

HEALING PROCESSES IN RECOVERING FROM SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual assault or an attempted assault may disrupt a victim/survivor's power to function in all facets of life. The first thing to remember when you are facing the emotional/physical disruptions that an assault brings is that it is NOT YOUR FAULT. No matter what you did, you did not deserve to be violated. You are a victim...a victim of a violent crime. You did not cause the crime to be committed. Being able to understand this will help you in the process of healing. If you are experiencing disruptions in your life, remember that these disruptions are not unusual, and you are not alone in these feelings. You are going through a process that leads to the healing of the mind, body, and spirit. However, everyone is unique and reactions vary greatly from person to person.

To start, let's take a look at the areas of disruption.

EMOTIONALLY--When a person has a life-threatening occurrence and experiences boundary violations such as assault, the feelings produced are often those of helplessness. You may feel out of control in your daily life.

SEXUALLY--A victim of a sexual crime may develop an aversion to sex. Sex and even touches by friends and family members may be perceived as unpleasant, frightening, and uncomfortable. Frequency of sexual activity usually returns to normal after three to six months. Again, what you are feeling is not abnormal. You are not unusual in having these feelings.

SOCIALLY--After the incident, a victim may also be afraid to go out alone. Interacting with others may be unpleasant as well. It is common to feel "everyone knows" and is looking at you. You may or may not feel this way.

LEGALLY--If you have decided to report the crime and are faced with the possibility of going to court, you may go through feelings of confusion. Often a victim wishes the whole thing could be avoided as it often feels demeaning and tends to disrupt your life all over again. On the other hand, many victims report being more "in control" when the court action takes place, and they feel they have done something to prevent this person from continuing to perpetrate the crime.

PHYSICALLY--You may have been physically hurt during the assault, or you may develop other physical symptoms. Some of these symptoms may include headaches, nausea, skin rashes, and eating problems. Your body is reacting to the stress brought about by the attack. Try to remember that these symptoms are the result of the crisis you experienced, and that they will pass with time.

Again, it is important for you to know that each victim responds to a sexual assault in a unique manner that reflects: (1) the uniqueness of the incident--each incident differs by degree of force used, place of occurrence, relationship, if any, with the assailant, and so on; (2) different developmental stages of the victim at the time of the assault; (3) your past pattern for responding to a crisis, which will likely serve you in responding to this crisis. After understanding these basic disruptions, you may also notice predictable and sequential patterns which you will progress through, though not necessarily in this order. We will try to list these phases so you may have an understanding and knowledge of what you may be going through and can expect. Remember, you are unique, and the time and phases can vary.

PHASES IN HEALING AND RECOVERY

Those who work in the helping professions consider sexual assault to be one of the most terrifying and devastating things that can happen. In addition to the shock, terror, and numbness that is felt by survivors of plane crashes, hostage situations, and other life-threatening experiences, sexual assault survivors may feel embarrassment, humiliation, shame, guilt, self-blame, and helplessness. The pattern of response is so unique and universal that it is known as "Rape Trauma Syndrome."

Rape Trauma Syndrome is the stress response pattern. The more severe the trauma, the longer it is likely to last. Relief from symptoms is possible as the survivor is able to identify and express intense emotions. Although everyone is unique, there are predictable phases in recovery:

PHASE I: Impact

This is a stage of confusion and disorientation immediately following the sexual assault. It may last a few hours or a few days. The victim's initial reaction may include shock, disbelief, anxiety, and fear. How the victim expresses these emotions will vary. During this phase, the victim will need to deal with medical attention, reporting to the police, notifying family and friends, and other immediate practical matters.

PHASE II: Outward Adjustment

As the victim deals with practical concerns, he or she will often deny, repress, or rationalize the sexual assault in attempt to return some normalcy to their life. This period may last for a few days, a few weeks, or even years. During this phase, the victim does not want to talk about the sexual assault or have to deal with it in any way. Although during this phase the victim outwardly may appear to have adjusted, the sexual assault experience is unresolved.

PHASE III: Resolution

The resolution phase usually begins when the victim is depressed and feels a need to talk to someone about the sexual assault. It may be precipitated by a specific incident (e.g., seeing someone who resembles the assailant). Or the victim may be unable to stop thinking about the sexual assault. Resolution occurs when the victim is able to experience anger and focus that anger on the assailant.

PHASE IV: Integration

The period of integration is the culmination of all previous phases. At this point, the victim has accepted the fact of the sexual assault, has sorted through feelings of guilt and responsibility-- focusing anger on the assailant, and has integrated the sexual assault experience into the whole of his/her life-- neither repressing it nor being dominated by it.

PHASE I--"Impact" (Shock and disbelief)

One of the main feelings that develop in this phase is disorganization along with disorientation. It can last from a few hours to a few days. In this time period, you may ask the question "Why me?" even if you had previously acknowledged the possibility that rape could happen to you. It is not uncommon to be shocked and to refuse to even believe that it really happened. Yet, during this period it is also time to make decisions about medical attention, reporting to the police, notifying family and friends, and other immediate concerns such as repairing locks, transportation, child care, and counseling.

At the same time you are facing practical matters and holding together, don't be surprised if you have mood swings. After your immediate reaction of impact, you have emotional responses of shock and the disbelief discussed earlier. You may express these reactions through various emotional responses such as crying, laughing, talking constantly, and so on. Your body may also respond to this shock by various physical reactions such as loss of appetite, exhaustion, headaches, and skin rash. These are some of the ways a body copes with stress. It may not happen, but if it does, remember that these things do pass with time. If the symptoms should persist, seeing a physician is advised. In conclusion, one should expect to experience confusion and disorientation during this phase. You are not "going crazy."

Note--Phase I and Phase II often intermingle as the feelings of disbelief and denial felt in Phase I may disappear and later resurface during Phase II.

PHASE II--"Outward Adjustment" (Confusion, fear, depression, and anger)

Your initial response served a purpose. It helped protect you from becoming totally overwhelmed by the experience. While people around you may see you as returning to life as before and may comment on your adjustment, underlying feelings of "being empty" or "unreal" may remain with you. Again, the time period in this phase varies from individual to individual. During this period, it is common to avoid any discussion of the assault. Wanting to return to your previous lifestyle represents security, comfort, and a feeling of being in control. The denial of the assault helps you do this. However, unresolved feelings may surface from time to time. These may include:

- (1) Physical symptoms that were previously mentioned in Phase I
- (2) Feelings of embarrassment
- (3) Feelings of fear
- (4) Nightmares or sleep pattern disturbances or fatigue
- (5) Fear of physical violence
- (6) Feelings of humiliation
- (7) Feelings of revenge
- (8) Fear of death
- (9) Feelings of self-blame
- (10) Mood swings
- (11) A lower ability to cope with other people

PHASE III--"Resolution" (Taking back control)

This begins when you feel the need to talk to someone about the sexual assault. This desire to talk may be started by a specific incident such as seeing someone who looks like the perpetrator or by experiencing constant thoughts about the assault again. In this phase, talking to someone who understands and is a good listener can help you identify these feelings and really understand where they are coming from. Others may encourage you to keep quiet because they misinterpret your feelings. They may not know how to respond to your feelings and urge you to just forget it and to go on. They may even interpret your feelings as a negative reaction - as a way of getting attention or self-pity. They may have assumed you were doing quite well due to the coping and denial mechanisms you may have used earlier and may misinterpret your need to talk about the assault as a setback.

This reaction on the part of your friends and family may cause you to fear that you are going crazy, which further weakens your grasp on the control that you need over your life. You and your family and close friends need to understand that this is a normal process of recovery and integration. It is very important that you be able to vent your feelings and process through them. This phase is very helpful to your recovery. Resolution will occur when you are able to express anger and focus that anger on the perpetrator rather than yourself.

PHASE IV--"Integration" (Long term adjustment)

This period is the integration of all previous phases. You have accepted the fact of the sexual assault, sorted out feelings of guilt and responsibility, begun focusing anger on the assailant, and integrated the sexual assault experience into the whole of your life, neither repressing it nor being dominated by it. A number of victims/survivors do make significant changes in their lives. Job changes or residence changes, changes in relationships, and taking self-defense classes are just a few of the new directions taken. What is happening is that you are now in control of you.

It has been noted in a recent study that whether you are a victim of a rape or an attempted sexual assault, these phases are reported for both. It doesn't matter whether or not there was actual penetration. Any time a person is threatened with a possible assault, many of the symptoms of rape trauma can be experienced.

Rape is never a positive incident, but in reports it has been stated that 50 percent of all survivors report that there were some beneficial results of the incident in the sense that they feel that they found personal strength and resources that they never realized they had before. Many survivors at this point volunteer to assist battered women and victims of sexual assault and incest. Crisis can and does bring people together. It can foster the growth of individual strength. By reflecting back on what happened, the trauma you have survived, and the steps you took to survive, it can be noted that you have gained much confidence in yourself as a "survivor," and you may choose to assist others in their process of healing and recovery.