

The Victim's Reaction

Sexual assault is always traumatic and those who survive often have severe stress reactions similar to those of people who have survived other life threatening events, such as war or natural disaster. There are four stages of reaction to a sexual assault:

Crisis Stage: In the hours and days immediately following the assault, shock and denial are common reactions. It's hard to believe the assault really happened and difficult to understand why. The victim may feel strong emotions and appear visibly disturbed, crying, shaking, or even fainting. Or she / he may be in shock, feel no emotion at all, and seem calm and composed or even cold and detached. All these reactions are normal.

During the crisis stage, the most common emotion is fear – fear of the attacker returning, of being alone, of places like the one where the assault occurred or of people who remind the victim of the attacker. Victims often feel angry, depressed, confused and irritable. Many also feel guilty, ashamed, and 'dirty' because they believe the myths that blame victims for the assault.

There are many physical reactions after a sexual assault, including pain, soreness, eating and sleeping disturbances. Some sexual assault victims may want to talk about their experience soon afterwards; others may wait until much later or may never feel comfortable talking about it. Some victims do not want to be touched after an assault and others want increased physical affection.

Denial Stage: During this stage, the victim may deny any effects from the assault and may assure you things are fine. This may be because she / he thinks everyone is tired of hearing about the assault or because the victim is trying to shut out the pain and get back 'to normal'. In an effort to put the assault behind him / her, the victim may also want to change lifestyles, jobs, or residences. This stage can be brief or can last for many years. Sometimes while in the denial stage, victims may turn to harmful things (alcohol, drugs, overeating or overworking) to enable them to numb their feelings and go on.

Suffering Stage: This stage is when the reality of the assault sinks in. It is characterized by depression and feelings of loss. The victim's sense of security and control over her / his life has been devastated.

Common reactions include fear, nightmares, changes in sleeping and eating, sexual problems, physical aches and pains, difficulty concentrating and loss of interest in usual activities. Anger, guilt, and shame are common. Victims may have frequent, disturbing memories of the assault and 'flashbacks', when it seems the assault is happening again. This stage is very painful for victims. Mood swings are common and it is not unusual for victims to misdirect their anger toward loved ones or themselves at this time.

Resolution Stage: This stage begins when the victim starts the long term process of resolving her / his feelings about the sexual assault, the attacker and her / himself. The goal of this stage is to move from 'victim' to 'survivor' and to integrate the sexual assault as an accepted, although painful, event in one's life. If integration is not achieved, the survivor may continue to have problems in many life areas.

Although all sexual assault survivors pass through the four stages of healing, the passage is not always smooth or straightforward. A survivor may be in two stages at the same time, may return to a previous stage for a time, or get stuck in one stage.