

## Effects of Sexual Assault

You have just experienced a terrible crime, and the effects of sexual assault can be devastating. You may be experiencing some of many of the effects listed below, which can be divided into three main categories: psychological, physical, and social:

Psychological	Physical	Social
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guilt and shame</li> <li>• Confusion</li> <li>• Anger</li> <li>• Helplessness</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Fear and anxiety</li> <li>• Denial of the assault</li> <li>• Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (e.g. nightmares, flashbacks)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes in appetite</li> <li>• Sleeping difficulties</li> <li>• Stress-related illness</li> <li>• Alcohol/drug abuse</li> <li>• Soreness</li> <li>• Muscle Tension</li> <li>• Stomach pain</li> <li>• Vaginal irritation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Isolation and withdrawal</li> <li>• Difficulty trusting people</li> <li>• Interpersonal conflicts</li> <li>• Decline in academics</li> </ul>

The psychological trauma caused by a sexual assault can be severe and long-lasting. Because people react in very different ways to stress, it is not possible to predict exactly how you will feel. Each person is unique. Although many survivors experience similar reactions, there are still individual differences in how they respond to the trauma of sexual violence.

You may experience some or all of these symptoms. They may occur immediately, or you may have a delayed reaction weeks or months later. Certain situations, such as seeing the assailant or testifying in court, may intensify the symptoms or cause them to recur after a period during which you have been feeling better.

Survivors of sexual assault experience a wide range of reactions. Some have said that after the assault their emotions go up and down or from one extreme to another. It is important for you to know that what you are feeling and thinking right now is okay. Although guilt and shame are common reactions to sexual violence, you do not deserve what happened to you and it is not your fault. Your reactions are your own way of coping with the crime that has been committed against you. There is no standard response to sexual assault. You may experience a few, none, or all of the following:

Reaction	Description	What you can do
Shock and numbness	<p>Feelings of being "out it", confusion, being easily overwhelmed, not knowing how to feel or what to do.</p> <p>You may react in a way that is similar to your reactions during other crises in your life (for example with tears, irritability, nervous laughter, withdrawal).</p>	Be aware that these are normal reactions to trauma. Each person handles crises differently, so think of things that helped you get through crises in the past. Get help to sort out what you would like to do and how you may want to organize your thoughts, time, and decisions. Be compassionate toward yourself; and give yourself time to heal.
Loss of	Feeling like your whole life has been	Try to get as much control over your life

control	turned upside down and that you will never have control of your life again. Your thoughts and feelings seem out of control.	as you possibly can, even over small things. Ask for information that may help you sort out your thoughts and feelings. Use outside resources, such as counselors and legal professionals. Ask how other people have handled similar situations. Try to make as many of your own decisions as possible. This may gradually help you regain a sense of control over your own life.
Fear	Fear that the rapist may return; fear of your general physical safety; fear of being alone; fear of other people or situations that may remind you of the assault.	If you want company, do not hesitate to ask familiar people to be with you day and night. You may want to make your physical environment feel more safe (moving, making your home more secure, getting to know your neighbors better, or taking a self defense class).
Guilt and self-blame	Feeling like you could have or should have done something to avoid or prevent the assault; doubts regarding your ability to make judgments.	No matter what the situation was, you did not ask to be hurt or violated. Try to surround yourself with supportive friends and family who understand that this experience was not your fault.
Isolation	Feeling that this experience has set you apart from other people; feeling that other people can tell you have been sexually assaulted just by looking at you; not wanting to burden other people with your experience.	Recovering from an assault can be a very lonely experience. However, you are not alone in what you are feeling. You may find it reassuring to talk to others who have been raped, or to a counselor at ASTOP Sexual Abuse Center who has worked with survivors of sexual violence.
Vulnerability, distrust	Feeling that you are at the mercy of your own emotions or the actions of others; not knowing who to trust or how to trust yourself; feelings of suspicion and caution.	Trust your instincts about who you want to talk with about what has happened to you. Try to talk with people who you have found to be the most dependable in the past. Select those who have been good listeners and non-judgmental. Feelings of general suspicion will subside as you begin to find people you can trust.
Sexual fears	Feeling that you do not want to have sexual relations; wondering whether you will ever want or enjoy sexual relationships again; fears that being sexually intimate may remind you of the rape.	Try to tell your sexual partner what your limits are. Let your partner know if the situation reminds you of the assault and may bring up painful memories. Let your partner know that it is the situation, not him/her, that is bringing up the painful memories. You may feel more comfortable with gentle physical affection. Let your partner know what level of intimacy feels comfortable for you.

Anger	Feeling angry at the assailant. You may find yourself thinking about retaliation. You may be angry at the world since you no longer feel safe. If you are religious, you may feel angry that your faith did not prevent this.	Be accepting of your anger. Thoughts of committing violence toward the attacker do not mean that you are a violent or bad person. You have the right to feel angry about the violation you have experienced. You may want to talk to people who understand this.
Disruption of daily activities	During the first few days or weeks after the assault you may feel preoccupied with intrusive thoughts about it. You may experience difficulty concentrating, nightmares, sleep disturbances, changes in appetite, startle reactions, phobias, general anxiety or depression. You may have memories of a prior crisis.	Although these are common reactions, they can be quite disturbing. Take things very slowly. Some people find it helpful to keep a notebook at hand to write down feelings, thoughts, ideas, or details of the assault. Keeping the thoughts and feelings in one place may make them feel more manageable.

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## Talking with Significant Others

You may be wondering who you should tell or what you should say to significant people of in your life. Parents, friends, employers, neighbors, and your partner can be sources of support and solace. Follow your own heart when deciding who to turn to. You may worry that you are relying on others too much. It is okay to ask for help in times of crisis. People who truly care about you will want to help; however, they may need to be told how to help you. Try to avoid asking or allowing others to make decisions for you. It will help you regain your feelings of control if you make your own decisions. It is okay to tell people what you need from them. It is okay to say:

- I don't want to be touched.
- I need to be held.
- I would like to talk about what happened.
- I don't want to discuss that.
- I'd like for you to sit with me while I call the police

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## Recovery

Recovery is a process that is different for everyone. Sometimes the first reaction is shock, disbelief, and fear. You may respond by appearing very upset, or by appearing calm and controlled. You may be unsure who to tell or what to do, and may not even be sure of how you feel. Experiencing so many different emotions is a part of working through what has happened to you. Right now, you may wonder when you will "get your life back." Or, perhaps you are not feeling much at all. There is no right or wrong way to react to sexual assault. Many survivors have found that self- acceptance, patience, time, and support from others has helped them recover.

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