

After Sexual Assault: Understanding Common Reactions

Sexual assault is a traumatic experience

People of all genders, sexualities, cultures and ages can be affected by sexual assault and violence. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to react, recovery is not linear and responses to trauma change over time. Remember that how you have been impacted by sexual violence is not your fault – the blame sits with the perpetrator.

Where to get help:

If you are in immediate danger or need urgent medical assistance, call 000

During business hours

Contact your local Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA)

Find your nearest service at: <https://peak.sasvic.org.au/servicemap> and enter your postcode or suburb

After hours, weekends and public holidays

Call the Sexual Assault Crisis Line (SACL) on 1800 577 011

If you are not in Victoria

Call 1800 RESPECT or 1800 737 732

Or find a local support service at: <https://www.nasasv.org.au/support-directory>

All services listed are free, confidential and voluntary.

Sexual assault and sexual violence can involve the sudden loss of control over your body. You might have felt unsafe in the lead up to the assault, during or after. Many people fear serious harm, injury or death. The reactions after a sexual assault are normal responses to trauma.

Trauma affects emotions, thoughts, behaviours and the body. Trauma responses are protective – your body is trying to keep you safe after something terrifying has happened to you.

You might experience some, many, none or all of the reactions listed below. Your responses may change over time and they might come and go.

Common reactions after sexual assault

Psychological and emotional reactions

- Fear and anxiety
- Numbness, shock or feeling empty
- Angry, stressed, moody, feelings of injustice or rage
- Embarrassment, shame, guilt, 'dirty'
- Lonely, alone, hopeless, worthless
- Depressed, sad, teary
- Confused
- Self-harm urges
- Suicidal thoughts or feelings
- Increased alcohol or drug use

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Cognitive reactions

- Foggy, finding it hard to concentrate at work or school
- Forgetful, disorganised
- Intrusive memories, flashbacks
- Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- Nightmares

Physical reactions

- Headaches, stomach aches, muscle pain, body tension
- Impacted appetite – eating more or less than usual
- Drained, exhausted, low energy
- Jumpy, hypervigilant, ‘on edge’
- Reactive to triggers that remind you of the assault
- Pain during sex
- Difficulty brushing your teeth, showering or getting dressed and undressed

Social reactions

- Uninterested in intimacy or sex or disgusted by it
- Withdrawn, not wanting to be around other people
- Unable to go to work or school or participate in usual activities
- Mistrustful of those around you

Trauma responses can begin immediately after the event or can start days, months or years after. Your body is doing what it needs to do to protect you. But you do not have to manage these responses on your own.