

RECOVERING FROM RAPE OR SEXUAL TRAUMA

Step 1: Open up about what happened to you

It can be extraordinarily difficult to admit that you were raped or sexually assaulted. There's a stigma attached. It can make you feel dirty and weak. You may also be afraid of how others will react. Will they judge you? Look at you differently? It seems easier to downplay what happened or keep it a secret. But when you stay silent, you deny yourself help and reinforce your victimhood.

Reach out to someone you trust. It's common to think that if you don't talk about your rape, it didn't really happen. But you can't heal when you're avoiding the truth. And hiding only adds to feelings of shame. As scary as it is to open up, it will set you free. However, it's important to be selective about who you tell, especially at first. Your best bet is someone who will be supportive, empathetic, and calm. If you don't have someone you trust, talk to a therapist.

Challenge your sense of helplessness and isolation. Trauma leaves you feeling powerless and vulnerable. It's important to remind yourself that you have strengths and coping skills that can get you through tough times. One of the best ways to reclaim your sense of power is by helping others: volunteer your time, give blood, reach out to a friend in need, or donate to your favorite charity.

Consider joining a support group for other rape or sexual abuse survivors. Support groups can help you feel less isolated and alone. They also provide invaluable information on how to cope with symptoms and work towards recovery. As a member of this group, you have already taken this step and we recognize your courage in being in the room today.

Step 2: Cope with Feelings of Guilt and Shame

Even if you intellectually understand that you're not to blame for the rape or sexual attack, you may still struggle with a sense of guilt or shame. These feelings can surface immediately following the assault or arise years after the attack. But as you acknowledge the truth of what happened, it will be easier to fully accept that you are not responsible. You did not bring the assault on yourself and you have nothing to be ashamed about.

Feelings of guilt and shame often stem from misconceptions such as:

You didn't stop the assault from happening. After the fact, it's easy to second guess what you did or didn't do. But when you're in the midst of an assault, your brain and body are in

shock. You can't think clearly. Many people say they feel "frozen." Don't judge yourself for this natural reaction to trauma. You did the best you could under extreme circumstances. If you could have stopped the assault, you would have.

You trusted someone you "shouldn't" have. One of the most difficult things to deal with following an assault by someone you know is the violation of trust. It's natural to start questioning yourself and wondering if you missed warning signs. Just remember that your attacker is the only one to blame. Don't beat yourself up for assuming that your attacker was a decent human being. Your attacker is the one who should feel guilty and ashamed, not you.

You were drunk or not cautious enough. Regardless of the circumstances, the only one who is responsible for the assault is the perpetrator. You did not ask for it or deserve what happened to you. Assign responsibility where it belongs: on the rapist.

Step 3: Prepare for flashbacks and upsetting memories

When you go through something stressful, your body temporarily goes into "fight-or-flight" mode. When the threat has passed, your body calms down. But traumatic experiences such as rape can cause your nervous system to become stuck in a state of high alert. You're hypersensitive to the smallest of stimuli. This is the case for many rape survivors. Flashbacks, nightmares, and intrusive memories are extremely common, especially in the first few months following the assault. If your nervous system remains "stuck" in the long-term and you develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), they can last much longer.

To reduce the stress of flashbacks and upsetting memories:

Try to anticipate and prepare for triggers. Common triggers include anniversary dates; people or places associated with the rape; and certain sights, sounds, or smells. If you are aware of what triggers may cause an upsetting reaction, you'll be in a better position to understand what's happening and take steps to calm down.

Pay attention to your body's danger signals. Your body and emotions give you clues when you're starting to feel stressed and unsafe. These clues include feeling tense, holding your breath, racing thoughts, shortness of breath, hot flashes, dizziness, and nausea.

Take immediate steps to self-soothe. When you notice any of the above symptoms, it's important to quickly act to calm yourself down before they spiral out of control. One of the quickest and most effective ways to calm anxiety and panic is to slow down your breathing.

Tips for dealing with Flashbacks

It's not always possible to prevent flashbacks. But if you find yourself losing touch with the present and feeling like the sexual assault is happening all over again, there are actions you

Accept and reassure yourself that this is a flashback, not reality. The traumatic event is over and you survived. Here's a simple script that can help: "I am feeling [panicked, frightened, overwhelmed, etc.] because I am remembering the rape/sexual assault, but as I look around I can see that the assault isn't happening right now and I'm not actually in danger."

Ground yourself in the present. Grounding techniques can help you direct your attention away from the flashback and back to your present environment. For example, try tapping or touching your arms or describing your actual environment and what you see when look around—name the place where you are, the current date, and 3 things you see when you look around.

Step 4: Reconnect to your body and feelings

Since your nervous system is in a hypersensitive state following a rape or assault, you may start trying to numb yourself or avoid any associations with the trauma. But you can't selectively numb your feelings. When you shut down the unpleasant sensations, you also shut down your self-awareness and capacity for joy. You end up disconnected both emotionally and physically existing, but not fully living.

Signs that you're avoiding and numbing in unhelpful ways:

- Feeling physically shut down. You don't feel bodily sensations like you used to (you might even have trouble differentiating between pleasure and pain).
- Feeling separate from your body or surroundings (you may feel like you're watching yourself or the situation you're in, rather than participating in it).
- Having trouble concentrating and remembering things.
- Using stimulants, risky activities, or physical pain to feel alive and counteract the empty feeling inside of you.
- Compulsively using drugs or alcohol.
- Escaping through fantasies, daydreams, or excessive TV, video games, etc.
- Feeling detached from the world, the people in your life, and the activities you used to enjoy.

To recover after rape, you need to reconnect to your body and feelings

It's frightening to get back in touch with your body and feelings following a sexual trauma. In many ways, rape makes your body the enemy, something that's been violated and contaminated—something you may hate or want to ignore. It's also scary to face the intense feelings associated with the assault. But while the process of reconnecting may feel threatening, it's not actually dangerous. Feelings, while powerful, are not reality. They won't hurt you or drive you insane. The true danger to your physical and mental health comes from avoiding them.

Once you're back in touch with your body and feelings, you will feel more safe, confident, and powerful. You can achieve this through the following techniques:

Rhythmic movement. Rhythm can be very healing. It helps us relax and regain a sense of control over our bodies. Anything that combines rhythm and movement will work: dancing, drumming, marching. You can even incorporate it into your walking or running routine by concentrating on the back and forth movements of your arms and legs.

Mindfulness meditation. You can practice mindfulness meditation anywhere, even while you are walking or eating. Simply focus on what you're feeling in the present moment—including any bodily sensations and emotions. The goal is to observe without judgement.

Yoga, Tai Chi, and Qigong. These activities combine body awareness with relaxing, focused movement and can help relieve symptoms of PTSD and trauma.

Massage. After rape, you may feel uncomfortable with human touch. But touching and being touched is an important way we give and receive affection and comfort. You can begin to reopen yourself to human contact through massage therapy.

Step 5: Stay connected

It's common to feel isolated and disconnected from others following a sexual assault. You may feel tempted to withdraw from social activities and your loved ones. But it's important to stay connected to life and the people who care about you. Support from other people is vital to your recovery. But remember that support doesn't mean that you always have to talk about or dwell on what happened. Having fun and laughing with people who care about you can be equally healing.

Participate in social activities, even if you don't feel like it. Do "normal" things with other people, things that have nothing to do with the sexual trauma.

Reconnect with old friends. If you've retreated from relationships that were once important to you, make the effort to reconnect.

Make new friends. If you live alone or far from family and friends, try to reach out and make new friends. Take a class or join a club to meet people with similar interests, connect to an alumni association, or reach out to neighbors or work colleagues.

Step 6: Nurture yourself

Healing from sexual trauma is a gradual, ongoing process. It doesn't happen overnight, nor do the memories of the trauma ever disappear completely. This can make life seem difficult at times. But there are many steps you can take to cope with the residual symptoms and reduce your anxiety and fear.

Take time to rest and restore your body's balance. That means taking a break when you're tired and avoiding the temptation to lose yourself by throwing yourself into activities. Avoid doing anything compulsively, including working. If you're having trouble relaxing and letting down your guard, you may benefit from relaxation techniques such as meditation and yoga.

Be smart about media consumption. Avoid watching any program that could trigger bad memories or flashbacks. This includes obvious things such as news reports about sexual violence and sexually explicit TV shows and movies. But you may also want to temporarily avoid anything that's over-stimulating, including social media.

Take care of yourself physically. It's always important to eat right, exercise regularly, and get plenty of sleep—but even more so when you're healing from trauma. Exercise in particular can soothe your traumatized nervous system, relieve stress, and help you feel more powerful and in control of your body.

Avoid alcohol and drugs. Avoid the temptation to self-medicate with alcohol or drugs. Substance use worsens many symptoms of trauma, including emotional numbing, social isolation, anger, and depression. It also interferes with treatment and can contribute to problems at home and in your relationships.