

### Losing Control

When sexually assaulted, victims temporarily lose power and control. These feelings can potentially endure for a longer period of time than the actual event, so keep in mind that it might take some time to regain the feeling of control of your own life.

### Other Common Reactions

Following an assault, some people report difficulties enjoying sex or other forms of intimacy and/or experience a poorer self-image. Many victims report feeling unclean, which sometimes results in behaviors such as frequent bathing. These are all completely normal reactions to sexual assault. However, these behaviors should ideally be addressed in order to prevent them from interrupting quality of life in the long-term.

### What Can You Do About Sadness or Depression?

- ◆ Don't avoid situations that used to be fun (such as spending time with friends/family) or have been important to you (such as school, work, or hobbies).
- ◆ Don't isolate yourself from other people.
- ◆ Try to do at least one activity outside your home each day.
- ◆ Keep busy. Plan your next day the night before and stick to the plan. Fight avoidance with daily activities.
- ◆ Don't blame yourself for what happened.
- ◆ Focus on taking care of yourself.

### Please Don't Let Drugs or Alcohol Get in the Way of Your Recovery

Some people may believe that alcohol and/or drugs can help relieve feelings of distress, help them relax, or overcome bad memories. The truth is, however, that alcohol and/or substance use can only provide a short-term relief, at best. It delays the normal processing of the trauma and might even become an additional problem to tackle later on.

- ◆ Stay away from people, places, and situations that lead to urges to use alcohol and/or drugs.
- ◆ Recognize when emotions (such as anxiety or depression) are causing urges to use alcohol and/or drugs and take steps to cope with these emotions in healthy ways.

### Support from Others

Social support that provides feelings of trust and safety is very important after experiencing a sexual assault. It is important to share your difficult experience with someone else, so please seek support from people you trust to help you through these

difficulties. Put effort into seeking support from your closest friends and family. Some people report finding it difficult to seek support from their closest social environment and in such cases it can be beneficial to seek support from a professional, such as a psychologist or other health care professionals.

### What if the Reactions Won't Go Away?

It is important to remember that the reactions to trauma that have been discussed in this brochure are normal and in many cases they diminish on their own over time. Some traumatic events, however, are more likely than others to cause continuing problems. It is therefore important to keep in mind that if the traumatic reactions do not go away or get worse, they might be a sign of something called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), clinical depression, or other forms of psychological problems that may need specialized treatment. Such treatment should be undertaken in collaboration with a professional that has knowledge and experience in treating trauma. The prognosis is good for most people who receive such treatment. It is important that the treatment works towards helping you come to terms with what happened, offers cognitive processing and education, and helps to build your coping skills and support systems. All this will help in coping with your own feelings, daily life and functioning, and thereby gradually getting back to normal and making it easier to look towards the future.



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## Traumatic Reactions to Sexual Assault

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People who experience sexual assault often experience it as a traumatic event. Its effects can be physical, psychological and/or emotional. These effects may be brief in duration or last a very long time. There are common reactions to this type of trauma or shock, but at the same time, each person responds in his/her own unique way to the assault.

This brochure is intended to provide information about possible reactions following a sexual assault and suggested ways to deal with those reactions are provided. The brochure does not necessarily provide a comprehensive overview, but is intended to shed some light on the different reactions that are commonly experienced after a sexual trauma.

## Common Reactions to Sexual Assault

Short-term Reactions	Long-term reactions
Trembling, chills	Intrusive memories and thoughts
Muscle tension	Nightmares, bad dreams
Racing heartbeat	Sleep problems
Numbness, feeling empty	Hyper-arousal (e.g. jumpiness)
Feeling "unreal"	Muscle tension, hard to relax
Crying	Fear related to reminders of the event
Choking or chest pains	Trouble concentrating
Fear, anxiety	Fear, anxiety
Sadness	Depression, lack of interest, hopelessness
Abdominal pain	Avoiding people, social isolation
Insecurity	Insecurity
Helplessness, confusion	Irritability, anger

Some people may not experience any of these aforementioned reactions whereas others may experience several at the same time. The first reactions to sexual assault are often of the short-term variety, but they may also last over a longer period of time. Physical reactions, such as your heart racing and/or shallow breathing, often happen during a sexual assault and are part of your body's normal stress reaction. Other physical and psychological problems that may have been present prior to the assault

can possibly increase, thereby potentially causing temporary difficulties and distress. Be aware that various events in your daily life and surroundings may then subsequently trigger memories of the sexual assault.

## Common Triggers of Fear Reactions

- ◆ Reminders of the event (e.g. news reports, TV shows).
- ◆ Intimate contact with your partner.
- ◆ People who look like the perpetrator.
- ◆ Places that remind you of the assault.
- ◆ Physical activity (exercise) that increases pulse rate.
- ◆ Going out after dark.
- ◆ Certain smells and/or sounds.

## How to Deal with Possible Triggers

Triggers or reminders are not usually dangerous in themselves; they may just feel that way because they are in some way associated with the assault. One way to change your reaction to triggers is through exposure. This means gradually facing the situation or reminders until they no longer make you feel anxious. This is the opposite of avoidance.

## Here are Some Tips for Effective Exposure

- 1) **Decide if the situation is safe.**
- 2) **Start slowly** – for example, tackle the easiest triggers first.
- 3) **Break it down** – break the exposure exercises into parts – for example, if you are afraid of sleeping in the dark, perhaps keep a small light on at first and then eventually try to turn it off. If you are afraid of going to public places, you might begin by going only a short distance at first and maybe take someone you trust with you.
- 4) **One minute more** – try this technique: when it feels like you need to escape the situation in question, just try to stay for one more minute. Then see if you can do it for another minute. Remember to take it just one minute at a time.

Exposure can be hard, so be sure to reward yourself for doing it!

## Flashbacks

Flashbacks are quite common after sexual assaults. These memories often cause distress and may produce physical reactions. Many people have nightmares about what happened. These memories can be fragmented, feel very real, and are often intrusive. Flashbacks are experienced because the brain has not yet processed the memories. When the assault occurred, the brain didn't get a chance to process thoughts and feelings. It is there-

fore important for the brain to work through these memories after the assault. It is important to remember that, although these memories are often difficult and distressing, they are not dangerous. It is important to allow yourself to have thoughts about what happened and work through them little by little.

## Emotional Distress and Numbness

Some people may experience overwhelming and fearful feelings during the assault and after the assault. It is normal to feel emotionally numb and to perhaps have a sense that the whole situation is unreal (depersonalization). It is also common to feel disassociated from others and to feel that no one understands you. Loss of interest in activities or events that were formerly a source of enjoyment is also commonly reported. These responses are normal and very often pass with time.

## Shame, Guilt, Self-blame

Some people may blame themselves for what happened and experience feelings of guilt and/or shame. Many people think about what they would have wanted to do differently or what they would have wanted to avoid, for example; "I shouldn't have... because then I could have prevented the assault", "If only I had... then this would not have happened." This is a result of people being used to attempting to explain what happens to them by examining their own behavior. Indeed, thoughts about responsibility are an attempt to make sense of what happened. Please bear in mind that such thoughts do absolutely not mean that the victim could have or should have done something to prevent what happened.

Sexual violence is never the victim's fault.

## Anger and Irritability

Some people may experience irritability and anger after being subjected to violence and injustice. While feelings of anger are often completely justified, they can potentially be unhelpful, as they can cause further distress and delay recovery. Sometimes feelings of anger are directed at the traumatic event itself, but sometimes a person directs their anger towards themselves or something that happened (or didn't happen) after the trauma. Indeed, feelings of anger can be related to a victim's sense that they were treated unjustly and/or felt a lack of support from their environment. Such anger can inhibit positive communication with others and might even prevent the victim from seeking support after the trauma.