



## Common Reactions and what can Help after a Sexual Assault

### Following are some of the reactions a person may experience after a sexual abuse:

- Emotional Shock: I feel so numb. Why am I so calm? Why can't I cry?
- Disbelief: Did it really happen? Why me? Maybe I just made it up.
- Embarrassment: What will people think? I can't tell my family or friends.
- Shame: I feel so dirty, like there is something wrong with me. I want to wash my hands or shower all the time.
- Guilt: I feel as if it's my fault, or I did something to make this happen.
- Depression: How am I going to get through this semester? I'm so tired. I feel so helpless. Maybe I'd be better off dead.
- Powerlessness: Will I ever feel in control again?
- Disorientation: I don't even know what day it is, or what class I'm supposed to be in. I can't remember my appointments. I keep forgetting things.
- Triggers: I keep having flashbacks. I'm still re-living it. I see his face all the time.
- Denial: It wasn't really a "rape."
- Fear: I'm scared of everything. How can I ever feel safe again? Do people realize there's anything wrong? I can't sleep because I know I'll have nightmares. I'm afraid I'm going crazy. I'm afraid to go outside.
- I'm afraid to be alone.
- Anxiety: I'm having panic attacks. I can't breathe! I just can't stop shaking. I can't sit still in class anymore. I feel overwhelmed.
- Anger: I want to kill the person who attacked me!
- Physical Stress: My stomach (or head or back) aches all the time. I feel jittery and don't feel like eating.

### Following are some of the things that could be helpful after a sexual assault:

Remember that no matter how much difficulty you're having dealing with the assault, it does not mean you're "going crazy" or becoming "mentally ill." The recovery process may actually help you develop strengths, insights and abilities that you never had (or never knew you had) before.

Talking about the assault will help you feel better, but may also be really hard to do. In fact, it's common to want to avoid conversations and situations that may remind you of the assault. You may have a sense of wanting to "get on with life" and "let the past be the past." This is a normal part of the recovery process and may last for weeks or months. Eventually you will need to deal with fears and feelings in order to heal and regain a sense of control over your life. Talking with someone who can listen in understanding and affirming ways—whether it's a friend, family member, victim services, a hotline staff member or counselor – can be very helpful in the healing process.

**Remember - You are not to blame, no matter what, not even if:**

- Your attacker was an acquaintance, date, friend or spouse.
- You have been sexually intimate with that person or with others before.
- You were drinking or using drugs.
- You froze and did not or could not say "no," or were unable to fight back physically.
- You were wearing clothes that others may see as seductive.
- You were flirting with your attacker or had been interested in them.

**Ways to Take Care of Yourself:**

**Get Support**

- Get support from friends and family-try to identify people you trust to validate your feelings and affirm your strengths.
- Talk about the assault and express feelings-choose when, where, and with whom to talk about the assault, and set limits by only disclosing information that feels safe for you to reveal.

**Release Stress & Anger in Healthy Ways**

- Use stress reduction techniques - hard exercise like jogging, aerobics, walking; relaxation techniques like yoga, massage, music, hot baths; prayer and/or meditation.
- Maintain a balanced diet and sleep cycle as much as possible and avoid overusing stimulants like caffeine, sugar, and nicotine.
- Discover your playful and creative "self." Playing and creativity are important for healing from hurt. Find time for noncompetitive play, start or resume a creative activity like piano, painting, gardening, handicrafts, etc.
- Take "time outs." Give yourself permission to take quiet moments to reflect, relax and rejuvenate-especially during times you feel stressed or unsafe.
- Try reading. Reading can be a relaxing, healing activity.
- Try to find short periods of uninterrupted leisure reading time.
- Consider writing or keeping a journal as a way of expressing thoughts and feelings.
- Release some of the hurt and anger in a healthy way: Write a letter to your attacker about how you feel about what happened to you. Be as specific as you can. You can choose to send the letter or not. You also can draw pictures about the anger you feel for your attacker as a way of releasing the emotional pain.
- Hug those you love. Hugging releases the body's natural painkillers.

Remember you are safe, even if you don't feel it. The assault is over. You will feel better in time even if it takes longer than you think.

**Every person is unique, but many people who have been sexually assaulted have some of the same feelings that you may be having. The following tips for recovery were made by survivors. Some of them may work for you.**

- Take time to be kind to yourself. It takes time to overcome a trauma. Do not feel as though you must be healed right away. Give yourself time.
- Keep a journal. This is a wonderful way to help work through your thoughts. You can also look

back on it and see patterns that need to be changed. It can also show you how much healing you have done.

- You may have flashbacks. Hold on to something—maybe a table or even a friend. Take a deep breath, and exhale slowly. Focus on what is going on around you that you can see and touch. Keep doing this until you feel better.
- When you feel anxiety climbing to the uppermost limit, stop what you are doing. Look around you. If you do not feel safe, go to a safe place immediately. When you are safe, try to concentrate on breathing out very slowly. Do this several times until you feel better. Resist the urge to rush, and just concentrate on breathing out slowly and relaxing.
- If you have a nightmare, turn on all the lights and/or calming music. If you live with someone, you can ask them to do it for you.
- When you get angry, don't be afraid of it. Rip an old newspaper to shreds. Stomp all over a pillow. Run in place. Throw safe objects that aren't breakable into other safe spaces, yell, scream into your pillow. Do whatever it takes to get the anger out. Don't hold it in.
- Make yourself comfortable and relaxed. Take soothing warm baths scented with your favorite bubble bath, listen to soft relaxing music. Fix yourself a mug of tea or coffee and sip it slowly. Hug a teddy bear or favorite stuffed animal.
- Get support, support, support. Find someone who will listen. Sometimes a professional counselor is very helpful.

*Adapted from Hope for Healing. Check out more recovery tips that are suggested by other survivors at:  
<http://www.hopeforhealing.org/tips.html>*