

Some Common Reactions to Sexual Assault

Each survivor copes with sexual assault differently. It is important to remember that there is no right way for a survivor to feel, and there is no set timeline for when a survivor should be feeling better. To heal from sexual assault, survivors need to draw on their individual strengths and skills and find what works best for them.

Sexual assault is a violent crime that triggers a variety of feelings and reactions. Some survivors experience a rush of emotions all at once, while others take longer to process what they are feeling.

Many survivors do share several common reactions to sexual assault. The feelings may be intense at times. Sometimes they seem to go away for a while and then come back again. These reactions include:

Guilt and Shame:

Many survivors of sexual assault feel guilty. We live in a culture that tends to blame victims, but sexual assault is never the survivor's fault. Even if a survivor realizes that they are not responsible for the assault, the reactions of others may induce these feelings. Be supportive of the self-perceptions of the survivor. Focus on helping the survivor separate their own reactions from those of others. Help survivors express their feelings and to separate others' problems from those of the survivor.

Loss of control:

Sexual assault robs a person of control over their body, and many survivors of sexual assault often feel out of control or powerless as a result. One of the most important elements of healing from sexual assault is regaining control.

Mistrust:

Often survivors will say that they have lost all their faith in people. The assault often causes survivors to reexamine their beliefs about life and people. This can create a major shift in the survivor's perspective that is very unsettling. If a survivor was sexually assaulted by someone they knew, they may feel like they have lost confidence in their sense of judgment about other people. If they were sexually assaulted by a stranger, they may feel that they can't trust people they don't know. Tell survivors that this is very common. Many survivors feel this way. Be understanding.

Self-Blame:

This can be serious in that it can provoke serious depression in survivors, especially if these feelings are not brought out and discussed. Our society tends to blame the survivor for having been raped (e.g. by style of dress, behavior, use of alcohol or other drugs, etc.). It is important to talk about these myths and dispel them. It is important to remain nonjudgmental – check your own attitudes.

Anger:

Often there is as much anger at the events following the assault as there is at the fact that the survivor has been assaulted. Survivors may be angry about having to change their lifestyles. Focus on how the survivor's anger is expressed. Help the survivor develop appropriate channels to express anger. Focus on the person(s) with whom the survivor is most angry. If you are able to establish this focus and help the survivor understand, you can move on to help in other areas. Remember to point out any consequences of inappropriate actions that the survivor may be considering (e.g. killing the assailant).

Fear:

Sexual Assault is traumatic, and it is normal to feel afraid after being assaulted. Sometimes the survivors have been in fear of losing their lives. Fear often dominates their emotions. Find out if the survivor has taken any measures to make themselves safer. Due to fear, survivors may make changes to their lifestyle. Survivors often feel less free and consequently may be angry at their loss of freedom. Focus on reinforcing the survivor's strengths and bringing their focus to the 'here and now.' This may help break the cycle of anxiety that many survivors experience.

Flashbacks:

These are common and typical of violent crime survivors. Reassure survivors that this is normal; i.e., the survivor is not "crazy". Discuss the feelings linked to this and remind survivors that flashbacks may continually recur, sometimes for years. In most cases they diminish in frequency and vividness.

Feeling Crazy:

Many survivors feel this way because of extreme stress and anxiety. Reassure survivors that this is a completely normal reaction to an abnormal event (a normal response to a crazy situation). Let survivors know that it takes time to recover and that they will experience good days and bad days; remind survivors that these feelings typically lessen in the future. Focus on narrowing survivors' problems to what they have to cope with now. Survivors who are anxious should not try to deal with too many problems simultaneously.

Avoidance:

It is common to avoid or want to avoid anything that is associated with the assault. Many survivors avoid getting assistance because it reminds them of the sexual assault. Although avoidance can initially help in coping, most survivors find that it is not a viable long-term solution.

Numbness:

Sometimes it takes a while for survivors of sexual assault to feel anything at all. Going numb is one of the ways some people cope with crisis.

People Get Tired of Listening:

Sometimes even sympathetic family and friends tire of listening. Often others do not realize how long it takes survivors to deal with the aftereffects of assault and sexual assault; they may not understand why survivors continue to talk about the assault months or years later. This is normal, however, and we can provide an empathetic ear when others have stopped listening.

Problems of Parents of Survivors

Often parents will feel guilty, becoming overprotective. This can produce more problems. One strategy is to try to help parents channel their guilt. Remind parents that if they feel anger with anyone, it should be the assailant. Help parents to be open to communication with the survivor.

Problems of Spouses, Lovers, Partners:

Following a sexual assault, partners, spouses, and/or lovers may mistakenly view the assault as an act of lovemaking rather than an act of power, aggression, and violence. Parents may also share this belief. Spouses, lovers, and/or partners may repeatedly ask the survivor how they feel, until the survivor may begin to doubt their own feelings. Remember that assault is an act of violence, aggression, and power and that sex is merely the weapon/vehicle used. If you are working with spouses, lovers, partners, and even parents, urge them to support the need of the survivor and help them recognize and separate their needs from those of the survivor.