

Common Reactions After Sexual Assault



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
SEXUAL ASSAULT CENTRE

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A range of experiences, symptoms, and reactions are common after a sexual assault. While these are normal, these symptoms themselves can often be distressing and disruptive. Most survivors of sexual assault are frustrated by the remaining after-effects they struggle with, and often worry they have been permanently affected. However, these symptoms and reactions can be overcome, and a sense of normalcy and wellness can be experienced again.

Sexual assault is typically experienced by the mind and body as a trauma, and it is common for survivors to develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). However, many survivors do not immediately recognize that they are suffering from trauma symptoms. Instead, their reactions make them feel "crazy" or as though

something is wrong. In these instances, they might tell themselves or feel that they are not "handling this well" or "keeping it together."

Many of the symptoms experienced after a sexual assault are also common after other traumatic events. And yet, having symptoms after a trauma, such as a sexual assault, is not a choice and is not an indication of personal weakness. Instead, these symptoms are normal reactions to abnormal life events and individual reactions may continue or develop for many months or years after the traumatic experience. Understanding which reactions are typical can be comforting to those who feel as though their responses are unique or overreactions.

Re-experiencing Symptoms

Sexual assault survivors commonly re-experience cognitive, emotional, or physical memories related to their sexual assault. These may be specific memories or more generalized feelings similar to the emotions or sensations related to the sexual assault.

Some common symptoms related to re-experiencing trauma include:

- Unwanted or intrusive thoughts related to the sexual assault that are difficult to avoid.
- Vivid recollections—visual, emotional, or physical flashbacks—of the sexual assault and the feelings associated with it. (These recollections, to the survivor, can make them feel as though the assault is happening again.)

- Nightmares of the sexual assault or similar content.
- Feeling emotional or agitated when reminded of the issue of sexual assault.
- Generalized or specific anxiety related to the sexual assault. (Anxiety is a natural response to danger and can persist after a trauma.)
- Triggered by cues related to the sexual assault that cause intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, or anxiety (e.g., particular sounds, smells, sights or touch, times of day or year, certain phrases, etc.).

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Avoidance Symptoms

Avoiding anything related to the sexual assault, including reminders, memories, or thoughts of it, is a common way to cope. Many survivors want to move on with their lives and do not want to think about what happened. And, for some, avoiding is a way to attempt to manage the intense and distressing emotional experiences that come with the memories of the trauma.

Some common symptoms related to avoidance include:

- Avoiding reminders of the sexual assault.
- Pushing away painful thoughts and emotions.
- Feeling numb and/or disconnected.
- Experiencing problems related to memory.
- Engaging in coping mechanisms that help with avoiding or forgetting (e.g., alcohol and/or drug use).

Hyperarousal Symptoms

Increased arousal or hypervigilance is a common reaction to a traumatic experience. Survivors often note that they feel on edge, generally unsafe, or unable to completely relax. These arousal reactions are a result of the body's fight or flight response, which is a protective survival mechanism related to stress. As a result, long after a traumatic experience, the mind and body may remain heavily stimulated (or "on guard"), which can be both emotionally and physically exhausting, making it difficult for survivors to cope with everyday tasks.

Some common symptoms related to hyperarousal include:

- Feeling jumpy, shaky, or startled
- Experiencing impatience, irritability, or anger
- Sleeping disturbances (e.g., quality of sleep, trouble sleeping)
- Decreasing capacity to concentrate or focus

Dissociative Symptoms

One of the most protective and commonly used mechanisms for surviving a sexual assault or other forms of trauma is to dissociate and/or freeze. While much is discussed about the fight or flight response, fewer people are aware that the freeze response is just as common, and likely even more so in sexual assaults. Some survivors may feel as though they disconnected from their body during the assault, or that they were unable to react or move. After surviving the sexual assault, dissociating or zoning out may remain a way of coping with intense emotions, triggers, or other stressful experiences.

Some common symptoms related to dissociative behaviours and feelings include:

- Distortions around time, and loss and/or lack of memory for particular time periods.
- Inability to feel emotion, sensation, or pain (e.g., emotionally and/or physically numb).
- Difficulty concentrating or feeling "present" (e.g., forgetful, foggy).
- Depersonalization and derealization (e.g., feeling alienated, estranged, or disconnected from yourself and surroundings).

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Somatic Symptoms

It is common for survivors to feel the effects from their sexual assaults on a somatic level. As traumatic events are physical experiences, the body may hold stress, tension, and/or implicit memory from these incidents.

The following are some common physical symptoms that some survivors may experience after a sexual assault:

- Headaches
- Changes in appetite
- Weight loss or gain with/without changes in eating patterns
- Stomach problems
- Muscle tension and/or soreness
- Insomnia, restless sleep and/or early morning awakenings
- Fatigue and/or dizziness
- Decrease interest in sex or low sex drive
- Vaginismus (involuntary tightness of the vagina, preventing penetration and sometimes leading to discomfort or pain)
- Vulvodynia (a chronic pain condition in the vulvar area)
- Erectile Dysfunction