

Men's Experience of Sexual Violence

Sexual assault is still considered by many to be a women's issue. Our cultural ideas about sexual assault make it very difficult for male survivors to disclose their experiences and reach out for support.

According to the [Department of Justice Canada](https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cj-jp/victim/rr13_8/rr13_8.pdf), male survivors accounted for 12% of self-reported sexual assault cases in 2010¹. This is a fairly conservative statistic, and most research shows that the number

of men who experience sexual assault or sexual abuse either in childhood and/or as an adult is much higher. In order to gain an understanding of the sexual assault and sexual abuse men and boys experience, it is essential to address a number of misconceptions related to men as survivors of sexual violence. To learn more about the myths surrounding male survivors, review *Myths About Male Sexual Assault Experiences* in Appendix A.

Reactions to Sexual Violence

All survivors of sexual violence have individual reactions to sexual assault. Yet, there are some common thoughts and experiences that many survivors have that can include:

Confusion about sexual identity

Sexual identity is a very important and common issue that male sexual assault survivors struggle with. Many survivors of sexual assault find themselves asking whether they are straight, gay, or bisexual, and wonder if the assault has influenced their sexuality. And, although no one is sure how sexual identity is determined, we do know it is not determined by the sexual assault.²

Homophobia is prevalent in our society, making it difficult for male survivors to disclose their abuse or to acquire information and support. Men who have been sexually assaulted often grapple with a number of questions depending on the gender of the perpetrator. If the perpetrator was a man, it may be harder for them to trust men or develop relationships with other men after a sexual assault. And, sometimes a male survivor may feel as though they must be gay because the perpetrator

was "attracted" to him. As well, male survivors who are heterosexual might fear being perceived as gay if others find out that the perpetrator was a man.

If, however, the perpetrator is a woman, the survivor may have difficulty defining or labeling his experience as a sexual assault or abuse, and may find it especially difficult to disclose their experience. Many men who are sexually assaulted by women are ashamed to disclose their experience out of fear they may be seen as "weak" and "unmanly," and that they should have been able to protect themselves. And yet, even if these survivors do not define their experience as a sexual assault, they will still experience the aftereffects common in most survivors. It is not widely understood that women can commit sexual assault, and our society teaches men that they should consider themselves "lucky" when receiving sexual attention from a woman. But, a woman can coerce a man into unwanted sexual activity just as a man could. Our society's reluctance to acknowledge women as perpetrators may be a result of a socialized view that women are exclusively protectors and nurturers who are incapable of violence.³

¹ McDonald, S. & Tijerino, A. (2013). *Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse and Assault: Their Experiences*. Retrieved from: https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cj-jp/victim/rr13_8/rr13_8.pdf.

² Napier-Hemy, J. (1994). *When Males Have Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Adult Male Survivors*. Vancouver: Family Services of Greater Vancouver

³ Gartner, R. B. (2001). *Betrayed as Boys: Psychodynamic Treatment of Sexually Abused Men*. New York: The Guilford Press.

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When a man is sexually assaulted by his partner, feelings of confusion and disbelief may be intensified, and he might reframe this as a “bad sexual experience” rather than a sexual assault. The survivor may even believe the myth that men “always want sex” and feel emasculated as a result of the sexual assault because he did not want sex at that time.⁴

Difficulties with physical functioning

It is very common for male survivors to experience problems with sexual functioning. Struggles with maintaining erections, lacking sexual desire, or having more frequent sexual intercourse may all follow a sexual assault experience.⁵ Sometimes even healthy sexual feelings and contact can become triggers. Moreover, it is possible that a man may also experience a number of physical symptoms after a sexual assault. These symptoms could include: irregular eating and sleeping patterns; frequent headaches; nausea; blurred vision; choking sensations; or pain in the genital area, buttocks or back.⁶ Fortunately, working through the sexual assault can help a survivor overcome these issues.

Difficulties with intimacy

Being sexually assaulted is a violation of trust, especially if the perpetrator was known to the survivor. It is normal for men to have difficulties trusting others after being sexually violated. This distrust might transfer to coworkers, friends, family, authority personnel, and intimate partners. Reactions are different and individual to the survivor, and it is helpful to them and for their

recovery to reserve judgement about what we think is/ is not an appropriate behavioural response.

Anger and shame

Our societal misconceptions and beliefs suggests that men are restricted to a certain array of emotions, most notably anger. It may seem “healthy” for a male survivor to express his anger, but, if the only emotional response is limited to anger, he may be suppressing other relevant and valid feelings. Typically, anger masks a deeper emotion such as hurt, shame, or fear, and it is important to be able to recognize and feel these underlying emotions. And yet, men are often socialized to hide emotions other than anger because they may be teased and/or criticized. For these reasons, it is critical for survivors to talk to someone who accepts their feelings and emotional expressions.

Shame is also an underlying emotion commonly experienced by male survivors. In our society, men are socialized to be strong, tough, and courageous. These established societal views of “manhood” can result in male survivors believing that they did not live up to their expected behavioural role. The survivor may also feel shame if he blames himself for the assault, or if he feels that he could have stopped it. Moreover, having a physiological response to sexual stimulation and activity often leads to feelings of shame. It is normal to experience physical arousal to stimulation, however, many men may interpret these sensations as something they enjoyed which contributed to their inability to prevent the sexual assault.

Recovery

Recovering from a sexual assault is a personal and private journey. It is a process that takes time and energy, and it can be difficult and overwhelming. However, through the healing process, a survivor

can come to a place where he understands that the sexual assault was not his fault, and where he no longer feels controlled or influenced by emotions or memories from the sexual assault.

⁴⁵⁶ Napier-Hemy, J. (1994). *When Males Have Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Adult Male Survivors*. Vancouver: Family Services of Greater Vancouver

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Appendix A

Myths About Male Sexual Assault Experiences	
Myth	Fact
The occurrence of sexual assault in men is rare.	A report conducted by the Department of Justice Canada estimates that male survivors accounted for 12% of self-reported sexual assault cases in 2010. However, research indicates this number is much higher. ⁷
Men are less traumatized by sexual violence, or do not suffer to the same extent as female survivors do.	After sexual assault or sexual abuse, male survivors are just as likely as any survivor to experience effects from the experience. Survivors of sexual assault all have personal reactions to their experiences, but they are all impacted in some way. Just like other survivors, these men may experience Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, suicidal ideations, flashbacks, and difficulty trusting others.
Men are only assaulted and abused by gay men.	A large majority of perpetrators against men and boys are heterosexual men. Women also commit sexual assault against men. The motivation for sexual violence is to gain a sense of control and power over another person, not to achieve sexual satisfaction.
A man or boy who is assaulted by another man is/becomes gay as a result of the sexual assault.	A person's sexual orientation does not change as a result of a sexual assault experience. Some survivors feel confused about their sexual orientation after a sexual assault or sexual abuse, particularly if they experienced physical arousal during the assault. For example, if a straight man is sexually assaulted by another man and has an erection during the assault, the survivor may worry that this may imply that he is gay or that he wanted the sexual assault to happen. Yet, it is very common to experience arousal during a sexual assault. This arousal can be a fear response, or it can be because a healthy body usually physically responds to sexual touch, even if the touch is not wanted.
Men can protect themselves from being sexually assaulted.	Persons of any gender are vulnerable to sexual assault. Because men are often physically stronger than women, some people mistakenly think that men should be able to defend themselves. But, there are many ways perpetrators commit sexual assault, and, most often, coercion is used. Remember, any person of any size or physical strength can be coerced.
You can't sexually assault a man because men always want and are ready for sex.	Our society's expectation that men always want to have sex can be very damaging to male survivors. It suggests that survivors wanted the experience and should not be upset about it. It also places survivors in an uncomfortable position where they might start to believe this narrative. It is important to remember that sexual assault is not sex; it is an act of violence that takes away a person's ability to choose and control. If a man wants sex, he wants to choose who it is with and what it involves.

⁷ McDonald, S. & Tijerino, A. (2013). Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse and Assault: Their Experiences. Retrieved from: https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cj-jp/victim/rr13_8/rr13_8.pdf.