Introduction

No one ever deserves to be harmed; and sexual assault is never the fault or responsibility of the person who was assaulted. The responsibility for sexual assault is solely with the person who chose to harm someone else.

Sexual assault is often a traumatic experience that interrupts your life and affects your relationships with other people, your schoolwork, your home life, and your emotional wellbeing. After a sexual assault, it is normal to be confused about what to do and to feel like your life is out of control. Being a survivor of sexual assault does not make you any less worthy, strong, or powerful, even though things may feel overwhelming right now. It is also common to question what you could have done differently and to blame yourself. You have no reason to blame yourself or question your actions. **If you were sexually assaulted, it is not your fault.**

If you are unsure what to do or need support, this booklet can help you understand why you may be feeling the way you are and can be a resource to help you feel more in control – in whatever way is best for you. It is important to realize that everyone responds differently to harm and trauma and that recovery is often a confusing and slow process. Be patient with yourself, and remember that healing from trauma can take time.

What is Sexual Assault?

Sexual assault is any touching or contact of a sexual nature that is unwanted and done without affirmative consent. Affirmative consent is a knowing, voluntary, and mutual decision among all participants to engage in sexual activity. Consent can be given by words or actions, as long as those words or actions create clear permission regarding willingness to engage in the sexual activity.

Sexual assault occurs any time a person is forced, coerced, pressured and/or manipulated into any unwanted sexual activity. No one is ever entitled to sexual contact with another person. A person’s relationship status or position of power, does not give them the right to sexual contact without consent. Forcing a person to say yes, is not gaining consent.

Sexual assault includes a range of behaviors, which may take the form of unwanted kissing or touches (groping, fondling), engaging in sexual behavior beyond what you have consented to, recording sexual activity without your permission, allowing other people to watch without your permission, or rape.

It is important to understand that physical force does not occur in all sexual assaults.
Why did this happen to me?

It is common to wonder why you were sexually assaulted. You may wonder about your own actions – could you have done something differently that would have prevented the assault from happening? You may blame yourself for what happened. Nothing you did caused the sexual assault. Sexual assault is not your fault.

Many individuals who have been sexually assaulted report that they “froze” and couldn't move or speak. A “freezing” reaction is never a person’s fault or an indicator the person wanted or consented to the assault. It is simply a reaction which takes place in someone's brain – it is part of the fight, flight, or freeze response and it serves a biological purpose. Unfortunately, much of society is not aware that freezing often happens when a person is placed in a scary or traumatic situation, so people may inadvertently blame the person who was harmed for not “fighting back” or trying to escape.

It is also normal to not realize that what happened was an assault immediately after the assault took place. Many people realize they were assaulted days, weeks, even years after it happened, and coming to this realization does not make what happened less true or less impactful.

Sexual Assault in Unhealthy or Abusive Relationships

Being in a relationship, whether-casual or exclusive, doesn't change what types of behaviors are abusive and/or criminal. It's important to know that sexual assault can happen in intimate relationships, casual dating, or during hookups. In fact, sexual assault and rape are often committed by people known to the survivor, including their partners. Any abuse in a relationship, whether it is emotional, physical, or sexual, constitutes an abusive relationship.

Healthy relationships are built on consent and communication. Consent is a continuous process. This means that you can decide what you want for yourself and your body at any time, for any reason, period. If you have ever been forced or pressured into a sexual act without verbal consent (that you didn't feel forced to give), it is a sexual assault. Sexual assault in an intimate relationship is a form of abuse.

You deserve to feel safe and valued in any relationship. If you find yourself in an abusive relationship you are not alone and there are people and groups who can support you. For more information and to find out ways to heal and gain independence and control, read our other booklet about unhealthy or abusive relationships.
Specific Communities

Many groups of people experience discrimination and unfair treatment based on their identity, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or ability. If you identify with one or more of these communities, you may experience specific or additional fears and concerns about seeking help following a sexual assault. If you identify as a person from a specific community, seek out friends or a trusted adult from your community who can help you find resources that feel safe to you.

LGBTQ or Gender Nonconforming Youth

If you identify as LGBTQ or gender nonconforming, you may be afraid of “being outed” by the person who assaulted you if you’re not out to everyone. You may also understandably fear that seeking help will make you a target of harassment or bullying. The person who assaulted you may exploit these fears to keep you from getting help. And if your family, school, or community is not tolerant of your sexual orientation and/or gender identity, it can be a barrier to turning to anyone for support.

So, What Should I Do? Reach out to LGBTQ organizations or school clubs like a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), to find out about LGBTQ resources. You may also find a supportive counselor or teacher who can help you find resources that will be helpful to you.

Youth with Undocumented Status or Dreamers

If you are undocumented or a Dreamer, you may fear being deported if you seek help for the sexual assault. Or you may fear telling a school staff member or other community member out of concern your information may lead to an investigation that could ultimately lead to the deportation of the person who assaulted you.

So, What Should I Do? Heightened immigration enforcement policies have justifiably increased fear of some groups to contact law enforcement. If you do not have immigration status or are a Dreamer in the United States, contact an attorney, or someone who is licensed to better understand the implications of your status when looking to get help in healing from a sexual assault.

Communities of Color or Indigenous Communities

If you identify as a person of color, the assault you experienced took place in the context of current racism and our country’s history of discrimination (such as, slavery of the Black community and genocide of Indigenous communities), and false narratives of white superiority. You may experience an increased impact following a sexual assault because of the everyday stress of being a person of color.
So, What Should I Do? You may understandably fear reaching out for help from the criminal justice or other systems because of historic and ongoing oppression and harm to your community by those systems. Find trusted adults in your community who can help you find resources that will be helpful to you.

Youth with Disabilities

If you identify as a person with a physical, mental, cognitive or intellectual disability, you may depend on others to meet some or many of your basic needs, or use assistive devices. It may be that the person who helps you was the one who assaulted you. You may have your daily needs or assistive devices used against you as a coercive tactic to control you or stop you from seeking help following an assault. You may feel shame from overly trusting the person who assaulted you. You may also experience barriers in seeking help based on stereotypes that individuals with disabilities do not experience sexual assault.

So, What Should I Do? Find trusted adults within disability advocacy organizations, like a Center for Independent Living or protection and advocacy organizations, that can help you advocate for your self-determination and enhance your safety.

Your Response to Sexual Assault

Your experience is yours, not anyone else’s, and no one can assume to know what you are going through. This does not mean you are alone. It simply means that no one responds to sexual assault in the same way. A hard part of the healing process is identifying how you and your body are reacting to the trauma you experienced. This can be challenging, but is important because it will help you figure out what you need to recover from the trauma you experienced. There is no one “right way” to respond to trauma, no one “right way” to heal, and no time-frame for how long healing takes. Be proud of yourself for each step you take towards healing, no matter how big or small that step may be.

Here is list of common reactions to sexual assault that may help you identify how your body and mind are responding to what you experienced:

Physical Reactions: Change in sleeping patterns, nightmares, headaches, loss of appetite or overeating, stomach problems, muscle tension, lack of concentration, impaired memory, and/or increased use of drugs or alcohol.

Emotional Reactions: Denial, fear, sadness, anger, guilt, shame, confusion, embarrassment, flashbacks, hyper-vigilance (heightened sense or being very aware of your surroundings in a way that you
weren’t before, or being fearful of everyday activities), mood swings, irritability, depression, and suicidal thoughts. You may feel very upset, very calm, or anything in between. You may not feel anything at all, feel numb, or feel that your emotions are mixed up or out of place. Or you may feel like you are on an emotional roller coaster, with your emotions going up and down at any given moment. Your reaction is normal because it is simply how your body is responding to trauma. Be patient with yourself.

Social Reactions: Fear of being in public or social situations, missing school, being unable to complete homework, a drop in your grades, fear of being alone, withdrawing from friends and family and after-school activities, difficulty trusting others, trouble with physical or emotional intimacy in relationships, and feeling isolated from others. You may also find yourself acting differently in social situations than you did before; sometimes this involves taking more risks. Any of these responses are normal after experiencing the trauma of a sexual assault.

Towards Healing

Surviving an assault can impact all aspects of a person’s life. Healing can happen, but it can take time. Your path to recover from the harm caused by an assault may have many stages, but the important thing is to take care of yourself and keep moving forward.

Immediate Steps

First, if the assault happened within the last few hours, safety is your priority. Get to a safe place and ask a friend to stay with you. If you are under eighteen, reach out to an adult you trust. After you are safe, you may want to consider the following:

Evidence Preservation: Remember this is your choice and if you want to report a sexual assault, try to preserve evidence. If you were assaulted and want to preserve the evidence, avoid drinking, bathing, showering, douching, brushing your teeth, or changing clothes. Place sheets or other soiled materials in a paper bag for safekeeping – plastic bags can ruin evidence. Collecting physical evidence from your body usually needs to occur within 96-108 hours after the assault, and requires going to the hospital for a forensic exam, often called a rape kit.
Forensic Exam: Preserving physical evidence can be very important. The forensic medical exams are lengthy (ranging between 3-6 hours) and invasive. Remember, that some types of evidence cannot be recovered once they are lost and can only be collected within a certain time. The exam involves the collection of bodily fluids and an examination and documentation of any trauma to the oral, anal, and vaginal cavities. This exam may be paid for by your state’s law enforcement agency and/or crime victim compensation program. Talk to a local attorney or advocate to find out your state’s process. You should be aware that if you have private insurance, your insurance may be billed for the exam prior to being covered by state funds. The medical bill or statement of benefits from your insurance company that you or your parents receive may indicate that services were for a sexual assault exam.

Advocacy: Most community or tribal sexual assault advocacy programs provide free services to individuals who are impacted by sexual assault. The people who work in these programs are called advocates. They can help you understand what to expect if you pursue medical care or criminal action, can assist you in safety planning, and can provide referrals to other service providers. However, remember that if you are under 18 or a person over the age of 18 and have someone legally appointed to help you make decisions, advocates may be mandatory reporters of certain crimes.

Immediate Contraception: If you are worried about being pregnant you can try to get emergency contraception, which can be taken up to three days after unprotected sex. This contraception is often called Plan B. It is important to know that this is NOT an abortion pill, it will only prevent you from getting pregnant if you are not already pregnant. You can usually buy these pills over the counter without a prescription at drugstores and pharmacies, even if you are under the age of 18. Sometimes it is locked up or kept behind the pharmacy counter, so you may have to ask the pharmacist or store clerk for help getting it, but you do not have to have a prescription or show your identification. These pills usually cost $40-$50 and can be especially difficult to access in small towns. If you don’t want to take immediate contraception, that is okay, but try to schedule a doctor appointment as soon as possible to learn about your options and get a pregnancy test.
Physical Healing

We encourage everyone to seek immediate medical care, especially if you are worried about your health or if you were injured during your assault. However, there are other aspects of physical healing and physical health that you should think about in the long term.

Medical Care: Depending on the kind of trauma you experienced, your need for medical care may differ. If you’ve been sexually assaulted you may access medical care through a personal physician, health district or health center, Planned Parenthood, or university health services office to get tested for pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. There are preventative measures that are most effective if taken right away so it is better to get tested as soon as possible. Letting your doctor know you are a survivor of violence can be one way to help you learn your options for care. But know that in some states, doctors must report to law enforcement when they become aware of certain crimes. It is okay, and recommended, to ask the doctor you see about their reporting responsibilities before disclosing details about your experience.

Understand Pain is a Message of Survival: Many people who experience trauma report feeling all sorts of emotional and physical pain in the aftermath. It can be in the form of flashbacks, numbness, stomach discomfort, loss of memory, inability to relax muscles and so much more. Pain is a message, and it’s your body’s way of telling you that it needs help. Understanding this can help you make sense of the pain and hopefully find positive ways to heal your body and yourself in the process.

Sleep: Sleep is a vital part of the healing process. It will help you recover both physically and mentally. Sleeping gives your brain time to regenerate and restore itself, which will help you feel more in control and connected to your body and your surroundings. It can be especially hard to get good sleep in the aftermath of a traumatic event, so you may need to develop some bedtime strategies to help your body relax and prepare for sleep. This practice can be as simple as listening to your favorite soothing song, changing your schedule to sleep during the day when you may feel safer, sleeping with a light on, or sleeping in an area of your home that feels safer.
Be Kind to Your Body: It is important to treat your body kindly. One way to do that is to drink lots of water and eat healthy food, which will help your body and brain heal over time. Not every day will be easy, but you can do it. It is also important to exercise, if you can. Try going on walks, bike rides, or whatever form of exercise works for you. Exercising makes you feel more connected to your body and in control of your movements. Avoid excessive amounts of alcohol and drugs. Some people are drawn to alcohol and drugs after trauma to mask the pain they are feeling; this is not a way to heal, but instead, makes the healing process harder and longer.

Breath: The impact of sexual assault can affect your whole being. By working on and restoring one part of yourself, all parts can benefit. When anyone experiences sexual assault, low and slow breathing with simple movements can help the healing process. It is natural and common to feel overwhelmed after a sexual assault and the simple act of intentional breathing can help.

Take three breaths. By focusing on your breath, you will think more clearly and have more control over your actions or reactions. This focus and time will help you feel more connected to your body.

Low and Slow. When people are overwhelmed they often take rapid, shallow breaths, which only increases anxiety. Instead, try to take low and slow breaths, from down in your belly button. This will help relax you and begin the healing process.

Movement with your breath. When you take these healing breaths, raise your arms on the inhale and lower your arms on the exhale. This will help you keep your breathing slow and it will help you feel present in the moment.

Emotional/Mental Healing

Healing from trauma is a hard and painful experience and many think it is easier to suppress and hide their pain than face it. However, the problem with hiding from your pain is that it still exists within you and that can be a hard thing to carry around. This section focuses on helping you find positive ways of healing from within that will help you feel in control over your life and your body.

Self-Harm/Suicide: Many people who experience sexual assault feel suicidal or engage in self-harm. If you are harming yourself or are feeling suicidal, it is important to reach out for help. Please contact an advocate, a counselor, a friend or a helpline listed at the end of this booklet.
Practice Daily Self-Care: The most important step you can take is to practice daily self-care. This might sound easy or even cliché, but self-care is a vital step in healing and often hard to do.

- Kindness – Be compassionate with yourself.
- Rest – Try to sleep a six to eight hour block each day.
- Breathe – Practice breathing each day or download a meditation or breathing app on your phone.
- Water – Drink water and stay hydrated throughout the day.
- Support – If you are able, spend time with friends and family who accept and support you, and make you happy.
- Spaciousness – Take five minutes a day to do something restorative for yourself (drink a cup of tea, take a quiet moment to think of something positive, or take a short walk).
- Take small steps – Healing is a slow process. Take on challenges that you feel ready for and go through them slowly and with purpose.

Create Strong Relationships: If you have a strong support system, healing from trauma feels a little bit less daunting. If you can, tell someone you trust about your experience. Tell them as much as you feel comfortable talking about, and let them know that you need them as a support system. Having people to talk to allows you to share your feelings, gain support, receive positive feedback, and find new ways towards healing. If you are unsure who to talk to, or your friends or family are having a hard time supporting you, many agencies have support groups or chat features for survivors. In these groups, survivors can share their stories, be connected to resources, and form community networks.

Counseling: In addition to developing a support network, you might want to consider speaking with a counselor or attending a support group. You may be able to access free or low-cost counseling through your university health center, school, community or tribal advocacy program, or through a private referral. Your local sexual assault advocacy program or your physician may be able to give you a list of counselors skilled in working with individuals who have experienced sexual assault. Talking to a professional about your experience can be extremely empowering. Additionally, the counselor can give you individualized tools to help you heal and cope in healthy ways. However, not everyone has the access or means to get counseling.

Know Your Triggers: Reliving your assault is an incredibly hard experience, and unfortunately something that many experience.
Reliving the assault or parts of an assault is known as being triggered. Triggers are things (smells, sounds, locations, etc.) that cause a person to experience a flashback or react as if the assault was happening again in present time. Being triggered can be overwhelming and makes those who experience it feel out of control.

If you have triggers, the best way to regain control over these events is to know what they are (the things in the environment that cause the flashbacks) and plan for those situations or avoid them if possible. Recognizing your triggers can help you feel more in control and prepared. Knowing your triggers doesn’t mean you won’t be triggered, but it can help you either avoid the triggers or mentally prepare and find new ways of dealing with them.

**Being Optimistic:** Maintaining a hopeful outlook is an important part of resiliency. Positive thinking doesn’t mean ignoring the problem or pretending that you are happy or okay. Instead, it is believing in yourself and knowing that you are trying to heal from an incredibly difficult trauma. Time is a huge part of healing. **Be kind and patient to yourself!**

Create a Sense of Purpose in Your Life: In 2017, the #MeToo social media campaign, originally by Tarana Burke, created the conditions for many individuals to speak about sexual assault, and by sharing these stories, interrupt the social norms of secrecy that protect the individuals who commit these acts of sexual violence. Know you are not alone.

You are more than your trauma. You are a whole and beautiful person and you deserve to feel that way. A great way to gain control in your life is to find a sense of purpose. Get involved in your community and do things that are meaningful to you. If this speaks to you, then find ways to join the #MeToo or other related movements.

Here are other ways to make a difference in your community:

- Express your experiences through art, photography, or dance.
- Learn more about feminism, gender violence, and the ways you can promote social, economic, and political equity across genders.
- Read authors like bell hooks or watch Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED Talk, “We Should All be Feminists.”
Legal Information and Options

Mandatory reporting is the process in which people such as doctors, teachers, counselors, and others are required by law to report crimes like assault or rape. If you are under 18 this law applies to you and the adults you talk to may be required to report what you have experienced. You should know this going forward because these individuals may be required to report what you tell them to law enforcement or other agencies. This does not mean you should not talk to them if you want to. It is just to let you know that they may have to report what you say and give up your confidentiality and options about what happens with your information. **It is also okay for you to ask if someone is a mandated reporter before you share about your experience.**

It is important that you weigh your legal options and make the choice that is best for you at this point in your healing process. If you want to report a sexual assault here are your options:

**School or College Reporting Options:** If you are attending a school, you have the option to report the assault to an administrator there. Most schools in the United States are required under Title IX to ensure an environment free from sex and gender-based discrimination, harassment, and violence. Generally, educational institutions are required to ensure that individuals who are sexually assaulted can continue their education. Examples of options a school or college may offer include academic accommodations or schedule changes, dorm and class transfers, school-based no contact orders, and mental health support. Regardless of whether you report the assault to law enforcement, your school or college must take its own action, through a thorough and impartial investigation, which may lead to possible consequences, such as suspension or expulsion of the offender from the school.

**Criminal Action:** You have the right to file a police report. If you report the sexual assault to law enforcement, you may be assigned a victim witness coordinator who will assist you through the criminal justice process to lessen re-victimization and connect you to community resources. However, as employees of the criminal justice system, victim witness coordinators have limits on confidentiality and may be required to share information you disclosed to them with others, such as an officer, detective, or prosecutor, who may then be required to give that information to the defendant through the defense attorney. After the law enforcement investigation, the prosecutor in the location where the crime was committed has the discretion to determine whether or not to file criminal charges.
Whether or Not to Report to Law Enforcement

For some survivors reporting a sexual assault to law enforcement is a very empowering experience, but for some it is not. You should know going in that it is often hard to “win” in cases relating to sexual assault and abuse, but it is possible. Here are some things to keep in mind when considering whether or not to report to law enforcement:

You will have to share what happened in detail. Sharing your experience of the sexual assault is a very personal thing and if you choose to report the assault you will be asked to talk about what happened to you in a very detailed manner. It is important to know this going in, so you are ready, and can decide if you want to pursue legal actions. Lawyers and community-based advocates may also be able to support you in sharing what happened to you in a way that feels best.

It is possible that not everyone will believe what happened to you, and a conviction of the person who assaulted you is not guaranteed. Sadly, people doubt survivor’s stories, which can be a painful experience in itself. Your story is your story, and no one should tell you otherwise. It is possible that within the legal system people will question your story or try to blame you. Remember, in the legal system the person who assaulted you being found guilty or convicted is not guaranteed.

You might feel a loss of control. Some people find reporting to law enforcement to be an empowering experience; however, others feel a loss of control. This process can be long and drawn out, and unfortunately you will not have much control over the events or the final outcome. This does not necessarily mean it will be a negative experience, but it is something you need to consider. Having an advocate can help you regain control in this confusing process since they have a greater understanding of the system and can explain to you what is going on.
Why Does This Happen in Our Communities?

Gender violence is a problem in our society that affects all communities. Gender violence includes abusive relationships, sexual assault, stalking, and sex trafficking. While everyone is hurt by violence, girls, women, and people who are gender nonconforming are hurt by these forms of violence the most.

Gender violence is common in our society because of our cultural beliefs and what we consider to be “normal” or “acceptable.” In our culture, men are given more value and power than any other gender. This leads to high rates of gender violence.

Gender violence does not happen in isolation. Gender violence is supported by larger forces or systemic oppressions, like patriarchy, which takes power over and harms girls and women. Systemic oppressions are the ways in which history, culture, beliefs, institutional practices, and policies interact to keep a ranking or power for some over others.

Our society values human beings based on identities, like gender, race, national origin, class, sexuality, ability, immigration, or refugee status. Ranking human beings supports the power and privileges that some groups of people hold to keep power over others. We need to create communities where everyone is valued, safe, and can thrive.

24/7 Helplines

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673 or chat online at online.rainn.org – Get help and referrals from advocates.


National Runaway Safeline: 1-800-786-2929 – Confidential support.


Additional Resources

Here are more online resources:

www.KnowYourIX.org – Information for individuals who have experienced sexual harassment or sexual assault

www.EverydayFeminism.org – Intersectional feminism

www.OurGenderRevolution.org – Information on how teens can be activists and organizers in their community to end violence
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