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THE EFFECTS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT AND RAPE

Sexual assault can have psychological, emotional, and physical effects on a survivor. Sexual violence also disturbs one’s normal routine of living and many aspects of one’s life. Therefore, the effects of rape vary for each person as we are all affected in different ways and recover at different rates. Through survivors we know that there are some common responses to rape and sexual violence and the effects could last many years to show themselves. Here are some of the effects.

There are so many physical effects which may be instantly obvious if the assailant has used violence during the assault and one made need immediate hospital treatment. However, it is also worth considering physical effects that can arise in the future such as sexually transmitted infections. A sexually transmitted infection (STI) is a bacterial or viral infection passed from one person to another through vaginal, anal, or oral contact.

Dissociation is one of the many defense mechanisms the brain can use to cope with the trauma of sexual violence. For many an initial reaction to being raped is one of shock and emotional numbness. Many people initially feel calm and shut off from what’s happened. This reaction can sometimes surprise friends, family, family and professionals who expect survivors to be distraught immediately after an assault. However, dissociation is a natural defence mechanism and is perfectly normal. Usually after a few days or weeks one will begin to have a range of other reactions including anger, fear and shock.

A significant number of people who’ve been sexually assaulted feel guilty, embarrassed or shameful about what has happened. Most of us find it difficult to discuss intimate things so it is not suprising that you might not find it easy to discuss what has happened with strangers or even friends. Feeling guilty on the other hand is very common. The feeling that you could have done something to prevent the attack or know the attacker who provoked the rape. Rape is never one’s fault- young girls and women in their 80’s are raped.

Depression can be expected as one starts to come to terms with or recover from any major trauma or emotionally charged event. Dealing with the memory of the assault as well as the things that follow ( the police, telling friends and family going to court, having medical examinations etc.) can be extremely draining physically and mentally.

One may experience recurrent dreams and nightmares as the brain tries to process, understand and recover from what has happened. This is normal and the nightmares usually become less frequent over time. Talking about them with someone you trust will help- it might not stop the dreams altogether but it will help them seem less powerful and overwhelming.

Depending on the circumstances one may feel fear about a number of things. A person might have been physically threatened during the assault, fear of reporting to the police thinking of what it would lead to, or being reluctant to tell friends or family for upsetting them. In cases where one recognizes , knows the assailant or the assailant knows where one lives, there might be fear of continued violence. Feeling worried about getting pregnant or contracting an STD. Later on, one may worry about being able to be in an intimate or sexual relationship.

All of these fears are absolutely normal and common and given time and support they can be overcome. Discussing them with a friend or counsellor will help.