

FACT SHEET

**Sexual Assault Response Team (SART)**

**Resilience and Recovery**

**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). You may question your beliefs; about your safety, how much control you have over your life and how predictable the world really is. These reactions will gradually decrease over time and there are things you can do to help (Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health [ACPMH], 2011).

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.

**Resilience and Recovery following traumatic events**

Victim/survivors possess significant resilience in the face of negative impacts of sexual assault and the negative reactions of others (Harvey, 2007, p. 9). The support you receive from people around you will make a big difference to your recovery. Help following a traumatic event does not have to come from a health professional. The answers are often found within ourselves and with the help of trusted friends and family. It is important that you use the resources and support systems most readily available to you following a traumatic event. For example, if you tend to use exercise to deal with stress, it might also help you to manage tension following a traumatic event. Spending time with people that have been supportive to you in the past is another way of coping with what is happening. Resilience and healing for victim/survivors are multidimensional processes; survivors are both "suffering and surviving" (Harvey, 2007, p. 9).



### Immediately following a traumatic event

This is a list of do's and don'ts' that can significantly improve your chances of recovering and getting on with your life (ACPMH (2011):

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spend time with people who care</li> <li>• Give yourself time</li> <li>• Find out about the impact of trauma and what to expect</li> <li>• Try to keep a routine going; work, study</li> <li>• Return to normal activities</li> <li>• Talk about how you feel or what happened when ready</li> <li>• What can you do right now....?</li> <li>• Do things that help you relax</li> <li>• Do things that you enjoy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use alcohol or drugs to cope</li> <li>• Keep yourself busy and work too much</li> <li>• Engage in stressful family or work situations</li> <li>• Withdraw from family and friends</li> <li>• Stop yourself from doing things that you enjoy</li> <li>• Avoid talking about what happened at all cost</li> <li>• Take risks</li> </ul>

### Here are some elements that can promote recovery

- Set realistic goals – don't take on too much and find goals that keep you motivated
- Review and reward progress – notice even the small steps
- Talk about the ups and downs of recovery with friends, family and the health professionals involved in your care
- Have a plan to maintain positive changes, and contingencies to deal with times of stress or reminders of the trauma ACPMH (2011).

### References

Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health. (2011). *Trauma and mental health*. Retrieved from <http://www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au/trauma/recovery.html>

Australian Institute of Family Studies: Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault. (2012). *The impacts of sexual assault on women*. Retrieved from <http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/pubs/sheets/rs2/index.html>

Harvey, M. R. (2007). *Towards an ecological understanding of resilience in trauma survivors: Implications for theory, research and practice*. Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma, 14(1-2), 9-32.

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