

Adult Sexual Assault Definitions and Effects

Sexual assault is any form of unwanted sexual activity that is intentionally forced upon another person without that person's consent. It encompasses a wide range of acts from fondling, touching, pinching or groping to violent sexual assault or rape (see separate handout - Rape and the Effects of Rape). Both women and men can be sexually assaulted, even in a marriage or a dating situation if the actions are sexual and you did not want or agree to them.

Sexual assault is a crime under the Sexual Offences Act 2003. In defining whether an action is sexual or not, a court looks at both whether most people would consider the act sexual by its nature (ie forced penetration with a penis or an object) or whether the act is sexual because that is the intention of the person doing it. For example a man touching a woman's breast on the tube with sexual intention is sexual assault. A doctor touching a woman's breast in a medical examination is not sexual assault. However if that doctor touched a woman's breast for their own sexual gratification, even during a medical examination, then this is sexual assault.

Because of its ambiguous definition, many adults who have been sexually assaulted try to wave away what happened to them, thinking that it doesn't matter or wasn't really that bad. But all forms of sexual assault can leave you feeling guilty, intimidated, anxious and afraid to go out. All these feelings and any others you may experience as a result of the assault show that what happened does matter *to you*. Any form of sexual activity that you don't want and makes you feel uncomfortable is wrong and it is important that you have a space where you feel safe enough to talk about your feelings openly.

You could have reacted in a variety of ways during a sexual assault; maybe you tried to get away, fought back or confronted the perpetrator. Perhaps you felt frozen or shocked, unable to move or make a sound. If you are blaming yourself in any way regarding how you reacted (this is often the case), then try to put the blame on the assailant where it belongs, and try to believe that no matter how you behaved both before and after the assault, the assault was not your fault. It was unwanted which means you did not deserve it or ask for it.

After suffering a sexual assault you may find yourself going through all sorts of painful and uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. It may bring up issues from your past or make you feel angry or helpless. If you have people around you who you trust to be non-judgemental and accepting of your feelings, then you will probably find it very helpful to express to them what is going on for you.

Unfortunately you may encounter disbelief from some people who may ask hurtful questions and make unhelpful comments like: 'Why didn't you fight back?' or 'Don't worry, it wasn't that bad.' It may help you to understand that these people probably have their own unresolved issues that make it impossible for them to be in touch with what you have been through. In other words their attitude says more about them than it does about you. There may also be people who want to help but who simply do not know what words to say to you.

RASASC believes that no form of sexual assault is acceptable and that everyone has the right to choose who has sexual access to their body. If you want to talk about what happened, how it has left you feeling and what your options are you can call RASASC's confidential helpline on 0808 802 9999. Adult sexual assault is a crime and you do not have to deal with it silently.