

Rape Trauma Syndrome

When a person experiences a traumatic event, whether it is physical or psychological, they will respond in a predictable manner. When the response consists of a series of reactions that series is called a syndrome. When the trauma is psychological, the response will be emotional.

Reactions and adjustment to rape are similar to those that might be experienced after other types of major life traumas. Reactions vary from individual to individual depending on the victim's age, maturity, life experience, and support systems. There is no one way that victim's respond to rape.

Most rape victims do, however, experience a predictable range of emotions following the assault. This cluster of reactions is called RAPE TRAUMA SYNDROME. Here, we offer 4 phases that explain the path of a survivor to healing.

I. ATTACK

During the attack, survivors often:

- **Fight, Flight, or Freeze** – while everyone thinks they would fight or run away, survivors often freeze in response to an attack. They do this to survive and to avoid further injury. Often victims are paralyzed by fear, and cannot take any action at all for fear that they could be hurt or killed.
- **Disorientation** during the attack may feel like being outside of oneself, and often helps victims to dissociate themselves from fear and pain they are experiencing.
- **Focus on survival** allows victims to get do things they might not ever have done, and things that may seem odd in retrospect. However, the desire to survive and get away from the attacker can lead victims to do whatever is necessary to live through the attack.

II. ACUTE REACTIONS

Immediately after the attack, victims often feel:

- Shock (cold, faint, nauseous, disoriented)
- Pain or irritation wherever the attacker touched or hurt them
- General soreness and tension
- Pain in lower back and/or stomach
- Emotional (crying, yelling, angry, devastated, confused, humiliated...)
- Withdrawn (detached from events, remote, disbelief)

III. REORGANIZATION REACTIONS

In trying to understand the impact this trauma has on one's life, the survivor undergoes a period of "reorganization" that is a struggle make sense of what happened, find safety, and cope with new concerns that are caused by the event. Some of them include:

Intrusion Symptoms – these symptoms intrude on the life of the survivor, no matter what the survivor tries to do...

- Intrusive thoughts and images

- Recurring dreams/nightmares
- Flashbacks (traumatic memories of the event that feel like the attack is happening again)
- Intense distress to similar events
- Anxiety attacks, or moments of panic so intense it feels like you cannot breathe
- Crying spells and tearfulness
- Feelings of shame or embarrassment

Avoidance Symptoms – these symptoms are ways that the survivor is trying to put the trauma behind them, but their efforts are often ineffective.

- Avoid thoughts and feelings of the trauma
- Avoid activities that are reminders of the event
- Desire to change jobs, housing, or any general disruption of normal events
- Inability to recall specific events of the trauma
- Depression or diminished interest
- Feeling of detachment from others
- Restricted range of feelings and expression
- Sense of limited future
- Withdrawal from others, lack of interest in relationships
- Fear
- Difficulties with work or school activities
- Lack of sexual interest or pleasure
- Physical or emotional numbness
- Helplessness and loss of control
- Confusion

Arousal Symptoms – these symptoms are keep the survivor always thinking or aware of the trauma and its effects:

- Sleep Disturbance
- Anger/Rage
- Difficulty concentrating
- Hyper vigilance - watching everything around all the time
- Easily startled
- Physical reactions to things that are reminders of the trauma
- Headaches
- Muscle tension
- Nausea
- Eating disturbance (eating too much or too little)
- Difficulty breathing
- Cold sweats

COMMON FEELINGS AFTER RAPE

Rape can be a devastating crime, and even more so when the perpetrator is a date or someone you know. Everyone will react differently, however common feelings include:

- Shame, guilt, depression.

- Feeling dirty and “icky”.
- Anger and self-blame that survivor did not see signs that the assailant may become violent or abusive (even though there may not have been any).
- Being afraid of having to face the assailant in class, the office, or other places.
- Fear of entering into future dating situations or intimate relationships.
- Headaches, stomachaches, or other physical symptoms.
- Disturbed sleep, eating, and inability to focus.
- Normal ways of coping with things are not enough—sometimes survivors resort to drugs, alcohol, or other types of coping that are destructive or harmful.
- Some victims feel that their life is too much trouble after an assault, or that they have lost too much to go on.

If you or someone you know feels this way, please direct them to assistance or call 847-697-2380.

III. RESOLUTION OR INTEGRATION PHASE

After a time, survivors are able to process the trauma of sexual assault and integrate this experience into their lives. It is rarely forgotten, but rather moves from a memory that has power over their lives to an experience that changed their lives but no longer controls it. Survivors recover the part of their identity that was displaced by so many trauma symptoms, and they feel “themselves” again. Survivors who reach this phase of healing are clear that the responsibility for this trauma was the perpetrators, and they are able to move on in their lives.