

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 many 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 wresting 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. This is a shock response, and 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 all right."

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 sorts 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.

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 victim's 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 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 victims of sexual assault 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 victim's 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.