

Typical Reactions to Sexual Assault

Survivors of sexual assault suffer a significant degree of emotional trauma. Their symptoms can last long after the assault. Survivors describe symptoms which have been classified as “rape trauma syndrome,” a subtype of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. This syndrome has three stages, though the symptoms of each stage can overlap and vary in duration from person to person. People can cycle through these stages over time.

I. The Acute Phase

- Can last for several weeks.
- Most common feeling is a heightened sense of fear: fear of being alone, fear of the dark, fear of men, fear of the rapist returning.
- Other common feelings include guilt, shame, embarrassment, confusion, anger, sadness, shock, confusion, anxiety, numbness, and detachment.
- Survivors may also experience disorganized thoughts and short-term memory loss.

II. The Outward Adjustment Phase

- Can last from weeks to years.
- Survivor often feels depressed or experiences sense of loss.
- May deny that rape has affected her, may assure everyone that she’s fine.
- May stuff her feelings to avoid pain or in reaction to a belief that people are tired of hearing about the assault or her feelings.
- May spend a lot of time distracting herself.
- May experience a lot of anger, anxiety, helplessness, increased sleep, nightmares, insomnia, tension, appetite changes.

III. The Integration Phase

- Survivor integrates assault into her life so the incident is not the daily focus.
- Able to function well in daily activities.
- Troublesome feelings occur less intensely or less frequently.
- Survivor can still be triggered, or have flashbacks.

Please remember there is no specific time line for healing, no “right” or “wrong” way to process the trauma.

At times, survivors won’t want to talk about the trauma. This can be true in any of the above stages.

At the same time, it’s important for survivors to remember that—when they are ready--talking with those they trust (perhaps even a professional) about the trauma will likely speed their healing.