

What Happens to Women After They Are Sexually Assaulted?

Written by Sue Orsillo, Ph.D.

Saturday, 22 November 2008 10:27 - Last Updated Monday, 15 February 2010 18:13

Women who are the target of sexual assault may initially experience shock or stress, even denial that the sexual assault or rape took place. But there are also long-term reactions to sexual assault.

Women can experience a wide range of reactions after [being sexually assaulted](#) and there is no one pattern of response. Some women [respond immediately](#), others may have delayed reactions. Some women are affected by the assault for a long time whereas others appear to recover rather quickly.

In the early stages, many women report feeling shock, confusion, anxiety, and/or numbness. Sometimes women will experience feelings of denial. In other words, they may not fully acknowledge what has happened to them or they may downplay the intensity of the experience. This reaction may be more common among women who are assaulted by someone they know.

What are some early reactions to sexual assault?

{loadposition articleAdRight}In the first few days and weeks following the assault, it is very normal for a woman to experience intense and sometimes unpredictable emotions. She may have repeated [strong memories](#) of the event that are difficult to ignore, and nightmares are not uncommon. Women also report having difficulty concentrating and sleeping, and they may feel jumpy or on edge. While these initial reactions are normal and expected, some women may experience severe, highly disruptive symptoms that make it incredibly difficult to function in the first month following the assault. When these problems disrupt the woman's daily life, and prevent her from seeking assistance or telling friends and family members, the woman may have Acute Stress Disorder (ASD). Symptoms of ASD include:

- Feeling numb and detached, like being in a daze or a dream, or feeling that the world is strange and unreal
- Difficulty remembering important parts of the assault
- Reliving the assault through repeated thoughts, memories, or nightmares
- Avoidance of things (places, thoughts, feelings) that remind the woman of the assault
- Anxiety or increased arousal (e.g., difficulty sleeping, concentrating, etc.)

What are some other reactions that women have following a sexual assault?

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Major Depressive Disorder (MDD)

Depression is a common reaction following sexual assault. Symptoms of MDD can include a depressed mood, an inability to enjoy things, difficulty sleeping, changes in patterns of sleeping and eating, problems in concentration and decision-making, feelings of guilt, hopelessness, and decreased self-esteem. Research suggests that almost 1/3 of all rape victims have at least one period of MDD during their lives. And for many of these women, the depression can last for a long period of time. Thoughts about suicide are also common. Studies estimate that 1/3 of women who are raped contemplate suicide, and 17% of rape victims actually attempt suicide.

Anger

Many victims of sexual assault report struggling with anger after the assault. Although this is a natural reaction to such a violating event, there is some research that suggests that prolonged, intense anger can interfere with the recovery process and further disrupt a woman's life.

Shame and guilt

These feelings are common reactions to sexual assault. Some women blame themselves for what has happened or feel shameful about being an assault victim. This reaction can be even stronger among women who are assaulted by someone that they know, or who do not receive support from their friends, family, or authorities, following the incident. Shame and guilt can also get in the way of a woman's recovery by preventing her from telling others about what happened and getting assistance.

Social problems

Social problems can sometimes arise following a sexual assault. A woman can experience problems in her marital relationship or in her friendships. Sometimes an assault survivor will be too anxious or depressed to want to participate in social activities. Many women report difficulty trusting others after the assault, so it can be difficult to develop new relationships. Performance at work and school can also be affected.

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Sexual problems

Sexual problems can be among the most long-standing problems experienced by women who are the victims of sexual assault. Women can be afraid of and try to avoid any sexual activity; they may experience an overall decrease in sexual interest and desire.

Alcohol and drug use

Substance abuse can sometimes become problematic for women who are the victims of assault. A large-scale study found that compared to non-victims, rape survivors were 3.4 times more likely to use marijuana, 6 times more likely to use cocaine, and 10 times more likely to use other major drugs. Often, women will report that they use these substances to control other symptoms related to their assault.

PTSD

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) involves a pattern of symptoms that some individuals develop after experiencing a traumatic event such as sexual assault. Symptoms of PTSD include repeated thoughts of the assault; memories and nightmares; avoidance of thoughts, feelings, and situations related to the assault; and increased arousal (e.g., difficulty sleeping and concentrating, jumpiness, irritability). One study that examined PTSD symptoms among women who were raped found that 94% of women experienced these symptoms during the two weeks immediately following the rape. Nine months later, about 30% of the women were still reporting this pattern of symptoms. The National Women's Study reported that almost 1/3 of all rape victims develop PTSD sometime during their lives and 11% of rape victims currently suffer from the disorder.

Rape Trauma Syndrome

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The cluster of symptoms which sexual assault victims describe has been defined as “rape trauma syndrome.” This syndrome has two stages, the immediate/acute phase and the long-term process. Rape trauma syndrome includes physical, emotional, and behavioral stress reactions that result from facing a life-threatening, violent, and/or traumatic event. {loadposition articleAdRight}

Stage One: The Acute Phase or Disorganization

The Immediate Impact Reaction. The two main styles of emotional response immediately following the assault are called expressed and controlled. In the expressed style emotions such as fear, anxiety, and anger are displayed whereas in the controlled style, emotional shock and numbness masks the feelings of the survivor.

Physical Reactions. Survivors experience a wide range of physical symptoms including: sleep pattern disturbances (such as insomnia and nightmares), eating pattern disturbances (usually a marked decrease in appetite and stomach pains), and symptoms specific to the parts of the body that were the focus of the attack. Survivors may also feel like sleeping all the time, eating all the time, etc. Physical symptoms vary according to each person. If you are doing things you never used to do, then it is probably related to the assault.

Emotional Reactions. During this time survivors are prone to mood swings due to the intensity and wide range of emotions they feel. These include humiliation, degradation, fear, embarrassment, anger, revenge, and shame. A survivor may go over the assault again and again in her thoughts trying to make sense of what happened, or she may try to block it out altogether. **GIVE YOURSELF PERMISSION TO FEEL ALL OF THESE FEELINGS! THAT IS ESSENTIAL TO THE HEALING PROCESS.**

Stage Two: The Long-term Process of Reorganization

Changes in Lifestyle. A sexual assault disturbs the survivor’s normal routine of living and many aspects of one’s life. There is often a strong need to get away; many survivors change residences after the assault, although some may only change their telephone number. Your priority should be to feel safe. Do whatever you need to do to get back those feelings of security and safety. Get a guard dog, install extra outside lights, leave interior lights on, get an alarm system, have someone escort you to your car whenever you want, invite friends or family members to sleep over, buy self-defense products like mace, hand held alarms, etc. It is not silly to want to protect yourself. Do what makes you feel comfortable and safe.

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Dreams and Nightmares. These symptoms occur both during the acute phase and the long-term process. Two types of nightmares are reported most frequently: dreams of being in a similar situation to the rape and unable to get away and later on dreams in which the survivor is able to assert control. These latter dreams may consist of the survivor doing violence to other people. As unpleasant as nightmares are, they are a primary way in which our minds process events that have happened. Even if you try to shut out the event, your mind will not let you. Just remember the nightmares will gradually fade and eventually cease. As you heal emotionally and physically the nightmares will lessen, and the stronger you feel, the less frightening your nightmares will seem. Don't be afraid to talk about your nightmares with your therapist or friends and family. Talking about them will make them less powerful and scary.

Phobias. Fears and phobias are common psychological defenses. Some survivors may develop a fear of crowds, of being alone, of having sex, or they may feel a general paranoia.

REMEMBER: If these fears begin to control your life, you need to seek professional help.

There is nothing wrong with asking for help. Sexual assault is an unthinkable act that is very hard to learn to live with. You don't have to go through it alone. Please ask for help and accept help from people who care about you and from professionals who can assist you in dealing with the aftermath of sexual assault.

Sources:

The National Women's Health Information Center

National Center for PTSD

The Women's Resource Center

next: [Getting Help If You've Been Sexually Assaulted - Raped](#)