
RAPE AND THE EFFECTS OF RAPE

Rape and sexual assault happen far more often than statistics indicate. You may find that the people around you do not really understand about rape - most of us are shielded from knowing what actually happens until we, or someone close to us, is affected.

Power and Control

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

Fighting for survival

Women 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.

Common feelings

The ways in which women react immediately after being raped can also vary. Different women have different reactions; some will be hysterical; some will be calm; others may be silent and withdrawn.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 the rape 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 raped 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. Some people turn to alcohol, drugs, self injury in an attempt to stop the feelings taking over. Unfortunately, the memory, which you are trying to avoid is buried 'alive' and will continue to pop up when you least expect it 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 women 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.

Be kind to yourself

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'. Rape 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 is never acceptable, no one has a right over your body. Guilt, blame and shame belong to the rapist, 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 recover. We are open 365 days a year from 12 - 2.30pm and 7-9.30pm. Call us on 0808 802 9999. You do not have to do this alone.

Words from a Survivor of Rape:

'Silence is the main reason that rape is allowed to keep continuing and affecting generations of women. The silence doesn't stop if you report the rape. Everyone is stunned, confused, and unsure of what to say and do but ultimately they see silence as a healing mechanism. The less you talk about it the more likely, they think, you are to forget the rape and lead a 'normal life'. This is done out of care but is not helpful to the survivor. Silence eats away at you and silence turns the rape into your dirty little secret. Not very helpful when you are trying desperately to hold onto normality and feel like you're the same as anyone else. Maybe this is a mistake that we the survivor makes. We will never be 'normal' again, the fear and unease will always be there but our inner strength is so immense because we are surviving and not allowing ourselves to become more of a victim than we already are. In a way silence becomes a habit and silence becomes safe.

One significant mistake that people make is that they think rape is just sex when a woman does not want it or a bit of 'rough sex'. The fact is that rape is not about men losing control and needing sex, it is about men being very much in control, exercising complete power and dominance over someone else in the worst, most degrading way possible. Rape causes the woman humiliation and takes away her dignity. The lack of power as someone takes over your body against your wishes and reduces you to a sexual receptacle - whilst enjoying it - can never truly be described. Rape impacts on the victim's memory and identity. It destroys a victim's basic beliefs and trust in other human beings and becomes very hard to rebuild. After the rape you as a person no longer exists. You feel like a wooden shell that is deadened to the pain and it is living like this that reminds you of what you have lost and what you have become.

We become ashamed of the rape and its memories because we realise that it makes other people embarrassed and uncomfortable. We all recognise that rape is a terrible act and it takes a vile person to commit such a crime. Why then is it the victim who is ashamed? Surely it should be the rapist who is ashamed but it seems that during the rape the shame is transferred to the victim and thus causes silence.

*One incredible burden on a victim is the 'telling' of her story. You feel guilty for inflicting your pain and inability to cope on to others. In telling the people you're close to about the event, even if it isn't in any detail, you know that it will upset them and you run the risk of rejection. Silence, appearance of judgement or discomfort about my experience can feel like a major rejection to me. This results in the victim feeling she has to forget her nightmare and this is like swallowing a time bomb. Any day you will explode and this is inevitable but we still do it. The worst thing is that talking helps us to heal yet no one wants to hear. How can anyone who hasn't experienced rape understand how you feel? The truth is they can't but they can still support you and listen. Being able to talk and be heard is a great healer. But they don't know what to say for the best, they are frightened of hurting you and hearing your pain. What can you possibly say to help? There is nothing you can say but just your presence and willingness to hear what we have to say is enough'.
(Extracts from a letter written by Siobhan Louise Davies).*

READING LIST

For Females who have experienced Rape

Available from www.amazon.co.uk

HURTING AND HEALING: How to Overcome the Trauma of Sexual Abuse and Rape

Gloria Wade
ISBN: 1843330954

The more we understand the nature and effects of our trauma, the less overwhelming it becomes. so within these pages you will find an explanation of rape and child sexual abuse ... to offer a path from understanding to healing, from being buffeted by your emotions to living the life you chose."

QUEST FOR RESPECT: A Healing Guide for Survivors of Rape

Linda Braswell
ISBN: 0934793441

"This book was written to do two things: to educate rape survivors, to help them to know that rape is crime, that it is never the victim's fault, and to guide them, to help them to restore their personal power, and heal their hearts and spirits."

TOP SECRET - SEXUAL ASSAULT INFORMATION FOR TEENAGERS ONLY

Billie Jo Flerchinger and Jennifer Fay
ISBN: 0941953106

A nicely put together and brightly coloured guide for teenage girls. Covers rape by strangers, acquaintance rape, incest, what to do after sexual assault etc. Uses "problem pages", quizzes and stories.

FREE OF THE SHADOWS: Recovery from Sexual Violence

Caren Adams and Jennifer Fay
ISBN: 0934986711

Looks at common feelings for women who have been raped or sexually assaulted, from immediately after the assault to long-term coping. Positive and helpful, and includes advice for family and friends in each section.

RECOVERY: How to Survive Sexual Assault for Women, Men, Teenagers, Their Friends and Families

Helen Benedict
ISBN: 0231096755

This guide offers the survivors of rape and their friends and relatives a comprehensive body of knowledge drawn from social workers and social scientists on the short and long-term effects of rape. Includes survivor stories and how others can help.

WHO'S AFRAID OF THE DARK: A Forum of Truth, Support an Assurance for Those Who Are Affected By Rape

Edited by Cynthia Carosella
ISBN: 0060950722

Survivors of rape, both recent and long-past, women and men, tell their stories: "If you ever feel that your experiences have left you alone in the world, nothing comes as more of a relief than knowing that someone else has lived through something similar and understands ... my hope is that this book will help you find the words to describe what you are feeling and the strength to make the necessary changes."