



Sexual Violence and Its Effects

Information for Survivors

Sexual violence and abuse happen far more often than statistics indicate. You may find that some people around you do not really understand about what happened and the effect on you- most of us are shielded from knowing what actually happens until we, or someone close to us, is affected.

Power and Control

The perpetrator may have used physical violence and/or verbal intimidation. However, it is more than likely that he or she wanted to have control over you and was quite calm and calculating which would have confused and dazed you. They may have done humiliating things to you or involved other people. He or she may have been someone you know –a boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife, an ex-partner, a friend, neighbour, workmate or relative and he or she will more than likely have been someone you thought you could trust.

Fighting for Survival

People react in lots of different ways during assault; maybe you screamed, fought back and tried to get away but it is more likely that you froze, unable to defend yourself or make a sound. Freezing is not a passive response, it is your body taking over and doing what it needs to do to survive. No matter how you responded at the time, remember it was the right one to help you survive.

The Effects of Trauma

When we experience trauma our whole nervous system is challenged to cope with the terror and threat to our psychological and physical being. Most people have heard of the fight, flight or freeze response to a real or perceived threat to our person, which means that when something feels terrifying to us, our body will run, fight or generally in the case of rape and sexual assault, freeze.

This is an automatic response to provide us with some protection against the person/situation which we feel so terrified about. We will not be thinking logically at this point, our body takes over and directs us to do whatever we need to do in order to survive. This overtakes any conscious decision.

The autonomic nervous system has two systems, the sympathetic and the parasympathetic. The sympathetic nervous system is the part of us which responds to stress and the parasympathetic nervous system enables us to relax.

When a person is experiencing rape or sexual abuse his or her sympathetic nervous system is activated to allow a rapid reaction to the threat. It releases hormones such as adrenalin and noradrenalin into the blood. Adrenalin speeds up the heart beat, dilating the air passages in the lungs, decreasing movement of the stomach wall and mobilizing glucose in the liver. This means that both nutrients and oxygen are made more readily available for the organs that matter most for this type of response – the brain, the skeletal muscles and the heart, thereby increasing the probabilities of survival.

When the danger appears to be resolved, the parasympathetic nervous system takes over and counterbalances the effects of the sympathetic autonomic nervous system enabling the body to return to a more relaxed state.

Where it goes wrong is when the threat is continuous, or the trauma is so great that the body cannot process it as a past memory but experiences the threat as still present. The body does not therefore manage to return to a relaxed state but stays 'on alert'.

A combination of using grounding and relaxation and beginning to talk about your experiences in the accepting environment of counselling and perhaps with other people can help to reduce the sense of constant

threat, and allow your body to recognise the traumas as having happened in the past. This can help the body begin to 'slow down'.

Common Feelings

The ways in which people react immediately after being raped or sexually assaulted can also vary. Different people have different reactions; some will be hysterical; some will be calm; others may be silent and withdrawn.

You may feel too shocked to face up to what has happened. You may feel that you simply want to try to forget that it ever happened. You may have a feeling of not daring to 'let go' in case you lose control completely once you let your feelings out. However you felt after being assaulted was a reaction to being traumatised. The longer term effects of rape can also vary but you will probably experience flashbacks, sleeplessness, anxiety, feelings of guilt and blaming yourself- all the symptoms of post traumatic stress. You may be trying to cope with difficult feelings by trying to block out the memory of what happened.

Unfortunately, the memory, which you are trying to avoid, is unprocessed and has not had the compassionate attention it needs. This means that it will continue to pop up and will constantly be just below the surface.

Talking about Feelings

Surviving a sexual assault means you are likely to find yourself experiencing all sorts of painful and uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. If you have people around you who you trust to be non-judgemental and accepting, then try to talk to them. Lots of people find contacting our helpline a useful first step, as they are able to talk through their experience and feelings in a completely confidential and safe space with a trained specialist support worker.

Unfortunately sometimes survivors experience disbelief from some people who may ask hurtful questions and make unhelpful comments: 'Why didn't you fight back?' and 'Well I wouldn't have put myself in that sort of danger in the first place'. It may help you to understand that these people know very little about sexual assault and probably believe in the

myths around sexual violence from what they read in the newspapers. They have no idea what you have been through and what you are feeling now. Their responses can be very hurtful.

There may also be people who want to help but who simply do not know what words to say to you. It's important to be kind to yourself, accept whatever support is available and feels right for you. Don't expect too much of yourself and think you 'should get over it' or 'forget it'. Sexual violence is not something that can be forgotten, but you can work through your feelings with an experienced counsellor and learn to put it behind you.

You may find that you need to go over the details of what happened again and again. The length of time you need to help you recover is personal to you but talking things through with a specialist counsellor is important.

Try to hang on to the belief that you will get through this – you deserve to, and you will. No-one ever has a right to do things to us that we do not want to be done. Rape and sexual assault are never acceptable, no one has a right over your body. Guilt, blame and shame belong to the attacker, not to you. Remember, your needs and feelings are important – Look after yourself.

You did not deserve to be raped but you do deserve to be nurtured now. You are not to blame for what happened to you. When you are ready, therapy with an experienced counsellor who understands what you have been through can help you to recover.

Rape Crisis Centres are a phone call away and will be able to help you.