



Common Symptoms & Reactions following Sexual Assault & Rape

If you have experienced a sexual assault, or have been raped, you have experienced a trauma. There is no right or wrong way for you to think, feel or behave at the moment. The way you respond to, and cope with what has happened, is unique to you.

It can be helpful however, to know some of the common responses of people who have been sexually assaulted or raped. This document might help you make sense of what is happening and how you feel at the moment.

Initially, in the immediate stage after the sexual assault you will be in shock. Maybe you thought this sort of thing wouldn't happen to you? Perhaps you had previous perceptions about who this happened to, or under what circumstances?

In this initial stage, your self-perception may be challenged, and you might start to question your memory, or in some way blame yourself for what has happened. You are not to blame for what has happened. It is your attacker who is entirely responsible.

Your body may be hurt and sore following your assault. Responses to trauma are often let out through the body, so you might cry a lot (even if you don't cry much normally) you may need lots of sleep, maybe you are very calm and detached. Some people feel sick, shake or suffer headaches. This is your body's way of trying to deal with the distress and shock of what has happened.

Your thoughts and feelings are also affected. You may doubt yourself, or your account of what happened. This is common for people who have experienced trauma, as they do not want to face the reality that someone could hurt them in this way. People often blame themselves for what happened, or for not doing enough to stop it happening: 'I should have screamed' 'I should have fought back harder' etc. You did the best that you could. It is a very common reaction to completely freeze when you are attacked in this way. Whatever your response to this trauma was at the time, try to remember that you were not prepared for what happened, and you did what you could to survive it.

Often people feel guilt, shame, anger, and fear. You may experience nightmares or flashbacks. Flashbacks occur suddenly & often when we least expect it. Flashbacks are intense experiences that can feel like you are re-living the attack. Flashbacks are common at this stage because your body and mind are still trying to work out what has happened.

You will probably feel unsafe in many situations, even if they do not pose any threat, this is also a common response to trauma.

You had control and choice taken away from you, and when this happens it can leave you feeling completely powerless and out of control.

There are choices and decisions that you may want to make at the moment. For some people they are about reporting the sexual assault or rape to the police, about seeking medical support, or maybe about whether to tell a friend or family member. If you would like to talk through any of these decisions, or any others you are facing, you can do that with your Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA). Your ISVA will meet with you with no other agenda, than how to best support you.

The initial shock of sexual violence can last days, weeks, or months. After the initial shock has faded, you may feel able to resume parts of your life, including work or socialising. However, underneath you may still be experiencing a range of emotions, fear, anger, loss of confidence in self and trust in others, low mood, feeling numb etc. This is all normal. Don't expect too much of yourself at this time. Treat yourself well, give yourself time and let others look after you.

Later after sexual violence people may experience difficulty with intimacy in relationships, in particular, people often experience difficulty with sexual contact. Sometimes people can continue to experience anxiety, fear, and low mood. At this point lots of people find specialist counselling helpful in processing what has happened, and re-building parts of themselves, or parts of their life.

In the future, you can start to feel in control of your life once more and will be able to establish old routines again, or develop healthy new ones. You may learn about personal strengths and coping skills you did not know you had.

You cannot change what happened, but with time and support, you are able to move on from it. How often you think about what happened and the emotional impact of doing so can both decrease.

Give your self the best possible chance of moving forward from what has happened by looking after yourself and getting some support.

The Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA) service provides emotional and practical support which is individually tailored to meet the immediate, varied and specialist needs sexual assault and rape victims.

The service includes the following types of help:

- Providing you with emotional support, when maybe, there is no-one else to talk to about this
- Helping you stay safe
- Helping you communicate with the police, if you wish to, and providing you with support throughout the investigation
- Helping you understand and feel supported throughout the legal/ court processes
- Helping you access health and other related services
- Providing you with links to other agencies and forms of help for survivors of sexual violence, including counselling
- Helping you seek safe and appropriate housing, where necessary
- Helping you develop your support network