

Common Reactions to Sexual Assault

Each survivor of sexual assault responds uniquely to the assault, and the recovery process is different for each individual. These reactions may be experienced days, months, or years after an assault. Survivors suffer a great deal of physical and emotional trauma as a result of a sexual assault. Responses to a sexual assault can be immediate or delayed. While there are individual differences to survivors' experiences of sexual assault, there are common patterns to trauma recovery that are normative and natural.

The following is a list of reactions to sexual assault. It is not a comprehensive list but rather a sampling of common post-assault symptoms. Survivors can expect to experience some or many physical, emotional, cognitive, or social symptoms listed below:

Physical Effects

- changes in eating patterns
- changes in sleeping patterns
- eating disorders
- fatigue
- gastrointestinal irritability
- headaches
- HIV/AIDS
- muscular tension
- nightmares
- physical injuries
- pregnancy
- sexually transmitted diseases
- substance abuse
- soreness
- stress related depression
- immune system responses

Emotional Effects

- anger
- anxiety
- denial
- depression, sadness
- embarrassment, feeling exposed, humiliated
- fear
- helplessness
- hopelessness
- muscular tension
- mood swings
- numbness
- obsessions/compulsions
- phobias
- sense of disbelief
- sense of unreality
- shame, guilt, self-blame
- vulnerability

Cognitive Effects

- am I damaged goods?
- am I dirty?
- bad things happen to bad people, good things happen to good people; therefore I must be bad
- confusion
- difficulty concentrating
- flashbacks
- I deserved it because...
- if I forget about it, it will go away...
- what if I hadn't done...?
- what will people think?
- why me?
- will others reject me?
- will they blame me?

Social Effects

- changes in lifestyle
- difficulty getting things accomplished
- difficulty with intimacy
- difficulty/apprehension around men or apprehension around persons having similar attributes to the perpetrator
- discomfort around other people
- disruption in sexual relations
- fear of being alone
- fear of leaving house (especially alone)
- fear/nervousness in crowds
- hypersensitivity when relating to others
- loss of trust in self and others
- withdrawal from people, relationships, activities