

SAAVI Office

Sexual Assault and Anti Violence Information

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SEXUAL ASSAULT TRAUMA SYNDROME

Sexual assault is a crisis that overtaxes the psychological resources of an individual because it is beyond habitual problem-solving methods. It differs from other life crisis in that:

1. It involves physical and emotional injury.
2. If reported to the police, the victim may face further crises.
3. Reactions of other may be those of disbelief and hostility, rather than of concern and empathy.
4. The victim may be harassed, may decide to move, and there may be changes in close relationships.

Phase I: The Crisis

The first phase of the trauma is the most intense and crucial, and may last a few days to a few weeks. During this time, the victim must make immediate and long-term decisions regarding information sharing and medical treatment. The initial support a victim receives can have a significant influence on her/his recovery.

Emotional: The victim may openly express her/his reaction through crying, agitation, shaking, nervous smiling, and apprehension. Or the victim may appear very calm, indicating denial, shock, or exhaustion. The emotions expressed may be:

Shock and Disbelief “I felt numb all over,” “The world seemed different,” “How could this happen to me?”

Anger and Rage “I was so mad,” “How could he have treated me that way,” “I was so angry that I had to just take it!”

Fear “The terror was overpowering,” “I was scared it would happen all over again,” “I was scared he’d kill me,” “I’m afraid to be alone,” “I’m afraid he’ll find me.”

Guilt “It was my fault,” “I should have known better,” “If I hadn’t...”
(It takes many victims a great deal of time to correctly place blame on the assailant)

Physical: During the first few weeks following the assault, acute physical symptoms often occur such as oral, vaginal, or anal soreness and bruising. The survivor may have to deal with sexually transmitted disease or pregnancy.

Behavior: Some survivors experience nightmares and flashbacks. They may be afraid to go outside or be with too many people. Some may lapse into crying, refuse to go back to work or see anyone, experience changes in eating, drinking, or sexual habits.

Phase II: Initial Adjustment

The survivor will try to return to pre-crisis life without resolving the problem. The victim may say "I'm Fine," and suppress, deny, or rationalize the assault.

Phase III: Resolution

Resolution begins when a survivor realizes s/he must deal with feelings about the assault. This realization may be due to depression resulting from suppressed anger or from experiencing something that reminds them of the assault. A survivor's adjustment depends on:

1. Immediate support system after the assault.
2. Prior level of stability and ego strength.
3. The degree of support from family and friends.

Resolution is often complete when s/he can view the assault as a challenge that s/he has overcome and can integrate into her/his life.