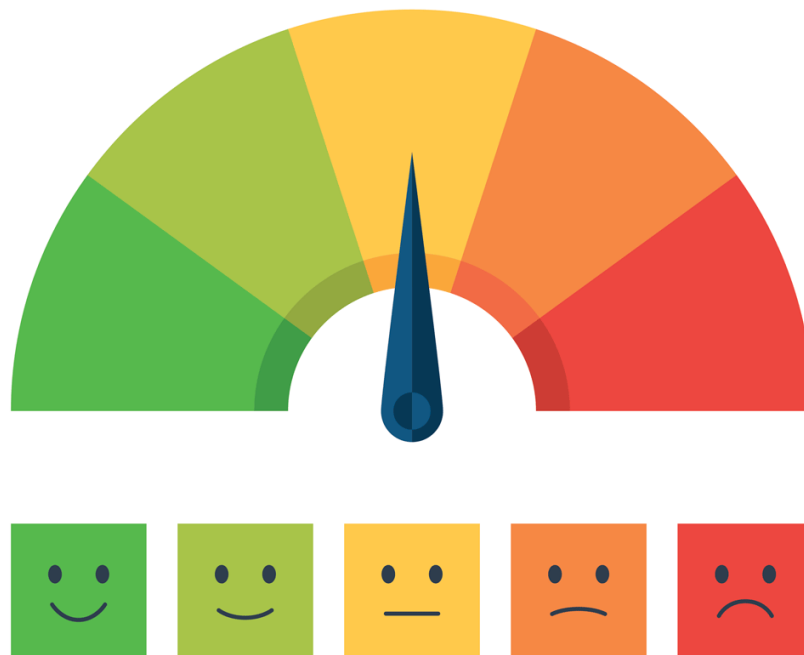


# Common Feelings of Survivors of Sexual Assault



Emotional responses of survivors will vary from individual to individual. Sexual assault can be extremely traumatic and life-changing. It's important to remember that your responses are not crazy; they are normal reactions to a traumatic situation – sexual assault. Our goal is to offer support, options and resources that encourage empowerment and healing. Below are some common questions and feelings survivors of sexual assault may experience but it is not necessarily an exhaustive list.

## Why did this happen to me?

You didn't do anything wrong. It's not your fault. Your power was taken away by someone else. Sexual violence can happen to anyone, regardless of age, gender, race, religion, etc. One in three women and one in six men are sexually assaulted at some point in their lifetime.

## When will I be okay? When will this be over? When will I stop feeling so bad?

It is hard to understand that someone would do this to you and that there would be so much pain. It isn't fair but you did survive. You are strong and courageous. There is no blueprint for healing. It is on your own time schedule and in your own way. There are people who can help you if you need it.

## How do I get over this?

No one was taught how to heal from a trauma, so it's scary. There are no simple 10 steps to healing but healing is happening. Talking about it is a very important healing tool. Sexual assault is not something that any individual will ever "get over" in their lifetime, more, it becomes an experience that makes up the character and being of the victim/survivor that has no more or no less impact on the individual than any other life experience.

## No one understands!

You are not alone. These are common feelings of survivors. Even if you feel that no one can understand your personal situation, there are those out there who want to help and support you through this time. Sexual assault is a very common experience for many people. 1 in 3 women will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime, and 1 in 6 men will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime.

## It wasn't that big of a deal.

What happened was a trauma and can affect you very much. Sometimes you don't realize the extent of how it is affecting you right away. But, just pretending it didn't happen or ignoring it won't be helpful in the healing process.

## I'm just imagining this. This couldn't really have happened.

It's hard to believe something so awful and so painful but typically memories like this are real. Memories of painful experiences are sometimes blocked until you're ready to process them and move on.

## I feel like I am going crazy!

You are not crazy; you are dealing with a "crazy" difficult situation. Many survivors have this feeling.

## SHOCK AND NUMBNESS

This response may occur soon after a sexual assault. Survivors may experience feelings of disbelief or denial about what happened. Survivors may feel emotionally detached or drained, and at times may be unaware of what is happening around them. Other reactions to the emotional shock may include: crying uncontrollably, laughing nervously, withdrawing, or claiming to feel nothing or to be "fine". Survivors often may feel overwhelmed to the point of not knowing how to feel or what to do.

- **If you are a victim/survivor, here are some tips that may help:** Recognize that these feelings are normal reactions to experiencing trauma. Reassure yourself that these feelings will diminish over time but it takes as much time as you need to heal. If you want company, it may be helpful to surround yourself with supportive friends or family. You may also want to think about what has helped you through a previous crisis. For example, it may help to practice breathing exercises or meditation, go for a walk, listen to music, or talk with supportive friends and family.

## DISRUPTION OF DAILY LIFE

After an assault, victims/survivors may feel preoccupied with thoughts about the incident. It may be difficult for survivors to concentrate, attend class, or focus on school work. It can be very upsetting to have reminders of the assault when trying to reclaim your normal life. Survivors may have nightmares, trouble sleeping, appetite changes, general anxiety, or depression. For the first few weeks or months after the assault, survivors may feel as though their life has been upset and may be wondering if it will ever be the same.

- **If you are a victim/survivor, here are some tips that may help:** It is important to be gentle with yourself and take steps to reclaim your life. After experiencing any kind of crisis, it is important to take time to grieve, to adjust, and to reorganize your life. Recognize that you will be able to go on with your life. Don't be afraid to seek help if you are struggling academically or you need help dealing with the trauma.

## LOSS OF CONTROL

Survivors may feel disoriented and overwhelmed. They may also feel anxious, scared, or nervous and have a difficult time concentrating. Often, survivors feel unsure about themselves, and may temporarily lack their usual self-confidence. Decisions that were made routinely before now may feel monumental. Survivors may feel that because of the assault they will have to change their whole lifestyle to feel safe.

- **If you are a victim/survivor, here are some tips that may help:** Try to make as many of your own decisions as possible. Even making small decisions can help you regain a sense of control. You may want to make some changes in your life such as re-arranging the furniture in your room, changing your look by cutting your hair, or changing your routine by exercising in the morning instead of at night. Small changes can help you feel like you are taking back control. Although there are people to help you through your options and support you to make a decision that is best for you, it is important to trust your instincts about what is right for you.

## FEAR

It is not uncommon for victims/survivors to fear people and feel vulnerable even when going through the regular activities of life. They may be afraid to be alone, or afraid of being with lots of people. They may find themselves not knowing who to trust. Survivors may have lost their sense of safety in their own environment, which makes them feel vulnerable and may fear that they will be assaulted again. Survivors may also be more aware of sexual innuendos, stray looks, or whistles.

- **If you are a victim/survivor, here are some tips that may help:** Make any changes in your life that you need in order to feel safe. If possible, you may want to change your locks, take a self-defense class, or stay with a family member or friend. Temporarily "not trusting" is a protective device that is an emotional coping skill. Most of these fears will go away or lessen over time. You will be able to trust when you have had a chance to heal and are feeling less vulnerable. If it doesn't get better and fear is getting in the way of your daily life, it may be helpful to speak to a counselor.

## GUILT, SHAME, SELF-BLAME

Most victims/survivors feel guilty and ashamed about the assault. Survivors often question that they somehow may have "provoked" or "asked for it", that they shouldn't have trusted the assailant, or that they should have somehow prevented the assault. Some of these feelings are the result of society's myths about sexual assault and sexuality. Survivors will often start to doubt their ability to make good judgments or trust their own instincts. Sometimes blaming themselves helps survivors to feel less helpless.

- **If you are a victim/survivor, here are some tips that may help:** It was not your fault. No one deserves to be sexually assaulted. Tell yourself that many times a day. Being sexually assaulted does not make you a bad person; you did not choose to be sexually assaulted. Realize that guilt and self-blame are efforts to feel some control over the situation. Many survivors also experience blame from individuals they tell about the incident. These reactions are fueled by society's myths about sexual assault. It is important

to surround yourself with supportive people. Education about the facts surrounding sexual assault may also be helpful in dispelling shame and self-blame. You may want to find some resources on health and recovery after sexual assault.

## ANGER

Victims/Survivors may have different reasons to feel angry. There is often as much anger at the events following the assault, as toward the assault itself: changing lifestyle, loss of freedom, being told to “get over it” by friends and family. Anger is an appropriate, healthy response to sexual assault. It usually means that the survivor is healing and has begun to look at the assailant’s responsibility for the assault. Survivors vary greatly in how readily they feel and express anger. It may be especially difficult to express anger if a survivor has been taught that being angry is never appropriate. Anger can be vented in safe and healthy ways, or can be turned in, where it may become sadness, pain, or depression.

- **If you are a victim/survivor, here are some tips that may help:** Allow yourself to be angry. You have a right to feel angry. However, it is important to feel angry without hurting yourself or others. As part of your anger, you may find yourself more irritable at home, school, or work. Anger can be expressed physically without harming yourself or others. Some people find that physical activity (such as walking, running, biking, hitting pillows, etc.) can help release the physical tension that often accompanies anger. Writing in a journal, playing music, or singing out loud to music are also helpful and healthy ways to release anger. Reporting the sexual assault may be another way you choose to turn your anger into a positive action. Many people often find it useful to speak with other survivors. Be careful to avoid unhealthy ways of coping with anger such as alcohol or drug use, cutting, or other self destructive behaviors.

## ISOLATION

Some sexual assault victims/survivors feel their experience sets them apart from others. Oftentimes, they feel differently or think that others can tell that they have been sexually assaulted just by looking at them. Some survivors do not want to bother anyone with their troubles, so they do not talk about the incident or their feelings. Survivors may withdraw or distance themselves from family and friends.

- **If you are a victim/survivor, here are some tips that may help:** You are not alone in what you are feeling. Many people find benefit in speaking with other survivors. Reading more about the topic can also be reassuring and validating. If you are feeling alone, call a trusted friend or family member. It can make all the difference to be with someone who cares about you.

## ANXIETY, SHAKING, NIGHTMARES

Victims/Survivors may experience shaking, anxiety, flashbacks, and nightmares after an attack. This can begin shortly after the attack and continue for a long period of time. Nightmares may replay the assault or include dreams of being chased, attacked, etc. Survivors often fear that they are “losing it” and may feel that they should be “over it by now”.

- **If you are a victim/survivor, here are some tips that may help:** These responses, as scary as they are, are normal reactions to trauma. These physical reactions are ways your emotions respond to the fear you experience. It is important to be able to discuss your nightmares and fears, particularly how they are affecting your life. Keeping a journal to write about your feelings, dreams, and worries can be a helpful tool in the recovery process.

## CONCERN FOR THE ASSAILANT

Some victims/survivors express concern about what will happen to the assailant if the attack is reported or prosecuted. Others express a concern that an assailant is sick or ill and needs psychiatric care more than prison. It is human to show concern for others, especially those who are troubled, destructive, and confused. Some of these attitudes may be the result of the survivors’ effort to understand what happened, particularly if there was a previous relationship. These attitudes might also be the result of the survivors

blaming themselves for the assault. If survivors feel sorry for the assailant, they might find it difficult to express their anger and indignation for what they suffered.

- **If you are a victim/survivor, here are some tips that may help:** The sexual assault was not your fault. Only the assailant is responsible for what happened. You have a right to feel and express anger. It is important to hold the assailant accountable. You can have mixed feelings – you can love/like the assailant as a person and still hate what that person did to you. Pushing yourself to prematurely “forgive” the assailant may force you to bury your feelings of anger and rage. Reporting the sexual assault may be one way you choose to turn your anger into a positive action. Reporting may also be the only way for the assailant to get treatment.

## SEXUAL CONCERNS

Victims/Survivors may experience a variety of sexual concerns after an assault. Some survivors may want no sexual contact whatsoever; others may use sex as a coping mechanism. Some people may experience some confusion about separating sex from sexual abuse. Particular sexual acts may provoke flashbacks and thus, be very difficult for the survivor to engage in.

- **If you are a victim/survivor, here are some tips that may help:** Sexual healing takes time. Go at your own pace. Be very clear with your partner about your needs and limits when it comes to any type of sexual touching or sexual contact. You have a right to refuse to be sexual until you feel ready. Tell your partner what kinds of physical or sexual intimacy feels comfortable to you. Sexual assault is not sex. Intimate consensual lovemaking should be pleasurable for both partners. A patient, gentle, intimate partner is helpful in your healing process. A therapist with experience in sexual trauma recovery can be very helpful to your healing process.

## POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, also known as PTSD, involves a pattern of symptoms survivors may experience after a sexual assault. Symptoms of PTSD include repeated thoughts of the assault; memories and nightmares; avoidance of thoughts, feelings, and situations related to the assault; and increased stimulation (e.g., difficulty sleeping and concentrating, jumpiness, irritability). One study that examined PTSD symptoms among women who were raped, found that 94% of women experienced these symptoms during the two weeks immediately following the rape. Nine months later, about 30% of the women were still reporting this pattern of symptoms. The National women’s Study reported that almost 1/3 of all rape survivors develop PTSD sometime during their lives and 11% of rape survivors currently suffer from the disorder.

- **If you are a victim/survivor, here are some tips that may help:** Treatment for PTSD typically begins with a detailed evaluation and the development of a treatment plan that meets the unique needs of the survivor. PTSD-specific treatment is usually begun only after people have been safely removed from a crisis situation.

*Adapted primarily from the Sexual Violence Center of Hennepin County, “Coping with Sexual Assault” by Terri Spahr Nelson, The Aurora Center for Advocacy & Education Sexual Assault Info Packet, and Becoming Whole Again – Healing from Sexual Assault, The University of Texas at Austin Counseling & Mental Health Center.*

## Getting Back on Track

It is important for you to know that any of the above reactions are normal and temporary reactions to an abnormal event. The fear and confusion will lessen with time, but the trauma may disrupt your life for awhile. Some reactions may be triggered by people, places or things connected to the assault, while other reactions may seem to come from “out of the blue”.

Remember that no matter how much difficulty you’re having dealing with the assault, it does not mean you’re “going crazy” or becoming “mentally ill.” The recovery process may actually help you develop strengths, insights, and abilities that you never had (or never knew you had) before.

Talking about the assault will help you feel better, but may also be really hard to do. In fact, it’s common to want to avoid conversations and situations that may remind you of the assault. You may have a sense of



wanting to “get on with life” and “let the past be the past.” This is a normal part of the recovery process and may last for weeks or months.

Eventually you will need to deal with fears and feelings in order to heal and regain a sense of control over your life. Talking with someone who can listen in understanding and affirming ways – whether it’s a friend, family member, sexual assault center staff member, or counselor – is a key part of this process.

- **Do you have concerns about the incident because you were drinking at the time?**  
No one deserves to be assaulted, no matter what the situation. The focus should be on the behavior of the one who assaulted, not the survivor. An individual who is physically incapacitated cannot legally consent to sexual contact. It is also important to make sure that you receive appropriate medical attention. No matter what you decide to do, remember that it was not your fault.
- **What if you have mutual friends or belong to the same groups as the person who assaulted you?**  
This is a common situation since most assaults occur between acquaintances. People will likely take sides and you may find yourself distrusting friends and colleagues. Surround yourself with people who support, respect, and believe you. Trust your instincts, and take steps to ensure your personal safety and well-being.
- **Do you worry about dating again?**  
Surviving a sexual assault involves having your control taken away from you, and it may be difficult to regain trust. Go at your own pace. It may be helpful to start in larger social situations or go on double dates. At first, you may want to avoid situations where you feel isolated or lacking control. When you are ready to date, don’t hesitate to be clear about your sexual limits.

## Self Care for Survivors

When learning to survive a traumatic experience, taking care of yourself is very important. Preventing undue stress and emotional over-load must be your priority. Here is a list of things that might be helpful for you:

- Get support from friends and family – try to identify people you trust to validate your feelings and affirm your strengths, and avoid those who you think will deter your healing process.
- Talk about the assault and express feelings – choose when, where, and with whom to talk about the assault, and set limits by only disclosing information that feels safe for you to reveal.
- Use stress reduction techniques – hard exercise like jogging, aerobics, walking; relaxation techniques like yoga, massage, music, hot baths; prayer and/or meditation.
- Maintain a balanced diet and sleep cycle as much as possible and avoid overusing stimulants like caffeine, sugar, and nicotine.
- Discover your playful and creative “self”. Playing and creativity are important for healing from hurt. Find time for noncompetitive play – start or resume a creative activity like piano, painting, gardening, handicrafts, etc.
- Take “time outs.” Give yourself permission to take quiet moments to reflect, relax and rejuvenate – especially during times you feel stressed or unsafe.
- Try reading. Reading can be a relaxing, healing activity. Try to find short periods of uninterrupted leisure reading time.
- Consider writing or keeping a journal as a way of expressing thoughts and feelings.
- Release some of the hurt and anger in a healthy way: Write a letter to your attacker about how you feel about what happened to you. Be as specific as you can. You can choose to send the letter or not. You also can draw pictures about the anger you feel towards your attacker as a way of releasing the emotional pain.
- Hug those you love. Hugging releases the body’s natural pain-killers.

**Remember you are safe, even if you don’t feel it. The sexual assault is over. It may take longer than you think, but you will feel better.**

# How to Help a Friend or Family Member who has been Sexually Assaulted

When someone you know is sexually assaulted, it can be a frightening and confusing time for them and for you. Remember that the person who has been sexually assaulted needs to obtain medical assistance, feel safe, be believed, know she or he was not at fault, take control of his or her life.

There are some things you can do to help. Here are a few suggestions. Keep in mind that there is not one “right” way to deal with sexual violence; each person has to make his or her own decisions.

1. **Believe them.** The most common reason many people choose not to tell anyone about sexual assault is the fear that the listener won't believe them. People rarely lie or exaggerate about sexual assault; in fact, survivors of sexual assault are much more likely to downplay the violence against them. If someone tells you, it's because they trust you and need to talk to someone.
2. **Don't blame them.** Another common fear in telling someone about a sexual assault is that the person will think it was somehow their fault. NO ONE deserves to be sexually assaulted, no matter what. Sexual assault is always the fault of the assaulter, not the survivor.
3. **Offer shelter.** If possible, stay with the person at a comfortable, reassuring place.
4. **Be there and give comfort.** The survivor may need to talk a lot or at odd hours at the beginning. Be there as much as you can and encourage the survivor to talk to others. Thank the survivor for feeling like he/she could talk to you. It's not easy to tell someone about a sexual assault and you, as a listener should feel grateful that the survivor feels you are a safe person to talk to about the incident.
5. **Be patient.** Don't try to rush the healing process or “make it better.” Individuals do not heal at the same pace.
6. **Validate the survivor's feelings: their anger, pain and fear.** These are natural, healthy responses. They need to feel them, express them, and be heard.
7. **Express your compassion.** If you have feelings of outrage, compassion, pain for their pain, do share them. There is probably nothing more comforting than a genuine human response. Just make sure your feelings don't overwhelm theirs.
8. **Resist seeing the survivor as a victim.** Continue to see them as a strong, courageous person who is reclaiming their own life.
9. **Accept the person's choice of what to do about the assault.** Don't be overly protective. Ask what is needed, help the survivor list some options, then encourage independent decision-making, even if you disagree. It is very important that the survivor make decisions and have them respected, as it can go a long way in helping them regain a sense of control in their lives.
10. **Stay friends.** Don't pull away from the friendship because it's too hard for you to handle: that will make the person feel like there is something wrong with them. You can always help them find other support people – don't try to do it alone.
11. **Respect their privacy.** Don't tell anyone who doesn't have to know. Don't gossip about it with mutual friends. IT IS UP TO EACH PERSON WHO WAS ASSAULTED TO DECIDE WHO TO TELL AND WHEN.
12. **LISTEN.** Try to be supportive without giving advice. You really can't know what is best for someone else. In sexual assault, a survivor's power over body and feelings has been temporarily taken away; the person needs support to take that power back, beginning with make his or her own decisions.
13. **Get help.** Sometimes a person needs medical attention or other emergency help or support from other people besides friends. You can help your friend find the resources that are needed.
14. **Help yourself.** When someone you care about is sexually assaulted, it affects you in a very deep way. You have your own needs and feelings which are probably somewhat different than your friend's. Find someone you can go to without violating your friend's confidence.
15. **Educate yourself about sexual assault and the healing process.** If you have a basic idea of what the survivor is going through, it will help you to be supportive. There are many good information sites on the internet and there are also resources at CSB/SJU Counseling located on the ground floor of Mary Hall on the SJU campus or the Health Center in lower level Lottie on the CSB campus. CSB Health Services, located in the same CSB location, is another good resource. Talk with other survivors and supporters of survivors. Many are willing to share what has helped them, or can give you ideas on how to deal with a certain situation.

People can and do survive sexual assault. It is much better if they have support from people they trust. You may be able to be that person for someone close to you.