attack to the police. They may have very negative attitudes toward the criminal justice system and may feel guilty reporting the crime. Some survivors want counseling for the rapist rather than jail time.

Wondering - Why Me?

Some people wonder why the rapist chose them. These feelings arise from the common misconception that sexual assault happens to people who “ask for it,” or who in some other way made themselves noticeable. It may help to know that anyone can be sexually assaulted. To help the survivor see this, ask them to tell you what happened before the sexual assault and to describe what the rapist did at this time. Did the rapist break into their home? Did he tell all their friends he would make sure the survivor got home safely? Looking back, they may be able to see that he had been planning the assault for a long time, waiting until he had the opportunity to act. In short, remind them that the rapist made the decision to assault them.

Shame

The destruction of self-respect, the deliberate efforts by the attacker to make them do things against their will, may make them feel dirty, disgusting and ashamed. That they “allowed” the sexual assault to

happen at all, even if they were frightened of serious injury or death, may also make them feel ashamed. Society's attitudes towards sex and different sexual acts are all reflected in their shame. The survivor who feels they have been violated needs to see the sexual assault as an attack, not their choice. Remind them that they had no choice and did everything possible to survive.

Feelings of shame may also affect their decision to report the crime to the police or to reach out for help. Because of actions which occurred prior to the assault (e.g. hitchhiking, drinking) they may believe others will blame them. They may also believe their previous sexual experiences and details of the assault will be scrutinized.

Anger

Anger is a healthy response to being sexually assaulted. They may be angry at themselves for their "bad" choices. It is also common for sexual assault survivors to generalize and extend their anger to the people who are trying to help them. It is important for them to direct this anger in an appropriate way—at the assailant. By being angry with their assailant and the situation, the survivor is letting go of feelings of responsibility for the assault. They can vent this anger in several ways, such as pressing charges, telling other people about the attacker, or the situation leading up to the attack.

Sexual assault is a terrifying experience. Survivors need calm, reassuring, unconditional support. They are not crazy and with time, the sexual assault will be incorporated into their life experience and their dignity, trust, and self-respect will be restored.

For more information, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/sexualviolence/index.html> or the Rape, Incest, and Abuse National Network at www.rainn.org