

# Rape Trauma Syndrome

Rape Trauma Syndrome is a specific form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that is commonly experienced by people who have been sexually assaulted<sup>1</sup>. It is a model for recovery after sexual assault that each survivor may go through at her/his own speed or intensity. The syndrome has three characteristic phases and may continue over a lengthy period of time. The time it takes to recover fully from a sexual assault can vary a great deal because of each survivor's personalized experience of sexual assault, as well as the events that followed it.

## **The Acute Phase**

Immediately following a sexual assault, survivors may experience a wide range of emotional reactions that result from being faced with a shocking, and in some cases, potentially life-threatening situation. Most commonly, survivors go into a state of emotional and physical shock immediately after a sexual assault. The symptoms that may be experienced while in this state include:

- Constant anxiety
- Fear
- Hypervigilance (being on edge and easily startled)
- Feeling scattered and unable to focus
- Nightmares
- Disturbed sleeping (difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep)
- Disturbed eating (increase or decrease in eating, nausea, vomiting)
- Body shakes

In addition to being in a state of shock, survivors in this phase are often overwhelmed by their feelings of guilt, shame, and self-blame regarding the sexual assault. It is these feelings that often deter survivors from reaching out for support from others.

Not all survivors' emotional reactions to a sexual assault are expressed in the same way. Most often their reactions are manifested in one of the two following ways:

1. **Expressive** - obvious outward expression such as crying, shaking, tenseness or restlessness. Demonstrations of anger, fear and/or anxiety.
2. **Controlled** - appearing quite calm and rational about the situation, and/or masking or hiding their feelings.

During the first few weeks following the assault the survivor may experience acute physical symptoms, for example, soreness and/or bruising on various parts of the body. These symptoms may be specific to where on the body the sexual assault took place, such as vaginal discharge, burning sensations, pain, itchiness, irritation of the mouth or throat, or rectal pain or bleeding.

In the period immediately following the assault, survivors may have many practical problems to deal with such as:

- Informing family and friends (who to tell and how to tell them)
- Medical examinations (whether or not to have one, and/or where to go)

- Concern of STIs, AIDS, and/or (for females) pregnancy
- Decision about pressing charges or not

### **Outward Adjustment**

In the next phase toward recovery it is common for survivors to attempt to forget about the sexual assault and to return some normalcy to their life. While they may seem to have forgotten about the incident and gone on with their life, there is usually a high level of denial and repression of feelings regarding the incident. Some survivors may express this denial by acting as though the sexual assault has no affect on them anymore, and others may frame the sexual assault as “just a bad sexual experience.”

Most survivors will not want to talk about the sexual assault during this phase, and will be actively avoiding any potential triggers or reminders of the sexual assault. For this reason, many people begin making some life changes such as moving, changing schools/job, traveling, changing friends, etc. while others keep busy to avoid thinking about it by working or partying hard. In this phase there is a sense of “getting on with life and forgetting about the sexual assault.” This phase of denying and repressing feelings serves both an important and functional role; it is an essential part of the healing process.

### **Long-Term Reorganization**

Long-term reorganization is the phase where the survivor is no longer able to repress the assault or forget about it and healing begins to take place. It begins when something triggers the survivor to think about the sexual assault again (this usually comes in the form of a flashback). The beginning of this phase can be very frustrating, as many feel that they have already dealt with this, and yet now they cannot seem to stop thinking about it again.

In this phase it is common to feel overwhelmed by the return of frequent flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety, and feelings of hopelessness. For some survivors this is a time when they may think about suicide. Fortunately, it is in this phase that the survivor is able to work to heal from the sexual assault and integrate it into their life; this phase provides the opportunity for survivors to regain a sense of safety, control and trust. Long-term adjustment to sexual assault depends on several factors. Some influencing factors include the degree of support received from friends and family, previous self-concept, treatment by professionals following the assault, involvement with the criminal justice system, and their relationship to the perpetrator.

The three phases of Rape Trauma Syndrome provide survivors and their supporters with a better understanding of the stages survivors commonly experience when recovering from a sexual assault. Each survivor will move through the phases at their own pace and each will find their own unique path to healing and recovery.