



## Some Common Reactions and Responses to Sexual Assault 2014

People who experience rape or sexual assault react in different ways. There is no right or wrong way to feel and no set time for when a person should start to feel better. People will draw on their own unique strengths and skills to survive and cope with rape or sexual assault. There are some common reactions that you may experience at some point in time. These responses are sometimes referred to as Rape Trauma Syndrome and outline a number of stages that you may go through in your recovery process. By identifying and describing some of these reactions and responses you may gain the strength to feel more in control, and recognise that your feelings and reactions are quite normal.

### Acute phase:

In the immediate period following rape or sexual assault you may experience a wide range of emotional reactions, which are natural responses resulting from a traumatic and possibly life threatening situation. These reactions usually last a few days to a few weeks, but can endure far longer. Shock is a common reaction following rape or sexual assault, and may include feelings of acute distress and severe anxiety. You may cry a lot or feel quite numb and appear calm and withdrawn. Your body may also respond with trauma symptoms including nausea, sweating, shaking, tension headaches, fatigue, loss of appetite and disturbed sleep. Other common feelings and reactions experienced during this stage may include fear, guilt, shame, anger, nightmares, flashbacks, betrayal, disbelief and revenge. Your usual coping strategies and sense of control over your life are often overwhelmed by the experience. You may feel quite powerless.

### Outward adjustment:

The second phase that many people go through is referred to as outward adjustment. Outward adjustment does not mean that you are "over" the experience of rape or sexual assault, but that the emotional turmoil and immediate anxiety may have subsided. You may feel you are ready to return to work or school and to see friends, family or co-workers. There is nothing wrong with wanting to "carry on as normal" and regain control over your life. It is important you take some time for yourself, to be cared for and not to expect too much of yourself. You may still be experiencing some of the same emotions felt immediately after the rape or sexual assault, as described earlier. It is not uncommon for feelings of depression, fear, loss of confidence, nightmares and flashbacks to last for quite some time.

### Triggers:

If the rape or sexual assault was reported to the police Sexual Assault & Child Offences Investigation Team (SOCIT) you may have ongoing involvement with SOCIT during the investigation. You may also be required to appear in court if the offender is charged. The court process may trigger the intense emotions and anxiety experienced just after the rape or sexual assault. It is important that you have access to accurate information about legal proceedings to support you through this often difficult process.

### Counselling and Support:

You can make an appointment to speak with a CASA counsellor who will provide you with information and support to assist you in making choices and decisions for yourself. The counsellor will offer ongoing counselling for you and your family members or friends. Counselling following rape or sexual assault will support you in processing the experience and regaining control over your life.

### What is the impact of sexual assault?

The impact of sexual assault on the lives of victims is multifaceted and complex. It includes emotional, social, psychological, legal, health, spiritual, economic and political consequences.

Barwon CASA

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Sexual Assault Crisis Line 24x7: 1800 806 292

Recovery from sexual assault is influenced by a range of factors reflecting positions of men, women and children in society and the power differences between them. These include difference of gender, culture, ethnicity, age, sexuality, religion, ability, disability and socio economic class.

### **Some Common Reactions You May Experience:**

#### **Feelings of powerlessness and loss of control:**

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

#### **Emotional numbness:**

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

#### **Denial:**

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

#### **Disturbed sleep:**

Survivors of sexual assault often experience disturbed sleep, sleepless nights and nightmares.

#### **Flashbacks:**

Memories of the assault often return without warning.

#### **Guilt and self blame:**

'I know I did something to make this happen. If only I hadn't...'

#### **Embarrassment and shame:**

'I feel so dirty. What will people think?' 'This doesn't happen to men.' 'I can't tell anyone.'

#### **Loss of confidence:**

'I can't do anything anymore, even the simplest things.'

#### **Mood changes:**

'I feel like I'm going crazy!'

#### **Low self-esteem:**

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

#### **Depression:**

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

#### **Fear:**

'I'm constantly jumpy. A sudden noise, an angry voice, a shadow and I'm scared, I'm terrified.'

#### **Anxiety:**

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

#### **Anger:**

'I want to kill him; I hate him, I hate everything, and everyone.'

#### **Loss of sexual Confidence:**

'I just can't bear to be touched, or looked at.'

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