

What Are the Effects of Sexual Assault?

Different people react to stress and trauma differently. Most people recover with support and counseling. Common reactions can include denial, physical problems, a mix of emotions and relationship concerns, and finally resolution.

Denial: Not wanting to talk about it. There is a sense of wanting to get on with life and put the experience in the past. This may, in fact, last for months.

Physical problems: These may include sexually transmitted disease, as well as physical symptoms of stress, such as stomachaches, headaches, back problems, inability to sleep, or diminished appetite.

Emotional reactions:

- **Feelings of anger, helplessness, guilt, pain, embarrassment, or anxiety.** These are all typical reactions and generally disappear with time. In any case, keep in mind that whatever happened and however it happened, sexual assault is the fault of the assailant, not the victim.
- **Fear of being alone.** This may be especially acute shortly after the assault but can also continue for a while afterwards.
- **Doubting the choice of partners.** Victims of date rape, especially, are left doubting their choice of partners and wondering how they can ever again date safely and if they will be able to trust themselves and others. Some women may be fearful and angry at all men. Counseling can be especially helpful in preventing this from becoming a long lasting problem.
- **Afraid to trust.** This may manifest itself long after the actual sexual assault has occurred when the survivor begins to date again and wonders if it will happen once more.
- **Sexual problems.** For some people, these may continue for a long time since the sexual act now has been associated with so many negative feelings. Again, counseling can often be helpful in overcoming these problems.
- **Depression.** This can sometimes come and go over a long period of time. Generally, the more a survivor can talk about her situation, the less severe the depression.
- **Concern over reactions from family/friends.** It is not always necessary for a survivor to tell her family and/or all of her friends if she is very sure that they will not support her and will react badly. However, family and close friends may be more supportive than the victim anticipates.

Adapted from *the Project on the Status and Education of Women, Association of American Colleges (1987)* www.cs.utk.edu/~bartley/acquaintRape.html

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2006

- **Difficulty Concentrating.** Sometimes memories of the assault are intrusive and disturb sleep, or fears about encountering the perpetrator again may cloud thinking.
 - **Resolution**
 - **Dealing with fears and feelings.** The primary way to work through these feelings is to talk to someone, be it a friend, member of the clergy, hotline, or professional counselor.
 - **Regaining a sense of control over life.** This will happen usually only after a victim has dealt with her fears and feelings. At this point, she will be ready to put the experience behind her and get on with her life; she is ready to be in charge again.
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For counseling and referrals call the Siena College Center for Counseling and Student and Development at 783-2342 or the Albany County Crime Victim and Sexual Violence Center (Rape Crisis) at 447-7100