Feelings and coping after a sexual assault

Everyone reacts and feels differently after experiencing such a traumatic event and whatever you are feeling right now is a completely normal response to what has happened to you.

Some common feelings you may experience are:

• anger/numbness/fear
• self-blame/guilt
• crying/anxiety/panic attacks
• flashbacks (reliving the events)
• sleeping problems
• isolation/powerlessness or denial.

Some of the long term effects can include:

• recurring nightmares
• relationship problems
• flashbacks or depression
• using drugs and/or alcohol to try to block out the memory of what happened
• controlling your eating or self-harming.

This list of effects can be endless, and some people may experience all or none of these feelings. Whatever you are feeling, or however you are coping, you are surviving what has happened to you in your own way.

About sexual violence

Following a recent sexual assault you may have many issues to consider. It is important to consider the possibilities of injury, pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections, and whether or not to report the assault to the police. The amount of support and help you receive at this time can help you to overcome the initial shock and disruption to your life.

The Sexual Offences (Scotland) Bill as passed in June 2009 considers the offence of rape to have been committed if a person penetrates to any extent the vagina, anus or mouth of another person without the other person’s consent. However, sexual violence takes many forms and can include: unwanted touching, fondling, sexual harassment, threats of violence, pressurised sex, flashing, penetration by objects, childhood sexual abuse and sexual assault. In short, sexual violence is any kind of unwanted sexual behaviour.

Most forms of sexual violence are criminal offences in Scotland and all of them have a significant and harmful impact which can be just as distressing as rape itself. It is an abuse of power and a form of control which causes humiliation, pain, fear and intimidation.

Instances of sexual violence occur more commonly than is realized; as many as 1 in 4 women and approximately 1 in 9 of adult males are estimated to experience sexual violence at some point during their lives. People of every age, gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion and cultural background can experience sexual violence.

Physical injuries

If you have any physical injuries you should consider having them treated by your doctor or local accident and emergency department. You may need medical attention, especially if you are bleeding or in pain. If you feel worried or nervous it may help to take a friend for support. Some people find it helpful to have all their questions written down. Remember, no-one has the right to make you go through anything you don’t feel you are able to, and you don’t have to tell the doctor about the assault if you don’t want to.

Pregnancy

If there is a possibility of pregnancy you may want to take the morning after pill (effective for up to 72 hours after) or have a coil fitted (effective for up to 5 days after). If this course of action is right for you, go to your Family Planning Clinic or GP. You may want to take a
pregnancy test. Again, you can ask your GP or the local Family Planning Clinic to do a pregnancy test, or you can buy a home pregnancy testing kit for around £6, which is accurate 2-3 weeks following conception. They are available from any chemist, have clear instructions, and are reliable.

Sexually transmitted infections
If you are worried that you may have caught a sexually transmitted infection (STI) it is a good idea to be tested. If you do have an STI, treatment can prevent you from becoming more seriously ill later on. You can go to a specialist clinic to have tests done. Details of your local Genito-urinary Medicine (GUM) clinic can be found at www.sexualhealthscotland.co.uk/get-help/directory-of-local-and-national-services/. GUM clinics provide completely confidential testing and often run women-only sessions as well as specialist sessions for people who have been raped or sexually assaulted – but you can go on any clinic day. It doesn’t matter whether the assault happened recently or in the past.

Everything that happens at the GUM clinic will be confidential, and you do not have to tell them that you have been assaulted. You or your doctor can make an appointment and you don’t have to give your own name. You can take a friend with you for support.

Reporting a sexual assault to the police
It is entirely your decision whether you want to report what has happened to you to the police or not but it is worth noting that The Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland (ACPOS) investigation manual states that “Without exception all reports of sexual assaults will be regarded as valid and investigated accordingly”. You can report directly to your local police station, or you can call and ask for your local Family Protection Unit. You can arrange to speak to an officer first and then decide if you want to report a crime. For female survivors, a female officer is available if this makes you more comfortable.

Healing and support
It may be very difficult to talk about what happened to you and you may fear not being believed. Some people do not want to tell anyone, and some never will. However, as a survivor of sexual violence it can be very hard to simply forget about what has happened, no matter how hard you try. As part of the healing process, breaking the silence and talking about your thoughts and feelings can help. Only you will know when the time feels right for you. Taking this step can be the beginning of regaining control over your own life and moving on. Even if it happened a long time ago, your feelings are still important.

Healing can take time and it is important to be patient with yourself and take things at your own pace. There is no right or wrong way and the most important thing is to trust your own feelings, and if you are able to, talk to someone you trust. It may be painful at first but it can help.

If you don’t want to talk to your family members or friends about your experience you can contact the free Rape Crisis Scotland Helpline on 08088 01 03 02 (open every day from 6pm – midnight). They will listen to you, believe and support you and offer confidential, emotional and practical support, information and advice.

Remember that you don’t have to go through this alone.

Some myths about rape and sexual assault
Myths about sexual violence are dangerous and hide the real causes of rape. They take the responsibility away from the offenders who commit the attack and blame the survivors. This only serves to minimise a survivor’s experience and make excuses for the offenders who commit crimes of sexual violence.

MYTH: ‘Real’ rape only occurs at the hands of strangers in dark alleys at night, behind bushes or in lonely places.

TRUTH: Contrary to popular belief, research shows that in the majority of cases the rapist is known and trusted by the person. This could be a husband, wife, friend, partner, ex-partner, relative, acquaintance, work colleague or anyone else known to the survivor. In the 2000 British Crime Survey, strangers accounted for only 8% of rapes. The survey also showed that people are far more likely to be sexually assaulted in their own homes than any other location.
MYTH: Some people make up stories about rape and sexual assault.

TRUTH: It has been proven that the level of false reporting of rape is about the same as that of any other crime – 3%. The nature of the physical examination a person is required to undergo when reporting rape, and the intimate questioning about his or her life, make it unlikely that someone would lie about being raped or assaulted. Why would anyone put themselves through this without just cause?

MYTH: Rape is just sex when you don’t want it.

TRUTH: Rape and sexual assault are not just sex; they are criminal acts. They involve the total humiliation of a person. Forcing anyone to take part in sexual acts against her/his will is not about sex. It is used to cause emotional and physical hurt, and takes control away from the person against their will. Research shows that rapists themselves say that rape is more about power and violence than about sex.

MYTH: Rape is only something that happens to women.

TRUTH: At least 1 in 9 of all adult males are estimated to experience sexual violence at some point during their lives. Feelings of guilt and shame can be powerful due to the social stigma attached to the rape of a male. These common myths can lead survivors to believe that they have brought the attack on themselves - shaming them into silence and preventing them from speaking out about their experiences or seeking help. Many survivors find it difficult to talk about their experiences. They may fear not being believed or being blamed for the attack perpetrated against them. However, no matter what you were wearing or doing, wherever you were, whether you were drunk or under the influence of drugs – you do not deserve to be sexually assaulted.

The responsibility always lies with the attacker.

Sexual assaults are crimes, and people should be able to live their lives free from fear and from attack.