



# Common Reactions to Sexual Assault

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## How does sexual assault affect a victim/survivor?

Regardless of the relationship between the victim/survivor and perpetrator, **sexual assault is a traumatic and life changing event.** There are many social misconceptions about sexual assault and its effect on a victim/survivor. 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/survivor is perceived in some way to have been at fault for the assault, then it really isn't "rape". One has to only talk to victim/survivors to know how devastating a sexual assault 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 victim/survivors report that while the sexual assault 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 victim/survivors of stranger sexual assault to victims of non-stranger sexual assault. The fear of imminent death is a common concern.

## Can a victim/survivor recover?

Yes. While the effects of a sexual assault can be devastating, with help, support, information, and reassurance a victim/survivor can heal from the experience. Many victim/survivors 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.

## Perceptions and reactions to sexual assault:

There are many false messages in society about sexual assault, victims/survivors, and perpetrators. While those messages are the result of misinformation, inaccurate perceptions or outdated attitudes, their impact on a victim/survivor can be powerful. Because of these messages, victim/survivors sometimes believe they are to blame for the assault, were not "really" raped, and 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 social messages may keep a victim from realizing that they did nothing to deserve the assault and is in no way to blame for what happened. **Victim/survivors may think that "giving in" to pressure or threats is the same as giving consent. It is not!**

## What are the common reactions to sexual assault?

Sexual assault of any kind can result in a wide range of reactions – some are immediate, some are long term. The variety of reactions may depend on the victim/survivor's previous life experience, the type of violation, if force was used, the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim/survivor, the age of the victim/survivor, previous victimization, etc. Most victim/survivors experience levels of fear, anger, self-blame, depression and anxiety that can be exhibited both emotionally and physically. Difficulty sleeping and concentrating, nightmares, flashbacks and emotional numbing are all common reactions to sexual assault.

A victim/survivor 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 professionals
- May experience somatic responses – aches, pain, stomach problems
- Sleep loss
- Nightmares/flashbacks
- Heightened fear/anxiety
- Depression
- Suicidal thoughts
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Disassociation
- Generalized fear of things reminiscent of assault
  - season
  - location
  - sounds
  - smells
- 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). Not everyone receives this diagnosis, understanding more about PTSD can help victim/survivors make sense of their response to their experience as well as provide hope during the healing process.

PTSD defines a number 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/survivor do?

It is often difficult for a victim/survivor of sexual assault to come forward for many of the reasons listed above. If you are a victim/survivor 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 "Find Help" page on the MNCASA website at [www.mncasa.org](http://www.mncasa.org).
- Seek medical attention at a 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 in case you choose to make a report to law enforcement. You do not need to report to law enforcement to have a forensic medical exam.
- Contact local law enforcement when you are ready. Sexual assault is a crime in Minnesota, regardless of the relationship to the person that assaulted you. Find someone safe to talk with. You do not deserve to be abused or assaulted by anyone.

A victim/survivor of sexual assault can apply for a Harassment Restraining Order (HRO) or an Order For Protection (OFP) 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?

- Help the victim/survivor feel emotionally and physically safe.
- Believe them! A victim/survivor has very little to gain by making up a story about sexual assault.
- Listen to them without judgment.
- Provide options instead of making decisions for the victim/survivor.
- Help the victim/survivor access as much information as possible to help them determine the best option to take.
- Contact your local advocacy program for information. See [www.mncasa.org](http://www.mncasa.org) for a program in your county.
- Reassure the victim/survivor that they do not deserve to be hurt or abused.
- Reassure the victim/survivor that what happened to them is not their fault.
- Educate yourself. Understand how sexual abuse or assault happens.

For more information, please contact:

