



Sexual Assault Response Services

of Southern Maine

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RAPE TRAUMA SYNDROME AND SYMPTOMS

Rape Trauma Syndrome is a pattern of physical, emotional and behavioral stress reactions (or symptoms) that often appear after a life-threatening event such as sexual abuse or assault. These symptoms may appear, then disappear, and perhaps reappear much later. The extent to which the symptoms are present gives an indication of how well a person is coping with the experience. It is very important for a victim/survivor to know that these are normal responses and that they will eventually subside.

REACTIVE DEPRESSION

- Sleeplessness, nightmares, walking in the night, early morning rising
- Nausea, loss of appetite
- Crying jags (uncontrollable, unprovoked crying); often can be controlled by allowing self to cry at “safe” times
- Depression, becoming silent and withdrawn
- Hyper-self consciousness, fear of people finding out and their reactions

SPECIFIC TO SEXUAL ASSAULT:

- Soreness: in the areas of the assault, aches, pains
- Fears: of being alone, of being in crowds, of anything that reminds them of the assault or assailant; fear of the return of the assailant, general nervousness
- Phobias: effective strategies for coping with the feelings in the aftermath of rape; feelings can not be processed at once, and phobias take certain feelings, like fear, and attach these to certain things; For example: if raped at a mall, a victim may be afraid to go to the mall. These are coping strategies, and while distressing, they will fade when no longer needed.
- Strong feelings: guilt, anger, embarrassment, mood swings
- Disruptions: in previous ways of relating to people, including family, of sexual style, of daily routine to work or school
- Escape: desire to move, get away, change jobs or school
- Somatizing: diverting feelings through the body, i.e. migraines or ulcers
- Flashbacks: many rape survivors will literally re-experience parts of the assault; physical pain may literally be felt again; this a normal reaction
- Washing: taking lots of showers or baths, trying to scrub the experience away; feelings of being dirty or contaminated
- Shame: feeling that the rape was their fault; feeling that they will be blamed if others know; these are typical reactions, the rape survivor needs to be reassured that the assault was not their fault

Help, Hope, and Healing

- Denial or minimizing of the assault: particularly if the assailant was an acquaintance; may focus on the sexual nature of the crime rather than on the motives of power and control

All symptoms will run their course. Although the reactions of depression, anger, fear, guilt, shame and sadness are normal these feelings are painful and will be the strongest for the first six to eight weeks, with marked improvements at six months to one year. Eighteen months and three years are also markers. The primary symptoms are typically over in 12 to 18 months, but this varies greatly for each individual.

Post-Rape Phases: There are three defined and overlapping phases that occur for most rape survivors.

1. Phase One (Acute Phase): Victim is in extreme stress or shock. May express great fear and anxiety and display some of the symptoms of Rape Trauma Syndrome listed above. Some people may become very quiet and controlled in their response. Others may be all smiles and giggly. Still others may cry and become hysterical. There is no single reaction; it depends on the victim's usual way of responding to stress. This phase may last hours or days.
2. Phase Two: Victim appears to accept the fact of the rape, and an attitude of "I've got to live with it" begins to emerge. Wants to get on with the business of living and forgetting what happened. Still may be experiencing a lot of the above symptoms. This phase may last weeks, months, or even years.
3. Phase Three: Victim begins to think increasingly about what happened. Some of the symptoms may return and the survivor may become depressed, anxious, or fearful. Functions less well generally. Feels a need to talk about the sexual assault and resulting feelings.

ANNIVERSARY REACTIONS:

The first year anniversary reaction may onset up to ten days before, symptoms may reoccur, the day or the date is the most unsettled, but 48 to 72 hours later the victim will usually begin to feel better. Each year the reaction will usually continue to diminish and eventually stop.

Most survivors do not develop major sexual dysfunction after rape if they were healthy and sexually active before. Those not active before the sexual assault may have more problems because they have no "normal" history. Others can discard the experience as sexually aberrant.

RECOVERY FROM SEXUAL ASSAULT IS POSSIBLE:

It is important that victims of sexual assault know that what they are going through is normal and that recovery from sexual assault is possible. Each victim of sexual assault will be affected differently by the crisis and will find their own path to recovery. Recovery will be at different rates and in different manners depending upon their specific personality, the support network available to them, and the reactions of those with whom they first have contact with after the assault. It is important for victims to make their own decisions to help them to regain control over their bodies and their lives.