

Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault

(ECASA)



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The aftermath of sexual assault: Am I supposed to feel this way?

Whether you're a man or a woman, sexual assault is a trauma. The trauma of sexual assault involves losing control of your own body and possibly fearing death or injury. There are certain ways that human beings react to trauma that are the same for men and women. "Rape trauma syndrome" is a term that mental health professionals use to describe the common reactions that occur for both men and women after sexual assault. "Rape trauma syndrome" is not an illness or abnormal reaction - it is a normal reaction to an abnormal, traumatic event.

Below is a checklist of common reactions to sexual assault. Though each person and situation is unique, this checklist will help you to know the range of reactions that are **normal** to expect. Of course, there are also ways that men are affected differently than women by sexual assault.

Following the list of *universal* reactions to sexual assault, we'll delve into some of the reactions to sexual assault that are more unique to men.

Checklist of Universal Reactions to Sexual Assault

- **Emotional Shock:** I feel numb. How can I be so calm? Why can't I cry?
- **Disbelief and/or Denial:** Did it really happen? Why me? Maybe I just imagined it. It wasn't really rape.
- **Embarrassment:** What will people think? I can't tell my family or friends.
- **Shame:** I feel completely filthy, like there's something wrong with me. I can't get clean.
- **Guilt:** I feel as if it's my fault, or I should've been able to stop it. If only I had...
- **Depression:** How am I going to get through this

month? I'm so tired! I feel so hopeless. 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 I'm supposed to be doing. I keep forgetting things.
- **Flashbacks:** I'm still re-living the assault! I keep seeing that face and feeling like it's happening all over again.
- **Fear:** I'm scared of everything. What if I have herpes or AIDS? I can't sleep because I'll have nightmares. I'm afraid to go out. I'm afraid to be alone.
- **Anxiety:** I'm having panic attacks. I can't breathe! I can't stop shaking. I feel overwhelmed.
- **Anger:** I feel like killing 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.

Unique Issues Faced By Male Survivors

There is great societal denial of the fact that men get sexually assaulted. Chances are - except for the occasional bad prison joke - most of us don't ever hear about the topic of male sexual assault.

The need to deny the existence of male sexual assault is partly rooted in the mistaken belief that men are immune to being victimised, that they should be able to fight off any attacker if they are truly a "real man." A closely related belief is that men can't be forced into sex - either they want it or they don't.

These mistaken beliefs allow lots of men to feel safe and invulnerable, and to think of sexual assault as something that only happens to women. Unfortunately, these beliefs can also increase the pain that is felt by a male survivor of sexual assault. These beliefs leave the male survivor feeling isolated, ashamed, and "less of a man."

No wonder so few men actually get help after being sexually assaulted. The fact is that only 5 to 20% of all victims of sexual assault actually report the crime - the percentage for male victims is probably lower. Feelings of shame, confusion and self-blame leave many men suffering in silence after being sexually assaulted.

Unique problems and concerns that male survivors may experience

For most men the idea of being a victim is very hard to handle. We're raised to believe that a man should be able to defend himself against all odds, or that he should be willing to risk his life or severe injury to protect his pride and self-respect. How many movies or TV shows have you seen in which the "manly" hero is prepared to fight a group of huge guys over an insult or name-calling? Surely, you're supposed to fight to the death over something like unwanted sexual advances ... right?

These beliefs about "manliness" and "masculinity" are deeply ingrained in most of us and can lead to intense feelings of guilt, shame and inadequacy for the male survivor of sexual assault. Many male survivors may even question whether they deserved or somehow wanted to be sexually assaulted because, in their minds, they failed to defend themselves. Male survivors frequently see their assault as a loss of manhood and get disgusted with themselves for not "fighting back."

These feelings are normal but the *thoughts* attached to them aren't necessarily true. Remind yourself that you did what seemed best at the time to survive-there's nothing unmasculine about that. As a result of their guilt, shame and anger some men punish themselves by getting into self-destructive behaviour after being sexually assaulted. For lots of men, this means increased alcohol or drug use. For others, it means increased aggressiveness, like arguing with friends or co-workers or even picking fights with strangers.

Many men pull back from relationships and wind up feeling more and more isolated. It's easy to see why male survivors of sexual assault are at increased risk for getting depressed, getting into trouble at work, getting physically hurt, or developing alcohol and drug problems.

Many male survivors also develop sexual difficulties after being sexually assaulted. It may be difficult to resume sexual relationships or start new ones because sexual contact may trigger flashbacks, memories of the assault, or just plain bad feelings.

It can take time to get back to normal so don't pressure yourself to be sexual before you're ready.

For heterosexual men, sexual assault almost always causes some confusion or questioning about their sexuality. Since many people believe that only gay men are sexually assaulted, a heterosexual survivor may begin to believe that he must be gay or that he will become gay.

Furthermore, perpetrators often accuse their victims of enjoying the sexual assault, leading some survivors to question their own experiences.

In fact, being sexually assaulted has **nothing** to do with sexual orientation, past, present or future.

People do not "become gay" as a result of being sexually assaulted.

For gay men, sexual assault can lead to feelings of self-blame and self-loathing attached to their sexuality. There is already enough homophobic sentiment in society to make many gay men suffer from internal conflicts about their sexuality. Being sexually assaulted may lead a gay man to believe he somehow "deserved it," that he was "paying the price" for his sexual orientation. Unfortunately, this self-blame can be reinforced by the ignorance or intolerance of others who blame the victim by suggesting that a gay victim somehow provoked the assault or was less harmed by it because he was gay. Gay men may also hesitate to report a sexual assault due to fears of blame, disbelief or intolerance by police or medical personnel. As a result gay men may be deprived of legal protections and necessary medical care following an assault.

Some sexual assaults of men are actually forms of gay-bashing, motivated by fear and hatred of homosexuality. In these cases, perpetrators may verbally abuse their victims and imply that the victim deserved to be sexually assaulted. It's important to remember that sexual assault is an act of violence, power and control and that no one deserves it.



For more information or to book an appointment, call **9870 7330** or call the 24 hour sexual assault crisis line on **1800 806 292**

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