

Sexual assault can happen to anyone.

Many women have been victims of rape and other sexual assaults; you are not alone. What happened was not your fault, no matter what the circumstances. You did not deserve to be raped.

If you were assaulted recently, or if you are just beginning to think about an assault that happened in the past, you may be feeling a variety of emotions: **Numbness, denial, confusion, upset, anger, shock, disbelief, fear, self-blame**

You may also be feeling a need to “get back to normal.” A sexual assault creates a crisis—both for you and for the people closest to you. **People handle crises in a variety of ways. There is no right or wrong way.**

Some women express their feelings openly in response to a sexual assault, while others are more comfortable controlling their feelings. You may want to find someone you trust to talk with right away. Or it may be that talking about the assault is difficult for you right now. You may choose not to express your feelings at this time. By acting calm and composed (even though you may be upset) you may feel more in control.

You may experience many different emotional and physical reactions as a result of the assault:

- ✓ You may notice that your appetite has decreased or your food may not taste right. Your stomach may be upset or you may feel nauseous. This is an important time to watch for signs of sexually transmitted diseases if it is possible you have been exposed to them.
- ✓ Nightmares, difficulty getting to sleep, or waking up in the night and being unable to get back to sleep are common. Even a few days without a good night’s sleep can increase the stress you are feeling. On the other hand, you might be sleeping a lot more than before. You’ve survived a trauma—sleeping a lot can be a natural reaction.
- ✓ You may find yourself struggling with depression. You might have difficulty making decisions that were easier before the assault. You may experience mood swings or crying spells. Though crying spells may be worrisome or frightening, they can be a way to release tension.
- ✓ As a result of the assault many things in your life may feel out of control. In the course of the assault you may not have had control over what happened to your body. During parts of the assault you may not have been sure if you were going to live or die. That loss of control is part of the trauma of sexual assault, and it takes most survivors time before they begin to feel in control of some things again.

- ✓ You may be feeling like your life is chaotic or disorganized right now. Though you may have a lot on your mind right now, remember that this is a time to take special care of yourself. You might want to do something that comforts you physically or emotionally. Try not to be too hard on yourself. Take each day as it comes.

With time, the fear and confusion will lessen. Sometimes, however, as you begin to regain a feeling of control over parts of your life, you may still be reminded of the assault. Feelings of depression, fear or anxiety may surface again, weeks, months, or even years after the assault. Seeing someone who looks like the assailant, or being in a place in which you feel unsafe can trigger some of your previous emotional upset. You may develop specific fears related to the detail of the assault, and have powerful reactions to smells, sights, or sounds that remind you of what happened. Sometimes the anniversary of the assault can be a difficult time.

Eating and sleeping problems may continue to occur sometimes. If you have nightmares, they may develop into attempts at being in control of the situation. Violent fantasies of revenge toward the assailant can be frightening, but the expression of anger does not necessarily mean you are becoming a violent person. It may indicate you are regaining control.

It's not your fault. It is likely that you have heard statements that blame victims of sexual violence for what happened: "She asked for it," or "It happened because she . . ." Such remarks can make you feel humiliated and ashamed. You may be blaming yourself and questioning your own actions. No matter what, what happened was not your fault. You may have your own set of rules about safety and behavior. We've been led to believe that being careful or acting in a certain manner will protect us from a sexual assault. If we don't follow the "rules" and we are assaulted, we are led to believe that the assault was something we could have prevented; that it was "our fault." That is not true. **The responsibility for the assault is on the shoulders of the offender.** If you had made all the same choices and, under all the same circumstances, the offender had not made the choice to assault you, you would probably not feel the same self-blame about your choices and actions. The difference is what the offender did, not what you did. The offender committed a crime—you did not.

Your feelings are natural reactions to a traumatic event. Recovery from sexual assault is hard. Having difficulty does not mean you are crazy or mentally ill. People recover from sexual assault as they recover from other traumatic events. Sometimes, talking about what happened can help. If you would like to talk to an advocate you can call our hotline, 748-8141.