Common Reactions After Sexual Assault

A range of experiences, symptoms, and reactions are common after sexual assault. While these symptoms are normal to experience, they themselves can often be distressing and disruptive. Most survivors of sexual assault are frustrated by the remaining after-effects that they struggle with, and they often worry that they have been permanently affected. However, these symptoms and reactions can be overcome, and a sense of normalcy and wellness will be experienced again. Many of the symptoms experienced after sexual assault are commonly experienced after other traumatic experiences as well.

Sexual assault is typically experienced by the mind and body as a trauma, and it is not uncommon for survivors to develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Many survivors do not immediately recognize that they are suffering from trauma symptoms, and thus their reactions make them feel “crazy” or as if there is something wrong with them that they “can’t handle this well” or “keep it together.”

Yet, having symptoms after a trauma, such as a sexual assault, is not a choice and it is not an indication of personal weakness. Instead, these symptoms are normal reactions to abnormal life events. These reactions may continue or develop many months or years after the traumatic experience, understanding what reactions are typical can be comforting to those who feel that their reactions are “unique” or “over-reactions.”

Re-experiencing symptoms
Sexual assault survivors commonly re-experience cognitive, emotional, or physical memories related to their sexual assault. These may be specific memories or more generalized experiences of feeling similar emotions or sensations related to the sexual assault. Common re-experiencing symptoms include:

- **Unwanted or intrusive thoughts** related to the sexual assault that are difficult to avoid
- **Flashbacks** ~ vivid recollections (either visual, emotional, or physical) of the sexual assault and the feelings associated with it, it can seem as though it is happening again
- **Nightmares** ~ either of the sexual assault or similar content
- **Feeling emotional or agitated** when reminded of the issue of sexual assault
- **Anxiety** ~ a natural response to danger, anxiety can persist after a trauma – it may be specifically related to the sexual assault, or it may generalize
- **Triggers** ~ cues that are related to the sexual assault that cause intrusive thoughts, flashbacks or anxiety. Often anxiety that appears to come out of nowhere is triggered by some type of reminder (including: experiences that elicit similar feelings; particular sounds, smells, sights, or touch; times of day or year; certain phrases; etc.)
Avoidance symptoms
Avoiding anything related to the sexual assault, including reminders, memories, or thoughts of it is a common way to cope. This is a way to attempt to manage the intense and distressing emotional experiences that come with the memories of the trauma. Also, many survivors feel as though they want to be able to move on with their lives and do not want to think about what happened. Common avoidance symptoms include:

- Avoiding reminders of the sexual assault
- Pushing away painful thoughts and emotions
- Feeling numb and/or disconnected
- Memory problems
- Engaging in coping mechanisms that help avoiding or forgetting (e.g., alcohol/drug use)

Hyperarousal symptoms
Increased arousal, or being hyper-alert, is a common experience after a traumatic experience. Survivors often note that they feel on edge, never completely relaxed, or generally unsafe. The arousal reactions are due to a continued fight or flight response being maintained in the body, which is a protective survival mechanism. Long after a traumatic experience, the mind and body may remain “on guard,” which ultimately is difficult to cope with and is both emotionally and physically exhausting. Common hyperarousal symptoms include:

- Feeling jumpy or shaky
- Startling easily
- Difficulty concentrating or focusing
- Difficulty sleeping
- Impatience or irritability
- Angering easily

Dissociative symptoms
One of the most protective and commonly used survival mechanisms for surviving a sexual assault or other form of trauma is to dissociate and/or freeze. While much is discussed about the fight or flight response, fewer people are aware that the freeze response is just as common, and likely even more common in sexual assaults. Some survivors may feel as though they disconnected from their body during the assault, or that they were unable to react or move. After surviving the sexual assault, dissociating or zoning out may remain a way of coping with intense emotion, triggers, or other stressful experiences. Common dissociative symptoms include:

- Loss of memory or lack of memory for particular time periods
- Feeling numb or unable to feel emotion
• Feeling disconnected from the body
• Unable to feel sensation or pain (physically numb)
• Feeling foggy
• Time distortion
• Depersonalization ~ feeling alienated or estranged from yourself (as though things are happening to someone else and not yourself)
• Derealization ~ feeling alienated or estranged from your surroundings (feeling as though the world is unreal, almost like in a dream)
• Not feeling present
• Spacing out
• Being forgetful
• Inability to concentrate

Somatic symptoms
Traumatic events are physical experiences, and the body may hold stress, tension, and/or implicit memory from these experiences. It is very common for survivors to feel effects from their sexual assaults on a somatic level. The following are common physical symptoms after sexual assault:
• Headaches
• Weight loss or weight gain (with or without changes in eating patterns)
• Changes in appetite
• Stomach problems
• Dizziness
• Muscle tension / muscle soreness
• Insomnia
• Restless sleep
• Early morning wakenings
• Fatigue
• Low sex drive
• Vaginismus (in females) ~ involuntary tightness of the vagina, preventing penetration and sometimes leading to discomfort or pain
• Vulvodynia (in females) ~ a chronic pain condition in the vulvar area
• Erectile Disorder (in males)