

Recovering from Sexual Assault

Sexual assault occurs when one person forces any unwanted sexual contact onto another person. It can involve a stranger, friend, partner, or acquaintance. It can involve any type of unwanted sexual behavior.

Being sexually assaulted involves both physical and psychological assault. Assault victims experience a range of emotions that include fear, shame, anger, and depression.

Most sexual assault victims are women, and most perpetrators are men. However, a significant number of males also are sexually assaulted. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to the victims in this article as females.

Stages of Sexual Assault Recovery

Sexual assault victims usually have emotional and physical reactions that fall into three stages. These can be described as shock, adjustment, and resolution.

Shock usually lasts from a few hours to several weeks. The victim experiences shock, disbelief, fear, and anger. She may have phobic reactions to the place where the sexual assault occurred. She may also have flashbacks, an immediate sense of reliving the sexual assault, and trouble sleeping.

Adjustment comes next. During this temporary stage, the victim begins to feel like her life is returning to normal and tries to regain some sense of control. She may deny the impact of the assault.

Resolution is the time when healing occurs. It is often an uncomfortable period for the victim. She may have many of the same feelings that she experienced immediately following the assault, but now she is closer to being ready to resolve them. She may feel depressed, experience mood swings, feel cut off from others, or need to isolate herself. During this stage of recovery, many victims seek the services of a professional counselor.

Common Responses to Sexual Assault

Most sexual assault victims report some of the following physical and emotional symptoms:

- Apathy
- Difficulty concentrating
- Eating disorders
- Feeling nervous or jumpy
- Feelings of depression, sadness, and hopelessness
- Guilt

Headaches
Hypervigilance
Inability to express emotions
Inability to trust others
Insomnia
Irritability and anger
Isolation
Less interest in activities
Less interest in sex
Loss of self-esteem
Nausea and vomiting
Nightmares and flashbacks
Panic attacks
Physical pain
Poor appetite
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (chronic anxiety, depression, and flashbacks)
Self-mutilation
Shame and embarrassment
Shock and denial
Substance abuse
Thoughts of suicide and death

Recovery Steps

Crisis intervention is an important first step. The first few days after an assault can be especially turbulent, and victims need the unique skills of counselors who are trained to respond to crises.

Individual counseling is highly recommended. Any person who has been sexually assaulted will benefit from individual counseling sessions with a caring, experienced, mental health professional.

Group therapy for sexual assault victims is an excellent way for victims to talk about their experiences with others in a supportive and nonjudgmental atmosphere.

Couples counseling can help the victim and her partner to explore their feelings, talk about how the assault is impacting their relationship, and learn coping skills.

Recovery Prognosis

Since every person and situation is different, victims of sexual assault respond to an assault in different ways. Many factors can influence an individual's recovery from sexual assault. Some examples include the following:

- The circumstances surrounding the assault
- The severity of the assault
- The victim's relationship to the perpetrator
- How police and medical workers respond to the assault
- The victim's age and maturity level
- How the victim views the attack and what meaning she gives it
- The victim's support system
- The quality of the response of the victim's family and friends
- Community attitudes toward sexual assault

Based on these factors, some survivors of sexual assault recover fairly quickly. Others feel the effects of the experience throughout their lifetime.
