

COMMON FEELINGS OF VICTIMS WHO HAVE BEEN SEXUALLY ASSAULTED

Emotional responses of victims to an assault will vary from individual to individual. Sexual assault is extremely traumatic and life-changing. It's important to remember that your responses are not crazy; they are normal reactions to a crazy situation--rape. Persons who are victims/survivors of an attempted sexual assault may also have similar feelings.

FEAR OF PEOPLE, SENSE OF VULNERABILITY. Victims frequently fear people and feel vulnerable even when going through the regular activities of life. You may be afraid to be alone or be afraid of being with lots of people and may find yourself not knowing who to trust. You may have lost your sense of safety in your environment which makes you feel vulnerable. You may fear it might happen again. You may be particularly aware of sexual innuendos, stray looks, pats, and whistles that you once took in stride.

Remember:

- Try to spend time with friends, family, and people you trust.
- Learning to trust others and learning to trust your own judgment takes time and support from others. This is particularly difficult if the assailant was someone you knew.
- Temporarily "not trusting" is a protective device that is an emotional coping skill. You will be able to trust when you have had a chance to heal and are feeling less vulnerable.
- Talk to trusted support people about your feelings.
- Trust your "gut feelings" when someone feels unsafe.
- It is okay to experience different feelings.

LOSS OF CONTROL OVER YOUR OWN LIFE, FEAR OF THE ASSAILANT. The assailant stepped into your life and took control. You did not have a choice and did what you had to do to survive that situation. You may feel unsure about yourself and may temporarily lack your usual self-confidence. Decisions that were made routinely before now feel monumental. You may feel that because of the assault you have to change your whole lifestyle to feel safe. You also may feel that the assailant has taken away your good feelings about your own body making you feel "used," "dirty," or "bad."

Remember:

- Your ability to make decisions will return.
- People who offer options and support your decisions unconditionally can help you regain confidence.
- It isn't paranoia to take precautions that will help you feel safe.
- Your fear is a result of your heightened sense of reality and feeling out of control. You may want to experiment with a different lifestyle that may make you feel more secure. Trusting only those who have earned your trust, locking doors, staying with trusted friends, taking self-defense classes, etc., are normal means to help you feel safer and regain a sense of control over your life.

ANXIETY, SHAKING, NIGHTMARES. You may experience shaking, anxiety, flashbacks, and nightmares after an attack. This can begin shortly after the attack and continue for a long period of time. Nightmares can be a replay of the assault. Other themes of nightmares may be fearful and include being chased, being out of control, etc. You may fear that you are "losing it" and may feel that you should be "over it by now."

Remember:

- These responses as scary as they are, are normal reactions to trauma and can be the way your emotions act out the fear experience.
- It is important to be able to talk about nightmares and fears and how they affect your life.
- Keeping a journal and writing about feelings, dreams, and fears can be a useful tool.

SEXUAL CONCERNS. You may experience a variety of sexual concerns after an assault. You may no sexual contact whatsoever, you may need intimacy - stroking, nurturing, holding and not want to be sexual, or you may experience some confusion about separating sex from sexual abuse. Particular sexual acts engaged in by the assailant may provoke flashbacks and thus be very difficult to engage in.

Remember:

- Sexual healing takes time.
- It is okay to ask your partner to nurture you and not ask you to be sexual at this time.
- A patient, gentle, intimate partner is helpful in your healing process.
- To retreat sexually is a normal coping mechanism.
- You have a right to refuse to be sexual until you feel ready.
- Rape is not sex. Intimate consensual love-making bears no resemblance to sexual assault.

GUILT, SHAME, AND SELF-BLAME. Most victims feel guilty and ashamed about the assault. You may question that you somehow might have "provoked" or "asked for it." That you should have known what was going to happen or that you shouldn't have trusted the assailant or that you should have prevented the assault. Some of these feelings are the result of society's myths about rape and sexuality. You may know what society believes and worry about what others might think of you now. Sometimes blaming yourself helps you to feel less helpless.

Remember:

- No one deserves to be sexually assaulted--tell yourself that many times a day.
- Being sexually assaulted does not make you a bad person; you did not choose to be sexually assaulted.
- Education about the facts surrounding sexual assault may be helpful in dispelling shame and self-blame.
- Stroke yourself for having done the best you could to survive the sexual assault--"I did the best I could, given the situation.

ANGER. Anger is an appropriate, healthy response to sexual assault. It usually means that you are healing and have begun to look at the assailant's responsibility for the assault. People vary greatly in how readily they feel and express anger. It may be especially difficult to express if you have been taught that being angry is never appropriate. Anger can be vented but in appropriate ways, or can be turned inward, where it may become sadness, pain, or depression.

Remember:

- Anger can be worked out physically without harming yourself or others. Walk, run, shoot baskets, bike, hit pillows, write down feelings, etc.
- Anger needs to be directed at the assailant, not at yourself.