

Sexual Violence in the News: Coping Skills for Survivors



If you were the victim of sexual assault or harassment, news stories might catch you off guard. You may feel you're coping well, when a small detail from a news story suddenly reminds you of your own experience. Though troubling, that reaction is normal, even years after the event. In fact, research in women has found that those who survived sexual violence experience more powerful memories of stressful life events, and are more likely to dwell on those events. What's more, sexual molestation and rape are the traumas most commonly associated with PTSD in women. Although men experience rape and sexual assault less often than women, men who experience sexual assault have a very high probability of developing PTSD.

If you're experiencing distress from sexual violence in the news, these steps can help you cope.

- **Focus on how far you've come.** Remind yourself that you've survived. There may be difficult emotions ahead, but they won't be as bad as the trauma you've already experienced.
- **Give yourself permission to look away.** Thanks to our 24/7 news cycle, high-profile stories are everywhere — on your phone, in social media, at the water cooler. Minimize exposure by setting a limited time to check in each day. You might read news for 30 minutes during your lunch hour, for example, then turn it off for the rest of the day. If seeing survivors speak is distressing, read the news instead of watching. And to avoid tossing and turning, skip checking the news before bedtime.
- **Control what you can.** Self-care is always important, but it's especially critical when you are experiencing distress. Now more than ever make sure you prioritize sleep, healthy eating and regular physical activity.
- **Reach into your toolbox.** Tap into proven strategies to help you stay balanced during difficult times. You might find joy and calm in meditation, going to concerts or volunteering in your community. Make a list of the things that restore you, and turn to the list whenever you need a reminder.
- **Talk about your experience — with caution.** For many survivors of sexual violence, talking about the experience can be helpful. Unfortunately, though, not everyone is supportive. Research suggests that sharing one's story with an unsupportive friend or family member can be more damaging than not sharing at all. So choose your social supports with care. If you don't feel you can talk openly with family or friends, consider calling a sexual assault hotline or seeing a mental health professional.
- **Don't feel pressured to share.** Many women have shared their stories of sexual assault and harassment in the wake of the #metoo movement. That doesn't mean disclosing is the right choice for everyone. You don't owe anyone your personal story, so don't feel guilty if you decide to keep your experience to yourself.
- **Keep a journal.** Research has shown that writing about traumatic or stressful events can help reduce the intensity of those memories, leading to better psychological wellbeing.
- **Connect with others.** Whether or not you choose to discuss your own sexual assault experience, it's important to engage with others. Becoming isolated can lead to worse mental health, so make an effort to spend time with friends and loved ones.
- **Seek help when you need it.** If you are depressed, using drugs or alcohol to cope, having trouble going to work, or find your distress is interfering with life in other ways, reach out to a mental health professional for help. Clinical psychologists are professionals trained to identify mental, emotional and behavioral problems or challenges and find solutions for handling them.