



Coping after a sexual assault

Sexual assault can be a very traumatic experience. It is also a common occurrence in our communities.

It is important to remember that recovery is possible, that there are many things you can do to assist your recovery, and that there are people available to support you.

You may experience a range of feelings and reactions to the trauma. These may disappear after a short period of time, or they may persist for longer. Everyone is different and no particular reaction, or lack of reaction, is right or wrong.

Important

The experience was not your fault.

People can be affected by trauma in different ways. These impacts are all normal and you are not crazy or broken.

You don't have to go through this alone, there are people who can help.

It is possible for you to recover from your trauma experiences, to feel good, and to lead a happy life. This is what you deserve.

Common impacts of sexual trauma can include things like:

It may feel like you will never recover and feel 'normal' again. Many people who have been through a trauma feel this way. We want you to know that you are important and worthwhile, and that you can recover.

- ▶ headaches
- ▶ nightmares
- ▶ confusion
- ▶ flashbacks
- ▶ loss of confidence
- ▶ difficulty concentrating

- ▶ avoiding people
- ▶ easily startled
- ▶ withdrawal
- ▶ loss of interest in things
- ▶ feeling angry

- ▶ self-harming
- ▶ feeling ashamed
- ▶ anxiety
- ▶ depression
- ▶ feeling worthless
- ▶ afraid to form relationships.

Your thoughts and beliefs influence your emotions. You might experience a sense of 'numbness', or you might find yourself thinking repeatedly about the sexual assault, causing emotions such as anger and fear. You may start to believe things about yourself that aren't true. For example, you may think you were to blame for the assault in some way, leading you to experience guilt. It is often helpful to talk these reactions through with someone who understands about sexual trauma.

I should have...
I shouldn't have...
I'm broken
If only I didn't...

Talking to someone supportive is important for healing

- ▶ It can be difficult to talk about such personal things to someone else, but talking is important for healing.
- ▶ Consider telling a trusted friend who will be supportive and understanding.
- ▶ You don't need to talk about details, only what you feel safe talking about.
- ▶ Writing in a diary can help you to let go of some of your heaviest thoughts and feelings. Keep it somewhere safe.
- ▶ An experienced counsellor is often the best way for you to change the way you think about the trauma and to cope better. Some counselling options are listed at the end of this handout.
- ▶ You can explain the situation to your doctor and ask for a referral to a counsellor and a 'Mental Health Care Plan' which will allow you to access counselling for free or at a discounted rate.
- ▶ If you just can't bring yourself to speak to someone face-to-face, you might like to start by calling a telephone support service. We have listed some services at the end of the handout.

If you have feelings of shame, talk to someone supportive. This will help you to let go of the shame. It doesn't need to stay with you.

The hardest part is often taking the first step



Tips for coping

- ▶ Be kind to yourself. Allow your feelings and reactions without being angry or upset at yourself.
- ▶ Avoid using drugs or alcohol to numb your feelings. These can make the situation worse.
- ▶ Aim for a healthy lifestyle including exercise, rest, good sleep and healthy food.
- ▶ Notice the messages you tell yourself. Stop yourself from thinking negative thoughts and start to say positive statements to yourself such as "I can do this, I'm a survivor" and "I deserve good things".
- ▶ Practice calming each day when you feel stressed or anxious. Start by taking slow, deep breaths, focussing on relaxing your body and saying soothing things in your mind, such as "Everything is okay".
- ▶ Focus on using your senses often. For example, look at the sky, notice how the water in the shower feels, taste the different flavours of your food and listen to the sounds around you.
- ▶ Take care of your medical and health needs.
- ▶ Do something you enjoy each day. It's a good idea to make a list of activities for ideas.
- ▶ Do creative things such as play an instrument, draw, cook, write poetry or make something.
- ▶ Stay in touch with supportive friends and family members. Even if they don't know about your trauma, connection with others is very important.

It is OKAY

To take time for yourself.

To have bad days.

To make mistakes.

To say "no".

To forgive yourself.

To be kind to yourself.

Your recovery may take time and effort, but you are worth it.

A **Care Package** with lots of information and tips about coping and recovery can be viewed or downloaded from the SARC website.

A **Supporter's Guide** providing information to parents, family and friends on how to support someone who is recovering from sexual trauma can also be viewed or downloaded from the SARC website.

The **Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC)** is a free 24-hour emergency service providing medical and counselling services for people who have experienced a recent (within 14 days) sexual assault. Counselling for any sexual assault/abuse experienced recently or in the past is also available to people of all genders aged 13 years and above. Call SARC on (08) **6458 1828** or Freecall **1800 199 888**.

Sexual assault can be reported to police at your **local police station**, or by calling **131 444**, or reporting online through the **Crime Stoppers Safe2Say website** (anonymously if you prefer).

Police assistance and reporting **Call 131 444**
(not emergencies)

Emergency Call 000 Police, Fire, Ambulance

Resources and services in WA

Telephone support services:

1800RESPECT Freecall 1800 737 732

Lifeline Australia 13 11 14

Beyond Blue 1300 224 636

Crisis Care (08) 9223 1111;
1800 199 008

The Samaritans Help Line 135 247

Women's Domestic Violence Helpline
9223 1188; 1800 007 339

Mensline Australia
1300 789 978

National Disability Abuse and Neglect Hotline 1800 880 052

WA Mental Health Emergency Response Line
1300 555 788 (metro)
and 1800 676 822 (peel)

QLife support for people who identify as LGBT+
1800 184 527

Rurallink mental health support for people living in rural WA
1800 552 002