

Rape Trauma Syndrome

Reactions and adjustment to sexual assault are similar to those that might be experienced after other types of major life traumas. Rape Trauma Syndrome (RTS) is the cluster of common reactions experienced by survivors of rape or sexual assault due to the intense feelings of fear and loss of power and control during the attack.

Every individual is different and may exhibit a wide range of reactions based on their age, maturity, life experience, coping strategies, and support systems. There is no singular experience that all victims have after sexual assault. However, most victims will report or demonstrate some indications of Rape Trauma Syndrome. The following are four phases of RTS and the feelings commonly experienced during each stage of assault.

I. DURING THE ATTACK

During the attack, survivors often:

- **Fight, Flight, or Freeze** – while most people think 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. This may be true whether the perpetrator is a stranger or someone known to the victim.
- **Disorientation** - during the attack may feel like being outside of oneself, and often helps victim to dissociate themselves from fear and pain they are experiencing.
- **Focus on survival** - allows victims to 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- Withdrawn (detached from events, remote, disbelief)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

While trying to understand the impact this trauma has on their life, the survivor undergoes a period of “reorganization”. They may 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 cause the survivor to be constantly aware of or thinking about 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 and sexual assault can be devastating experiences. This can be all the more true when the perpetrator is someone you know. Everyone will react differently, however common feelings include:

- Shame, guilt, depression.
- Feeling dirty and “icky”.
- Anger and self-blame that survivor that the 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.

III. RESOLUTION OR INTEGRATION PHASE

After some time has passed, 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 like “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.

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