



Reactions to rape and sexual assault

Every person who experiences sexual assault will react in a different way, which will vary according to your background and past experiences. There is no right or wrong way to feel and no set time for when you should be feeling better. To survive and cope with your situation you will draw on your own unique strengths and skills.

There are some common responses that many survivors experience at some point in time. These emotional responses that people experience after being sexually assaulted are sometimes referred to as Rape Trauma Syndrome, which outlines a number of stages that survivors may go through in the recovery process. By describing some of these it is hoped you will gain the strength to recognize that your feelings and reactions are quite normal and therefore enable you to feel more in control.

Acute phase

In the immediate period following the rape you may experience a wide range of emotional reactions, which are natural responses resulting from being faced with a possible life-threatening situation. These reactions usually last a few days to a few weeks, but can endure far longer. Following sexual assault shock is common reaction, which may include feelings of acute distress and severe anxiety. The way you react to these feelings may be to cry a lot or, to feel quite numb and appear calm and withdrawn to those around you. Your body may also respond to the anxiety with symptoms such as nausea, sweating, shaking, tension headaches, fatigue, loss of appetite or disturbed sleep. Other common feelings and reactions you may experience during this stage may be: 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 have been through, so you may feel quite powerless.

There are a number of practical problems you may need to deal with at this stage including:-

- whether or not to make a report to the police,
- medical examinations
- informing partners, friends or parents
- question of pregnancy, HIV or STD's

So that you begin to regain a sense of control over your life and your body it is important that you make your own decisions, as it is you they will affect. Remind yourself that each decision you make, no matter how small it may seem, is an important step in the healing process.

Outward adjustment

The second phase that many survivors go through is referred to as outward adjustment. This is not suggesting that you are 'over' the experience of being sexually assaulted, 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. You may also decide you want to move to a new location, particularly if the assault occurred in your home.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to 'carry on as normal' and regain control over your life. It



is important also to 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 as those immediately after the assault (described earlier). It is not uncommon for feelings of depression, fear, loss of confidence, nightmares and flashbacks to last for quite some time.

If you reported the assault to the police you may have an ongoing involvement with them as they investigate. You may also have to appear in court if the offender is charged. This process may trigger the intense emotions and anxiety that you felt just after the assault. It is important that you have access to accurate information about legal proceedings and support to help you get through this often difficult and traumatic process.



Re-organisation phase

Each person responds to and comes to terms with the experience at a different rate and in different ways, depending on age, circumstances of the attack, your own coping strategies and the responses of those from whom you seek support (family, friends, partners, police and other people important to you).

During this period there may be major changes in employment, place of living and close relationships. You may experience difficulties with relationships and sex, depression and continuing fears and anxieties (often in the form of nightmares or phobias).

You may finally feel like you are in control of your life again and able to re-establish your normal routines. From such a traumatic and harrowing experience it is not uncommon for survivors to discover personal strengths and coping skills they weren't previously aware of. No one is suggesting that you will ever forget what has happened to you, but with time it will become easier to cope with and less painful.

Remember that at any stage Counsellor/Advocates at a Victorian CASA are available to provide you with emotional support and talk with you about how you are feeling. Many survivors who have been through similar experiences say that if you can talk about your feelings it helps you understand where they come from and in this way regain control over your life. Counsellor/Advocates are also able to provide you with legal information about your rights and options, referrals and advocate on your behalf with the police and other parties if you feel you would like them to.