

Sexual Intimacy After Sexual Assault or Sexual Abuse

Many survivors find that their sexual attitudes and reactions are impacted after they experience a sexual assault or sexual abuse. While these effects are not permanent, they can be very frustrating and can contribute to decreasing enjoyment of one's sexual life and intimacy with others. Fortunately, even if one does not actively work on sexual healing, the sexual symptoms will diminish as the sexual assault or abuse is healed.

Experiencing sexual symptoms after sexual assault or abuse is very common and understandable. According to Wendy Waltz, "sexual abuse is not only a betrayal of human trust and affection, but it is, by

definition, an attack on a person's sexuality."¹ Some people may react to this attack by avoiding sexual activity and isolating their sexual selves, and may fear losing control of their body or feeling vulnerable to someone else. Others might react by having more sexual activity than they had before this experience. Their increase in sexual activity may be because they feel that sex is less important to them now, or that it will help them to regain a sense of power. Regardless of your reaction after a sexual assault or sexual abuse, it is important to remember that it is part of your healing that contributes to how you process what happened to you so that you can regain a sense of normalcy.

Common Sexual Symptoms

The sexual effects a survivor may experience after a sexual assault or abuse may be present immediately after an assault, or they may appear long afterwards. As a survivor, the effects may not be present until you are in a trusting and loving relationship, or when you truly feel safe with someone.

The following are some of the most common sexual symptoms survivors experience after a sexual assault or sexual abuse:

- Avoiding or afraid of sex
- Approaching sex as an obligation
- Associating negative feelings with touch (e.g., anger, disgust, or guilt)
- Achieving arousal and/or feeling sensation
- Feeling emotionally distant (e.g., not present during sex)
- Having intrusive or disturbing sexual thoughts and images

- Engaging in compulsive or inappropriate sexual behaviours
- Establishing or maintaining an intimate relationship
- Experiencing vaginal pain or difficulties orgasming (in women), or erectile or ejaculatory difficulties (in men)

As a survivor, it can be upsetting to think about all of the ways the sexual assault or abuse has influenced you sexually. However, discovering what your specific sexual symptoms are is an important step to your sexual healing. One way to learn more about your sexual symptoms is to self-assess. We recommend completing the Sexual Effects Inventory in *The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse* by Wendy Maltz. This tool can give you a general idea of your current sexual concerns and indicate how the sexual assault or abuse may have impacted your attitudes about sex, sexual self-concept, sexual behaviour, and intimate relationships. Although completing the inventory can be overwhelming, it can

¹ Maltz, W. (1999), www.healthysex.com

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help you understand how your sexuality has been impacted by the abuse. Many of the effects of the sexual assault or abuse that influence your sexuality are a result of the sexual abuse mindset. In general, this mindset consists of false beliefs about sex and the experiences survivors of sexual assault or abuse face. These false beliefs typically develop when there is

confusion between the sexual assault/abuse and sex. It is important to remember that while sexual activity was a part of the sexual assault or abuse, it was *not* healthy sex. It was not consensual and the perpetrator used sexual activity to gain power over you, making it abusive sex.

Sexual Attitudes

The following table summarizes the differences between healthy sexual attitudes versus attitudes related to sexual abuse²:

Sexual Abuse Mind-set (sex = sexual abuse)	Healthy Sexual Attitudes (sex = positive sexual energy)
Sexual is uncontrollable energy	Sex is controllable energy
Sex is an obligation	Sex is a choice
Sex is addictive	Sex is a natural drive
Sex is hurtful	Sex is nurturing, healing
Sex is a condition for receiving love	Sex is an expression of love
Sex is "doing to" someone	Sex is sharing with someone
Sex is a commodity	Sex is part of who I am
Sex is void of communication	Sex requires communication
Sex is secretive	Sex is private
Sex is exploitative	Sex is respectful
Sex is deceitful	Sex is honest
Sex benefits one person	Sex is mutual
Sex is emotionally distant	Sex is intimate
Sex is irresponsible	Sex is responsible
Sex is unsafe	Sex is safe
Sex has no limits	Sex has boundaries
Sex is power over someone	Sex is empowering

² Maltz, W. (2001). *The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse*. New York: Harper Collins.

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Healthy Sexual Attitudes and Reactions

The passing of time and positive sexual experiences by yourself or with a partner will naturally move you towards more healthy sexual attitudes.

You can also begin the process of shifting your ideas of a sexual abuse mindset to healthy sexual attitudes by practicing some of the following strategies:

- Avoiding exposure to people and things that reinforce the sexual abuse mindset, including any media that portrays sex as sexual abuse. For example, pornography consistently depicts sexually aggressive and abusive situations as pleasurable and consensual. Alternatives to pornography include erotic materials where the sexual situations involve consent, equality and respect.
- Ensuring that your language about sex reflects that sex is something positive and healthy, and that it is something that you can make choices about. For instance, using positive and accurate language when referring to sex and body parts as opposed to using slang or terms that are negative, degrading, or reinforce the idea that sex is sexual abuse (e.g., “banging” or “nailing”).
- Discovering more about your current sexual attitudes and how you want them to change. This reflection could include, for example, how you would feel about sex if you had never been sexually assaulted or abused, and how you want to think and feel about sex in the future.
- Discussing ideas about healthy sexuality and sex with others, including talking to your friends, partner, therapist, and/or support group members.
- Educating yourself about healthy sex (e.g., reading books, taking workshops, or talking with a counsellor).

As well, many people find it empowering to know their sexual rights as outlined in the **Bill of Sexual Rights**³:

Bill of Sexual Rights

- I have a right to develop healthy attitudes about sex.
- I have a right to receive accurate sexual information.
- I have a right to sexual privacy.
- I have a right to protection from bodily invasion or harm.
- I have a right to my own feelings, beliefs, opinions, and perceptions about sex.
- I have a right to set my own sexual limits.
- I have a right to say no to sexual behavior.
- I have a right to experience sexual pleasure.
- I have a right to be in control of my sexual experience.
- I have a right to control touch and sexual contact.
- I have a right to stop sexual arousal that feels inappropriate or uncomfortable.
- I have a right to develop my sexuality according to my sexual preferences and orientation.
- I have a right to have a loving partner.
- I have a right to a partner who respects me, understands me, and is willing to communicate with me about sex.
- I have a right to talk to my partner about my sexual assault and/or sexual abuse.
- I have a right to enjoy healthy sexual pleasure and satisfaction.

³Maltz, W. (2001). *The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse*. New York: Harper Collins.

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C.E.R.T.S. Healthy Sex Model

To determine if you are about to engage in healthy sex, ask yourself if your current situation meets all of the requirements found in the **C.E.R.T.S. Healthy Sex Model**⁴:

CONSENT: Can I freely and comfortably choose whether or not to engage in the sexual activity? Am I able to stop the activity at any time during the sexual contact?

EQUALITY: Is my feeling of personal power on an equal level with my partner? Do either of us dominate the other?

RESPECT: Do I have a positive regard for myself and for my partner? Do I feel respected by my partner? Do

I feel supported by my partner and am I supportive of them?

TRUST: Do I trust my partner on a physical and emotional level? Do we have a mutual acceptance of vulnerability and an ability to respond to each other with sensitivity?

SAFETY: Do I feel secure and safe within the sexual setting? Am I comfortable with and assertive about where, when and how the sexual activity takes place? Do I feel safe from the possibility of unwanted pregnancy and/or STIs?

Engaging in Healthy Sexual Activity

For many people, it is essential to take a break from sexual activity at some point in their healing. Taking a break from sexual activity is an important option for survivors, regardless of how long they have been in a relationship and whether or not they are married or common-law. As a survivor, this break is an opportunity for you to consider your own sexuality without concerning yourself with someone else's sexual desires. It also ensures that your time and energy are focused on healing as opposed to worrying about sex or sexual advances.

When you decide to be sexually intimate with someone, challenge yourself to take some of the following steps:

- Engage in sexual activity when you really want to, not when you feel you should want to (e.g.,

after a long period away from your partner, on your anniversary or on other special occasions).

- Take an active role in your sexual activity by communicating to your partner how you are feeling, what your preferences and desires are, what you don't like, or what makes you uncomfortable.
- Give yourself permission to say no to engaging in sexual activity at any time, even after you initiated or consented to the sexual activity.

⁴ Maltz, W. & Holman, B. (1991). *Incest and Sexuality: A Guide to Understanding and Healing*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

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Establishing Guidelines Around Sexual Activity

It can also be helpful to discuss guidelines about your shared sexual intimacy as a way to help you feel safer during sexual encounters, and set ground rules that make you both feel more comfortable.

The following guidelines outlined in the Healthy Sex Trust Contract are examples you can use in your own relationship:

The HealthySex Trust Contract⁵

- It's okay to say no to sex at ANY TIME.
- It's okay to ask for what we want sexually, without being teased or shamed for it.
- We don't ever have to do anything we don't want to do sexually.
- We will take a break or stop sexual activity whenever either of us requests it.
- It's okay to say how we are feeling or what we are needing at ANY TIME.
- We agree to be responsive to each other's needs for improving physical comfort.
- What we do sexually is private and not to be discussed with others outside our relationship unless we give permission to discuss it.
- We are ultimately responsible for our own sexual fulfillment and orgasm.
- Our sexual thoughts and fantasies are our own and we don't have to share them with each

other unless we want to reveal them.

- We don't have to disclose the details of a previous sexual relationship unless that information is important to our present partner's physical health or safety.
- We can initiate or decline sex without incurring a negative reaction from our partner.
- We each agree to be sexually faithful unless we have a clear, prior understanding that it's okay to have sex outside the relationship (this includes virtual sex, such as phone or internet sex).
- We will support each other in minimizing risk and using protection to decrease the possibility of disease and/or unwanted pregnancy.
- We will notify each other immediately if we have or suspect we have a sexually transmitted infection.
- We will support each other in handling any negative consequences that may result from our sexual interactions.

Once you and your partner have agreed on a set of guidelines, you can also discuss what the potential consequences will be if one of the guidelines is not respected.

Automatic Reactions to Touch

Even after you have set up guidelines to make sexual activity feel safer, you may still experience automatic reactions to touch. These reactions might include

flashbacks, panic attacks, a sense of sadness and/or fear, dissociation, nausea, pain, or freezing. Though these reactions are unwanted and upsetting to both

⁵ Maltz, W. (1999), www.healthysex.com

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you and your partner, with time and healing they will minimize in frequency and severity.

In order to gain control of your body and mind during an automatic reaction, refrain from all sexual activity. It's important to take the time you need to acknowledge that you are having an automatic reaction, and to consider what triggered it. Take some time to self-soothe, feel safe, pay attention to your breathing, and bring your mind and body back to the present by reorienting yourself to your surroundings (e.g., try to take slow, deep breaths). Remind yourself that you are no longer living the sexual assault or abuse and use your different senses to become aware of your current environment. For example, what do you see and hear? You can also touch some of the objects around

you to ground yourself to the present.

As well, take time to rest and recover after you experience an automatic reaction as they can be both physically and mentally overwhelming. When you are ready, think about what triggered your automatic reaction, and how you could alter the situation so that the trigger does not happen or does not affect you in the same way. Examples of how you can help yourself could include changing the set up of the room, asking your partner to watch for signs that you are having an automatic reaction, and stopping the activity you believe is causing your trigger. Also, if you are being triggered while intimate with a partner, discuss what you would like them to do when you have an automatic reaction (e.g. stop what they are doing, hold you, talk to you, sit with you, etc.).

Relearning Touch

Many survivors of sexual assault or abuse interpret sexual touch or sexual activities as negative and unpleasant. However, through specific therapeutic exercises with yourself and/or a partner, you can learn to enjoy and feel safe during sexual touch.⁶

Building emotional trust and a sense of safety in a relationship are important prerequisites to enjoying sexual intimacy. If you are in a partnership while you

are beginning to heal sexually, it is important that you work with and include your partner in the healing process. Feeling safe and comfortable with your partner, and making sure your partner respects your limits benefits both of you. Partners who act in ways that mimic sexual assault or abuse (e.g., touching without consent, ignoring how you feel, or behaving in impulsive or hurtful ways) will prevent you from healing.

Conclusion

The process of sexual healing is slow, and works best if it coincides with other healing approaches that focus on assault or abuse. Fortunately, with time and efforts made towards your healing process, the effects that a sexual assault or abuse can have on your ability to enjoy sexual intimacy can be minimized. For example, receiving counselling

throughout the healing process is beneficial, and is often recommended to manage triggers of difficult memories and emotions. While sexual healing is a process that can take time and energy on your part (and possibly that of your partner and loved ones), it can lead to experiencing consistent, positive, and pleasurable sexual intimacy.

⁶ Maltz, W. (2001). *The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse*. New York: Harper Collins.

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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
SEXUAL ASSAULT CENTRE

2-705 Students' Union Building
780-492-9771 | uab.ca/SACentre

Additional Resources

- Davis, L. & Bass, E. (2008). *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*. New York: Collins Living.
- Haines, S. (1999). *The Survivor's Guide to Sex: How to Have an Empowered Sex Life After Child Sexual Abuse*. San Francisco: Cleis Press.
- Lew, M. (2004). *Victims No Longer: The Classic Guide for Men Recovering from Sexual Child Abuse*. Harper Perennial.
- Maltz, W. (1987). *Incest and Sexuality: A Guide to Understanding and Healing*. England: Lexington Books.