

Recovering from sexual assault

Eating and sleeping problems may also return. Nightmares are common. They may change from unsuccessful attempts to escape, to being in control of the rape situation. Violent fantasy dreams of revenge toward the assailant are also common and can be frightening. The expression of anger in dreams does not mean you are becoming a violent person, but indicates you are regaining control.

You may continue to be afraid long after the initial shock has faded. Fear is a healthy response to being threatened or betrayed. If the assailant was someone you knew, feelings of betrayal may make you fearful of trusting others. If the assailant was a stranger, you can expect to feel angry for a number of reasons. Your anger may be toward the person who hurt you. You might feel bitter at the injustice, or you may feel as though God (or a higher power) has abandoned you. It may seem that the situation is out of your hands. Sometimes anger and fear work together, which may make you wary of other people, as though you are expecting the rapist to be everywhere. Much of your anger may also be directed at yourself and those around you.

Although you may initially be preoccupied with matters related to the assault, later you may be surprised to notice that you have not thought of it for a while. This is an ongoing process. Although you cannot change what has happened, there are ways of integrating the assault into your life experience. You probably will relate differently to people now. You may be more aware of the need for respect and caring between people, particularly in sexual relationships. Your increased sensitivity to coercion or force may change your sexual responses. You may have mixed feelings about intimacy and control, especially in a sexual relationship.

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If you have never talked with anyone about what happened, you may decide that this is a good time to start. King County Sexual Assault Resource Center provides professional counseling services designed specifically to help people who have experienced sexual assault.

Recovery from sexual assault is a lengthy process; the passage of time often lessens the pain. Having difficulty does not mean you have developed serious mental or emotional problems. People recover from sexual assaults as they recover from other crises. In the course of reorganizing their lives, some women become more sure of their own strengths and more confident in the power of the healing process.

Remember, your feelings and experiences are not abnormal - and you are not alone!



King County
Sexual Assault
Resource Center

24-hour Sexual Assault Resource Line

1.800.825.7273

Toll-free in Western Washington only

King County Sexual Assault Resource Center

PO Box 300, Renton, WA 98057

tel. **425.226.5062**

Business line (Voice/TTY)

www.KCSARC.org

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if it
happens
to you

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King County
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Sexual assault can happen to anyone

Many people have been victims of rape and other sexual assaults; you are not alone. It is important to remember that it is not your fault. No matter what the circumstances, you did not deserve to be raped.

Sexual assault is difficult to think about, much less talk about. If you have been assaulted, you will probably be reading this after the immediate feelings of shock, disbelief and fear have faded. You may be feeling upset and confused.

A sexual assault creates a crisis, for both you and the people closest to you. People handle crises in a variety of ways — there is no right way.

Some survivors openly express their feelings in response to sexual assault, while others are more comfortable with controlling their feelings. You may need to seek someone you trust to talk with right away. This may help sort things out so you feel better. Or it may be that talking about the assault is difficult for you and makes you feel restless and tense. You may choose not to express your feelings at this time. Even though you are upset, acting calm and composed may make you feel better and more in control.

You may experience many different emotional and physical reactions as a result of the assault, especially as time passes. Collectively these reactions are referred to as Rape Trauma Syndrome. Rape Trauma Syndrome encompasses a wide variety of physical, emotional and behavioral reactions to a rape. The initial stage begins immediately after a rape and may last up to six months. This is often followed by an underground stage, in which victims may feel as though their life is returning to normal. Finally, in the reorganization stage, victims may return to a period of emotional turmoil and begin to come to terms with the rape.

Initial reactions

You may be very confused and feel that your life is disorganized. You may have difficulty solving problems or making decisions. Though you may feel that there are too many things on your mind right now, remember that this is a time to take special care of yourself. You might want to do something that comforts you, such as making your house more secure or spending time with people who care about you. Physical comforts may also help. Remember not to be hard on yourself and to take each day as it comes.

Nightmares and crying out in your sleep may be very frightening but are not abnormal. Difficulty in getting to sleep, or waking up in the night and being unable to get back to sleep are also common. A couple of days without a good night's sleep can be very trying and will probably increase your irritability and stress. Fatigue and depression may also bring on a general soreness all over your body and a susceptibility to illness.

The unfairness of what has happened to you may trouble you for some time. Unfortunately, there are no guarantees that a sexual assault won't occur. Unfair things happen to people who do not deserve them.

Many survivors find that it eases their mind to take some kind of action. We all have ways of dealing with stressful situations; you can use the same skills that have helped you through other difficult problems to help you through this one. You might also develop new ways of coping with difficult situations.

It's likely you have heard statements that blame victims of rape for what happened—"She asked for it," or "It happened because..." Such remarks can make you feel humiliated and ashamed. Your reaction might also be feelings of guilt; you might begin to blame and question yourself about what you should or shouldn't have done to avoid being raped. It's important to remind yourself that the responsibility lies only with the rapist.

Underground stage

You may find yourself wanting to forget the assault ever happened and avoiding any discussion of it as well. Some people make major changes in their lives at this time; others resume usual activities.

There will be times when you feel fine; it will seem that things are going well and you are handling the crisis in the best possible way. The next moment, however, you may find yourself in tears for no apparent reason. Crying spells may worry you but are a good way of releasing tension. Because of the intensity of these feelings, you might experience wide mood swings. As a result, you may be short-tempered with the people you care about most.

Reorganization stage

As you begin to feel that you are back in control of things, you may suddenly be reminded of the assault. This reminder can come weeks, months or even years after the assault. You may feel depressed, anxious and fearful again. Seeing someone who looks like the assailant or receiving a court subpoena can trigger your previous emotional upset. You may develop specific fears related to details of the assault, and have powerful reactions to particular smells, sights or sounds that remind you of what happened. You may be more sensitive to the subject of rape and more aware of the frequency of sexual violence.