



UNDERSTANDING THE TRAUMA OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual Violence is a Form of Trauma

As a survivor of sexual violence, you have endured a trauma, a significant event or series of events that fall outside the range of normal, everyday human experience. All forms of sexual violence are traumatic, including rape, attempted rape, sexual abuse, molestation, voyeurism, and many others. Other familiar types of traumatic events include combat conditions, natural disasters, vehicle accidents, and medical emergencies, or witnessing one or more of these events happening to someone else.

What makes a particular experience traumatic is that the survivor's ability to control what is happening to him or her is stripped away, often violently. The survivor feels that his or her health, safety and even life are directly threatened and he/she is rendered powerless to address that threat in the moment. Such an event overwhelms the brain's capacity to effectively respond and cope the way you would be able to in other types of situations. The extent to which a particular event is experienced as being traumatic by the survivor depends on many factors, which are unique to each person and each situation. Although you may feel out of sorts, or even that you're "going crazy," your reactions are *normal responses* to an abnormal event.

Sexual Violence is Unique

While the "brain impact" of sexual violence is similar to that of other types of trauma, sexual violence is unique. Unlike other types of trauma, sexual violence is a deliberate violation of your most personal space by one or more individuals that you likely knew and may have even trusted or loved. It is a personal crime of violence in which sex or sexuality is used as a weapon to harm and humiliate. Additionally, the stigma and sense of shame with which society regards such crimes makes it more difficult for survivors of sexual violence to seek and receive support than survivors of any other type of trauma. This stigma has the capacity to prolong feelings of distress and complicate the recovery process for some survivors. *It's important for you to know that what happened to you is not your fault. You did not cause this to happen to you.*

Common Reactions to Sexual Violence

While every survivor's experience and recovery process is different, most survivors experience some or all of the following reactions to the trauma of sexual violence:

- Physical: body aches/pains, fatigue, upset stomach/bowels, changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- Mental: difficulty with concentration and comprehension, confusion
- Emotional: disbelief, sadness, anxiety, anger, irritability, neediness, feeling numb, mood swings
- Behavioral: hypervigilance, avoidance of people or places, desire to change appearance, surroundings or tasks, difficulty maintaining intimate relationships

UNDERSTANDING THE TRAUMA OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE (continued)

Recovery Takes Time

Recovering from any trauma, including sexual violence, takes time. The recovery process is as unique as each individual survivor and is impacted by countless factors. There is no right or wrong way to feel, and there is no established timeline to follow. The following describes a *general* process by which many survivors respond to and recover from the trauma of sexual violence. Not all survivors move through this process sequentially, and there is no predictable pace, but it may help to explain patterns of emotions and behaviors over time.

Acute Stage:

This stage typically lasts from a few days to a few weeks after the traumatic event and is characterized by intense physical and emotional symptoms. In the immediate aftermath of the trauma, the body and mind of the survivor are still reeling and are struggling to return to a sense of balance and normalcy. Some survivors are very expressive (crying, yelling), while others are very reserved (calm, in shock). Both reactions are normal responses to trauma, as is fluctuation between the two.

Underground Stage:

It is intolerable for the body and mind to continue to operate in the intensity described in the Acute Stage and so the survivor works to return to normal, everyday life. This stage can last from a few days or weeks to decades, and the survivor will often go to great lengths to distance him/herself from the trauma and any reminders of it. This might involve making subtle or profound changes to one's routine or surroundings. It is common to push thoughts of the trauma away, to deny it, or to think and speak of it as if it's "no big deal."

Reorganization Stage:

This stage often begins if/when the survivor experiences memories of the trauma and a return of intense emotions described in the Acute Stage. These memories and emotions are usually triggered by something that may or may not be directly related to the past trauma, including experiencing a sensory reminder of the trauma (sight, sound or smell), or experiencing a major life transition. Some survivors in this stage feel a need to examine the impact the trauma has had on their lives. Some survivors are not able or willing to examine the impact of the trauma, and return to the Underground Stage. For some survivors, this stage results in reaching a sense of resolution, where the trauma is understood and integrated within the context of the survivor's full life and experience. This can occur with or without formal assistance.

When to Seek Help

Help is both appropriate and available at any point in your recovery process. It is a sign of strength, not weakness, to seek help in recovering from the trauma of sexual violence. You do not need or deserve to suffer in silence. **IMPORTANT:** If you are experiencing physical or psychological symptoms that are interfering with your daily life, or if you are feeling suicidal, it is important that you seek help right away. (Please see our Survivor Series sheet on PTSD and related issues). You deserve to live a happy, healthy, fulfilling life.