

NAVIGATING SEXUAL INTIMACY

SEXUAL CONCERNS



After experiencing sexual trauma, it is often difficult for survivors to engage in sexual or intimate relationships. Trauma is very complex and multifaceted, so it can affect one's sexuality in diverse and individual ways. Some of these effects are immediate and may show up right away, or years after the assault experience. Some trauma-related symptoms you might experience include:

- ❖ Avoiding sexual contact or feeling a lack of physical desire even when you'd like to
- ❖ Feeling out of control of your sexuality, which may include doing sexual things you don't feel good about such as using sex as a coping mechanism
- ❖ Feeling some confusion about separating sex from sexual abuse
- ❖ Feeling some confusion about sexual identity especially in same-sex assault
- ❖ Feeling distant or alienated during sex
- ❖ Feeling uncomfortable, fearful, angry or disgusted by touch
- ❖ Experiencing physical/genital pain related to psychological distress
- ❖ Being triggered or experiencing flashbacks in response to particular kinds of touch, words, or scenarios.

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS



Navigating dating relationships after experiencing trauma can seem challenging. However, it is possible to successfully date and maintain an intimate relationship if you are interested in doing so. As you continue on your healing journey, remember that you are worthy of giving and receiving love. This handout will discuss important considerations for navigating a healthy relationship moving forward.

Disclosure should happen when you are ready. If you're with a partner, it is important to have a conversation about your experiences of violence and what that might mean for intimacy. There is no specific timeline for when this should happen. You should never feel compelled to share – do so at your own pace.

This could mean simply mentioning that you've experienced violence and need to go slow, or could be a precise detailing of your experiences and needs. A good partner will listen to and respect your boundaries, desires, and discomforts every time—and you deserve a good partner.

Sexual healing takes time. Go at your own pace. Whether and how you have sex should always be your choice. After experiencing sexual violence, you may want to have sex like you did before, only in certain ways, or not at all. All of this is okay. If, when, and how you

have sex, it should be because you choose it, not because you feel you should or someone else pressures you.

And remember that if you don't want to have sex, this doesn't mean missing out on intimacy. There are many different ways to be physically and emotionally intimate with people you care about and to experience pleasure (cuddling, massage, or sumptuous romantic dinners, for example) whatever your desire for genital sexual intimacy.

Clearly communicate your sexual boundaries. If you decide to be sexual, be very clear with your partner about your needs and limits when it comes to any type of sexual touching or sexual contact.

Tell your partner what kinds of physical or sexual intimacy feels comfortable to you. Sexual assault is NOT sex. Intimate consensual lovemaking should be pleasurable for both partners. A patient, gentle, intimate partner is helpful in your healing process.

Consider seeing a therapist. Even after deciding to be sexual again, you may still experience various forms of post-traumatic stress. This is completely normal. Trauma is complex, highly individual, and it can take a long time and lots of effort to heal. A great therapist who is trained to treat trauma, and especially sexual trauma, will help you process what you're experiencing and offer vital support as you heal. If you feel comfortable enough, you may also invite your partner to therapy with you.
