



Common Reactions to Sexual Assault

How Does Sexual Assault Affect a Victim?

Regardless of the relationship between the victim and perpetrator, sexual assault is always a traumatic and life affecting event. There are many social misconceptions about sexual violence and its affect on a victim. Many people think that if there is no obvious physical injury, or if the two parties had been intimate in the past, or if the victim is perceived in some way to have precipitated the assault against her then it really isn't rape. One has to only talk to victims to know how devastating a rape can be. Not only is it a physical assault, it is an assault that targets the most intimate part of an individual's being.

Many victims report that while the sexual assault/rape was horrendous, it was the fear of dying that terrified them. From one victim: "If he could do this to me, then he could just as easily kill me." That experience does not vary from victims of stranger rape to victims of acquaintance rape. The fear of imminent death is a common concern.

Can a victim recover?

Of course. While the effects of sexual violence can be devastating, with help, support, information, and reassurance a victim can heal from the experience. Many victims talk about the healing process as one that takes time and patience. Eventually, those who call themselves "survivors" find that they have been changed but not defeated by the experience.

Sexual Assault Myths and Reactions:

There are many myths about sexual assault/rape, victims, and perpetrators. While those myths are the result of misinformation, inaccurate perceptions or outdated attitudes, their impact on a victim can be powerful. Because of these myths, victims sometimes believe they are to blame for an assault, were not "really" raped, should have done more to resist the assailant, etc. We know, in contrast, that assailants carefully "set up" the victim and assault. Adherence to these myths may keep a victim from realizing that s/he did nothing to deserve the assault and is in no way to blame for what happened to them. Victims may think that "giving in" to pressure or threats is the same as giving consent. It is not!

What are the common reactions to rape?

Sexual assault of any kind can result in a host of reactions – some are immediate, some are long term. The variety of reactions may depend on the victim's previous life experience, the kind of force used, the relationship of the offender of the victim, the age of the victim, etc. Most victims experience levels of fear, anger, self-blame, depression and anxiety that can be exhibited both emotionally and physically. Difficulty sleeping and concentrating, nightmares, flashbacks, emotional numbing are all common reactions to sexual assault. The immediate and long term reactions to sexual assault are generally understood under the name "Rape Trauma Syndrome."

A victim of sexual assault may experience any or all of the following:

- Feeling of betrayal
- Rage
- Shame/humiliation
- Fear
- Self blame
- May feel loss of control over their life
- May fear they will not be believed by friends, family, and
- Heightened fear/anxiety
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Disassociation
- Generalized fear of things reminiscent of assault
 - season
 - location
 - sounds
 - smells

professionals

- May experience somatic responses
 - pain
 - aches
 - stomach problems
- Sleep loss
- Nightmares/flashbacks
- Heightened responses at the anniversary time of the assault
- Difficulty concentrating
- Fear of intimate relationships/becoming vulnerable
- Emotional numbing

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder:

Some victim/survivors of sexual assault may be diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD defines a cluster of symptoms that may accompany recovery from a traumatic event. While this is labeled a disorder, mental health professionals understand that PTSD symptoms describe a normal reaction to an abnormal and traumatizing event. When this reaction interferes with an individual's ability to function well in day to day life, the diagnosis and treatment may be warranted.

What can a victim do?

It is often difficult for a victim of **sexual assault** to come forward for many of the reasons listed above. If you are a victim you can:

- Do what you need to get to a safe place.
- Trust your feelings. If you feel as if you have been violated, trust that your feelings are accurate.
- Contact your local advocacy program for assistance. To find your local program, see the "Seek Help" page on the MNCASA website.
- Seek medical attention at the local hospital. It is important to make sure you are not injured. Also, if there is evidence of the crime, it can be documented and collected there at no cost to you in case you choose to make a report to law enforcement.
- Contact local law enforcement. Sexual assault is a crime in Minnesota, regardless of the relationship of the victim and perpetrator.
- Find someone safe to talk with. You do not deserve to be abused or assaulted by anyone.
- A victim of **sexual assault** can apply for a Harassment Restraining Order (HRO) which will keep the perpetrator from committing additional acts of violence. This can be accomplished free of charge and can be made effective immediately.

How can friends and family help a victim of sexual assault?

- Help the victim feel emotionally and physically safe.
- Believe the victim. A victim has very little to gain by making up a story about sexual assault or trafficking.
- Listen to the victim without judgment.
- Provide options instead of making decisions for the victim.
- Help the victim access as much information as possible to help her/him determine the best option to take.
- Contact your local advocacy program for information. See www.mncasa.org for a program in your county.
- Reassure the victim that she/he does not deserve to be hurt or abused.
- Reassure the victim that she/he is not to blame for being assaulted.
- Educate yourself. Understand how sexual assault happens.

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