

FACT SHEET

Sexual Assault Response Team (SART)

Self Care

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.

Helping yourself after a traumatic event

People cope with trauma in many different ways and the following self-care strategies may help you during your recovery. Even if you feel unmotivated and apathetic, try to do some of the things below. They will help you begin to come to terms with the traumatic event and to reduce some of the emotional pain associated with it (Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health, 2007):

- Recognise that you have been through an extremely stressful event; give yourself permission to feel rotten, but don't overact – it is unpleasant but you can cope
- Be more careful than usual, for example when cooking, driving or using machinery; following trauma, we are more vulnerable to accidents and illness
- Try to resume a normal routine as quickly as possible, but do not throw yourself into activities or work to avoid unpleasant feelings and memories. Tackle the things that need to be done gradually and count each success.
- Avoid making any major life decisions, such as moving house or changing jobs, in the period following the trauma; but making daily decisions such as choosing what food you want to eat or movie you'd like to see can help to re-establish a sense of control over your life.
- Structure your days. Try planning a timetable that includes some exercise, some work and some relaxation; try to schedule at least one enjoyable activity each day.



Physical self-care is an area that people often overlook

- Look after yourself: get plenty of rest, even if you can't sleep, and try to eat regular, well-balanced meals. Regular exercise, like walking, cycling or jogging, is very good at reducing the physical effects of stress and trauma; try to do a little everyday.
- Cut back or cut out tea, coffee, chocolate, cola and cigarettes. Your body is already 'hyped up' and these substances only add to this. Do not try to numb the pain with drugs or alcohol; this will lead to more problems in the long term.

Emotional self-care will mean different things for different people. It might mean...

- Make time for meditation or relaxation exercises. You may wish to learn relaxation techniques such as yoga and meditation, or breathing exercises, or deep muscle relaxation. Take a warm bath; listen to music – whatever works for you.
- Finding time for fun leisure activities you enjoy is an important aspect of self-care
- Nightmares, flashbacks and recurring thoughts are normal and will decrease in time; so don't try to fight them; block them out; or bottle up your feelings. Confronting the reality, gradually, will assist you come to terms with the experience.
- Keeping a journal. Some survivors find it useful to record their thoughts and feelings in a journal or diary, especially when you cannot talk to others about how you feel; recording it is almost as good.
- Seek support from other people. If you feel able, talk about your feelings to other people who will understand; which is part of the natural healing process, and in time, will help you accept what has happened.
- Involve the people around. Spend time with people you care about, even if you do not wish to talk about the event. Contact friends and, if necessary, arrange someone to stay with you for a few hours each day. Sometimes you may wish to be alone and that is okay, but try not to become too isolated.
- You may wish to provide support to others who have been through similar situations, especially as you start to feel better.
- A traumatic event can have an impact on how you see the world, your life, your goals and your relationships. Giving yourself time to re-evaluate what you think and talking to others about it may help.

Relaxation techniques or meditation help many survivors with their emotional self-care. For example:

- Meditation or relaxation exercises: Relaxation techniques or meditation help many survivors with their emotional self-care. For example: Sit or stand comfortably, with your feet flat on the floor and your back straight. Place one hand over your belly button. Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose and let your stomach expand as you inhale. Hold your breath for a few seconds, then exhale slowly through your mouth, sighing as you breathe out. Concentrate on relaxing your stomach muscles as you breathe in. When you are doing this exercise correctly, you will feel your stomach rise and fall about an inch as you breathe in and out. Try to keep the rest of your body relaxed—your shoulders should not rise and fall as you breathe! Slowly count to 4 as you inhale and to 4 again as you exhale. At the end of the exhalation, take another deep breath. After 3-4 cycles of breathing you should begin to feel the calming effects (Rape Abuse & Incest National Network, 2009).

References

Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health. (2012). Mental health and wellbeing information for the community. Retrieved from http://www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au/resources/resources-community.html#fact_sheets

Queensland Health. (2009). Review of Queensland Health responses to adult victims of sexual assault. KPMG Report. Retrieved from <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/sexualassault/default.asp>

Rape Abuse and Incest National Network. (2009). Self-Care for Survivors [Factsheet]. Retrieved from <http://www.rainn.org/get-information/sexual-assault-recovery/self-care-for-survivors>