

FACT SHEET

Sexual Assault Response Team (SART)
Relationships

Effects of Sexual Assault

People who have experienced sexual assault may suffer significant health effects, including immediate injuries from the assault, as well as ongoing effects from chronic diseases and mental health conditions. Reactions in the early weeks following sexual assault include strong emotional responses and a range of post-traumatic symptoms such as anxiety; tearfulness; self blame and guilt; disbelief; physical revulsion; and helplessness. About 50 per cent of victims recover from these symptoms by 12 weeks after the assault but for many, the symptoms may persist for years (Queensland Health, 2009).

While the information below may be helpful, if you are concerned about your reactions or feel unsafe, you can ring:

- The 24 hr **Statewide Sexual Assault Helpline 1800 010 120** for support, information and referral to a service near you
- A counsellor, doctor or hospital in your local area.

Many people have difficulties with relationships, work and daily life following sexual assault

People are at greater risk of developing mental health problems following a traumatic event. These can have a significant impact on family, social and work life. A person's distress can make it difficult for them to relate to others. This may take different forms including withdrawal from family and social activities, over protectiveness or difficulty expressing emotions. People can also feel irritable and lash out at family and friends. While anger is a common response to a traumatic situation, if it persists, it may have serious and negative consequences.

Returning to work can be difficult following a traumatic event but returning to your normal routine helps recovery. This can be important even when the problem seems mild. It is often easier to prevent a problem getting worse than trying to manage it when it is having a significant impact on your life.

People experiencing mental health problems as a result of a traumatic event may feel irritable and lash out at family and friends, even when they are trying to help. While anger is a common response to a traumatic situation, if it persists, it may have serious, negative consequences for relationships and family.



Intimacy

Following a sexual assault some people may avoid sexual activity fearing losing control of their body or feeling vulnerable. Others may react, increasing sexual activity possibly because they may feel that sex is less important to them now or that it is a way for them to regain a sense of power.

The following are a range of normal symptoms that you might experience after an assault, they may be present immediately after or they may appear long afterwards

- Avoiding or being afraid of sex
- Approaching sex as an obligation
- Experiencing negative feelings such as anger, disgust, or guilt with touch
- Having difficulty becoming aroused or feeling sensation
- Feeling emotionally distant or not present during sex
- Experiencing intrusive or disturbing sexual thoughts and images
- Engaging in compulsive or inappropriate sexual behaviours
- Experiencing difficulty establishing or maintaining an intimate relationship
- Experiencing vaginal pain or orgasmic difficulties
- Experiencing erectile or ejaculatory difficulties.

Positive sexual experiences over time are the best way to reconnect with healthy sexual attitudes. To speed up the process you can try actively shifting your mindset by attempting some of the following:

- Avoid exposure to people and things that reinforce sexual abuse.
- Avoid any media (TV programs, books, magazines, websites, etc.) that portray sex as sexual abuse.
- Use positive, healthy and accurate language when referring to sex. When referring to body parts use the proper names, not slang terms that can be negative or degrading.
- Discover more about your current sexual attitudes and how you would like them to change. Spend time considering how you would feel about sex if you had never been sexually assaulted or abused. Consider how you want to think and feel about sex in the future. If you feel comfortable discuss ideas about healthy sexuality and sex with others such as with your partner.
- Educate yourself about healthy sex. Read books, take workshops, or talk with a counsellor.

References

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