

## Victim Reactions to Sexual Assault

Women who become victims of sexual assault typically experience the victimization as a traumatic event. There are common reactions to this kind of trauma or shock; but at the same time, each woman responds in her own unique way.

### *Typical Responses*

You may find that you have experienced in the past and perhaps are currently experiencing some or all of these reactions. You are likely to find that you have experienced or are experiencing different levels of intensity of some of these reactions.

- 1. *Fear responses:*** The most common victim reaction to sexual assault is fear. At the time of the assault, most victims have an overwhelming experience is fear-- of being physically injured (beaten, cut, shot, etc.) or even of being killed. Fear responses associated with the assault (to certain sights, sounds, smells, thoughts, etc.) can persist for weeks, months, or even years. Victims who have been assaulted typically avoid anything which reminds them of the assault (places, situations, people, etc.). Some men and women become so fearful that they greatly restrict their activities, even to the point that they are unable to leave their homes or to be left alone.
- 2. *Losing control:*** After experiencing a sexual assault, many men and women fear that they are losing *control* over their lives. They have been forced to participate in an act that was against their wills. They lost control over their lives at the time of the assault, and this feeling of loss of control may continue after the assault.
- 3. *Flashbacks:*** Victims may re-experience the assault over and over again in their thoughts and/or in their dreams. When this happens, it is almost as though the assault is actually occurring again. This re-experience of the event is called a *flashback*.
- 4. *Trouble concentrating:*** Sexual assault victims may find that they have trouble concentrating on things. It is as though they cannot keep their minds on what they are doing. This can be frustrating and add to the sense of loss of control.
- 5. *Guilty feelings:*** The most common source of guilty feelings are the result of self-blame. The victim tells him- or herself such things as, "I should not have been out that late," or "I should have been dressed differently," or "If I had been more careful about locking the door, this would not have happened." Sexual assault victims may also feel guilty about what they had to do in order to survive the assault, such as activities the victim felt he or she had to engage in in an effort to save him- or herself from serious physical harm or even death. In some instances, guilty feelings result from the fact that others may have been seriously harmed more than the victim herself. This is referred to as *survivor's guilt*.
- 6. *Feeling "dirty":*** Self-image frequently suffers as a result of the assault. Many victims report feeling "dirty" and may take frequent showers in an effort to feel clean.
- 7. *Depression:*** Another common reaction to sexual assault is a sense of sadness or depression. There may be feelings of hopelessness and despair, frequent crying spells, and sometimes even thoughts of suicide. A loss of interest in activities and things that previously were enjoyable often accompanies these feelings of sadness and despair. Nothing seems like it is fun anymore.

8. ***Disrupted relationships:*** It is not unusual to see a disruption in relationships with others after a sexual assault. This is, in part, a result of the withdrawn behavior that frequently accompanies sadness and depression. The victim may also feel embarrassment and ashamed about what happened to them. However, the support of friends and family plays a vitally important role in the victim's recovery from the trauma of sexual assault.

9. ***Loss of interest in sex:*** After an assault it is not unusual for the victim to experience a significant loss of interest in sexual relations. It is understandable that sexual assault trauma would lead to an avoidance of sexual activity. There may be other factors involved, however. For instance, it is very common for people who are depressed to experience a decrease in libido or sexual drive.

Some of these reactions are connected with each other. For some women, having flashbacks, for example, may increase their concern about losing control of their lives and may even intensify the fear responses. In other words, the responses to being sexually assaulted often interact with one another and may cause the overall response to become more intense. Of these nine categories of reactions, *fear* is the most common and appears to be the most debilitating. For this reason, this handout will focus on this very normal and very predictable response to being sexually assaulted. We want to emphasize, in fact, that all of the nine reactions listed here are normal responses to experiencing a traumatic event (whether or not the traumatic event is a sexual assault).

## **Fear and Anxiety**

Fear and anxiety are difficult to distinguish from each other. In general, fear usually has a specific object (person, place, situation, etc.) that is identified as the feared object. Anxiety (worry, uneasiness, distress, etc.) on the other hand, is usually more vague. For example, weeks, even months, after the assault, it is not uncommon for victims to describe a feeling of general uneasiness or jitteriness--a feeling that something bad is going to happen.

Victims of sexual assault may experience both fear and anxiety. Long after the assault, victims may continue to experience a fear response triggered by any number of reminders of the sexual assault. The triggers or stimuli might be certain features of the man who assaulted you, such as skin color, facial hair, body build, type of dress, and so forth. It might be related to the situation or the setting in which the assault took place, such as dark nights, country roads, or even your own home. In other words, anything which reminds you of the assault may serve as a trigger for a fear response. Places, situations, smells, etc. are often avoided because these stimuli remind the victim of the assault and trigger the fear reaction.

### ***The Physical Reaction***

People react to any kind of fearful situation on three different levels: physical, mental, and behavioral. Our physical reactions are *automatic*; when faced with danger--or anything we interpret as dangerous--our bodies automatically respond. For instance, our hearts begin to beat faster and harder, our blood pressure increases, we breathe faster and harder, and our muscles get more tense. These kinds of physical reactions are the result of a flow of adrenalin, and is referred to as a "fight" or "flight" response. When we perceive that we are being threatened, our bodies automatically get ready to either fight the threatening object or to run away from the threat.

Sexual assault victims first experience this physical reaction to danger during the attack itself. Weeks, months, or years later, the victim may experience a similar reaction (rapid heartbeat, rapid breathing, tense muscles, and so on) to reminders of the assault.

### *The Mental Reaction*

Sometimes it is not a physical reminder, but rather a thought or emotion, that triggers or stimulates fear. It is not unusual, for example, for an assault victim to wonder if the assailant will come back and harm him or her again, or if someone else is lurking in the shadows waiting to victimize her. It is not unusual for the victim to fear being alone.

Sometimes certain people, places, things, or circumstances will trigger these thoughts; at other times, the thoughts just enter the minds of the victims without any clear stimuli. For example, many victims report that pictures of the assault flash through their minds, even though they do not want, and try not, to think about it. These kinds of experiences--of having frightening thoughts invade their minds--seem to be virtually uncontrollable at times and can make it difficult to concentrate. Or, many people have nightmares or "night terrors" (in which they wake up crying but can't recall what they were dreaming about) related to the assault. They feel that, even while asleep, they are not safe from frightening thoughts; these kinds of intrusive thoughts, images, and dreams may lead a victim to think she is going crazy since she does not seem to be able to control her mind.

It is very important to know that these reactions are not abnormal! Very stressful, traumatic events can often lead to these kinds of reactions.

### *The Behavioral Reaction*

A third way that trauma victims respond to the fear and anxiety associated with the traumatic event is on a *behavioral* level, where they try to control or avoid the fear response itself. In other words, they try to avoid the intense discomfort associated with the physical and mental aspects of fear and anxiety. They will go to great lengths to avoid people, places, things, or situations which remind them of the assault. One woman, for instance, who was sexually assaulted at work, began to experience flashbacks and felt physically shaky when she approached her office. Another woman drastically altered her behavior in terms of never being out of her home alone after dark because of the circumstances of her assault. Shopping, picking up her children, visiting friends and relatives, even putting out the garbage were governed by the number of hours of daylight and dark.

Once again, it may seem to the victim like he or she has lost control over their life, but it is important to emphasize that these kinds of reactions--physical, mental, and behavioral--are normal.

## **Interactions**

These physical, mental, and behavioral responses to fear and anxiety may occur separately. Most often, however, they occur simultaneously and influence or interact with each other. For example, having thoughts, flashbacks, or dreams (mental reactions) about the traumatic event usually triggers a physical reactions, such as rapid breathing, increased heart rate and muscle tension. These reactions, in turn, may lead to behaviors which help avoid the victims avoid the stimuli that triggered the mental and physical reactions.

## Summary

Typical responses to sexual assault are one or more of the following:

- Fear responses to reminders of the assault
- Feeling like you are losing control of your life or you mind
- Re-experiencing assault over and over again through flashbacks
- Problems concentrating and staying focused on the task at hand
- Guilty feelings
- Developing a negative self-image; feeling “dirty” inside or out
- Depression
- Disruptions in close relationships
- Loss of interest in sex

Fear and anxiety cause physical, mental, and behavioral reactions, all of which may lead the assault survivor to feel as though he or she has no control over her life.

Most importantly, **all of these reactions are normal responses to the traumatic event you have experienced!**