COMMON REACTIONS TO SEXUAL ASSAULT

The trauma caused by sexual assault often results in emotional stress that may be long lasting. Because people react in very different ways to stress, it is not possible to predict exactly how you will feel. It may be helpful, however, for you to know some of the most common responses other sexual assault victims have experienced.

Initially, most sexual assault victims react with shock and disbelief. You may feel numb and dazed, withdrawn and distant from other people. You may want to forget about what happened and avoid people or situations that remind you of the assault.

There may also be periods when you are reoccupied with thoughts and feelings about the assault. You may have unwanted memories or flashbacks and nightmares. When you think about what happened, you may re-experience the sensations, thoughts, and feelings you had during the assault, such as fear and powerlessness.

Many victims experience intense emotions in the aftermath of a sexual assault. Sometimes, you may feel angry. At other times you may feel anxious or depressed.

Some victims have physical symptoms, such as sleep disturbances, headaches, and stomachaches. You may feel tired or less energetic than usual. You may find that it is very difficult to concentrate in classes or when you try to study. Some victims find that their grades drop. You may also experience changes in your sexuality, such as a loss of interest in sex or avoidance of sexual situation.

Fears about personal safety are an almost universal response to a sexual assault. Victims often become fearful in situations and places where they were never frightened before. In many sexual assault situations, the victim feels powerless and/or terrified of being killed or seriously harmed. Afterwards, the feeling of vulnerability may persist for a while.

Feelings of guilt and shame are also frequent reactions. Because of misconceptions about rape, victims may blame themselves, doubt their own judgment, or wonder if they were in some way responsible for the assault. Feelings of guilt and self-blame may be reinforced by the reactions of others, who, because of prevalent myths about rape, may blame or criticize the victim’s behavior. Some survivors describe feeling dirty, devalued, and humiliated as a result of a sexual assault. Feeling of guilt and shame are sometimes a reaction to being forced by the assailant to participate in the crime.

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, may intensify the symptoms or cause them to reoccur after a period during which you have been feeling better.
Some victims think that if they avoid talking about the assault, they will be able to forget about what happened to them. Most survivors who try this approach eventually realize that they need to deal with the assault. Their unresolved feelings and fears hold them back from enjoying their lives and participating fully in relationships.

Talking about the assault can help relieve some of the control it has over you and can help you begin the process of recovery. We recommend that victims seek professional counseling as soon as possible to begin the healing process. Therapy provides a safe, private place to talk about your feelings and concerns. It also can be helpful to talk about your reactions with friends and family members who are supportive and understanding.