A Survivors' Guide: Support for Recovering after Sexual Assault

Surviving sexual assault can be a violating, fear-inducing experience. Common responses include:

- Blaming oneself (remember it's not your fault).
- Anxiety and panic.
- Intense feelings of anger, shame, guilt, disgust.
- Intrusive memories about the event.
- Medical and safety concerns.
- Challenges trusting others.
- Challenges at work, education, socially.
- Changes in body image.
- An increased startle response, feeling jumpy or on edge.

With social, legal, and medical support, the distress you experience after surviving an assault can gradually subside. You can also speak to a practitioner via **1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732)** telephone line, available 24/7 – they can help you navigate supports and it may help to reduce distress. However, you may notice distress linger or get worse. In this circumstance, you may benefit from **short or longer-term counselling**. Persistent symptoms may indicate symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Counselling engages with symptoms, rather than providing a diagnosis. To investigative a diagnosis, see a psychologist, psychiatrist or doctor for a comprehensive assessment.

These responses are **common and treatable**. Sometimes, they can appear months or years after the assault(s). These reactions do not mean something is 'wrong' with you. They reflect your body and mind responding to something overwhelming.

Both short-term and long-term counselling has shown to effectively reduce distress after surviving assault. Contact your local Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA) who can provide confidential support and information about accessing counselling.

How can Trauma-Informed Counselling Help?

Trauma-informed counselling acknowledges that after surviving trauma, a person's physical body, or 'nervous system, 'may more readily interpret neutral or safe signals as dangerous. Counsellors understand that for your body to feel safe enough, more and clearer signs of safety are likely required. This may look like highlighting your autonomy, choice and control when possible. In the circumstance of surviving sexual assault, sometimes danger levels are higher and on-going. Your counsellor can help you manage this type of risk with a safety plan.

Counsellors acknowledge that the first step towards lowering distress is to ensure that **enough safety** is present. Once enough safety is established, other goals can be explored.

Counselling may offer:

- A safe, confidential space to talk
- Support to feel safer and more in control
- Help managing distress and overwhelming emotions
- Understanding common responses to trauma
- Managing panic, sleep difficulties and feeling on edge
- Reducing the impact of unwanted memories and reminders
- Working through difficult feelings
- Building confidence, choice and self-advocacy
- Understanding the impact of trauma
- Reconnecting with your strengths and wellbeing

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Surviving common responses after assault

Coping with nightmares

Nightmares can feel vivid and frightening. Remember that they are **memories**, not current danger.

Strategies that may help:

- Surround yourself with comforting or familiar objects before bed.
- Keep a soft light or lamp on so the room feels safe if you wake suddenly.
- Use slow, deep breathing when you wake from a nightmare.
- Remind yourself: "This is a memory. I am safe now"
- Invite a trusted support person to sit with you until you feel calmer.
- Imagine or draw a safe place to help your body settle.
- Write down the nightmare and gently rewrite the ending in a way that empowers you. Over time, this can reduce distress.

Managing insomnia

Insomnia is very common after trauma. You might find it hard to fall asleep, wake frequently, or feel alert and 'on guard' at night. Below are tips based on **Stimulus Control**, an evidence-based treatment for insomnia

1. **Go to bed only when you are sleepy**
    a. If you're not sleepy, do something calming until you are.
2. **If you can't fall asleep after 5-10 minutes, get out of bed, go to another room and do something regulating**
    a. Grounding and regulating skills such as slow belly breathing.
    b. Avoid screens, bright lights or anything stimulating.
3. **Repeat this as many times as needed**
    a. This part may feel frustrating at first; however it teaches the brain that bed = sleep.
4. **Use the bed for sleep only**
    a. Avoid scrolling on your phone, watching TV, working or studying, lying in bed worrying, processing thoughts.

Safety planning

If you are concerned about your immediately safety, you can contact Police on 000.

You can get support or specialist Safety Planning for family violence from your local Orange Door (9am-5pm) www.orangedoor.vic.gov.au - or - from Safe Steps (telephone line, 24/7) – they can support you to understand your options, including going into refuge on **1800 015 188**

Medical concerns

If you survived **strangulation**, referred to as 'non-fatal strangulation,' seek medical attention from your GP, or immediate medical attention if signs of:

- Unconsciousness
- Bruising
- Nausea
- Confusion
- Memory loss
- Loss of sight or speech
- Sore throat/difficulty swallowing
- Breathing difficulties
- Loss of bladder function are experienced.

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Non-fatal strangulation or neck compression can lead to short- and long-term injuries including brain clots, stroke, acquired brain injury (ABI), and death. Injuries resulting from NFS may not be immediately apparent.

If you suspect you may have a STI or may be pregnant, seek help from a trusted GP or the 1800 My Options phone line on 1800 696 784.

Fear and anxiety

"I'm constantly jumpy. A sudden noise, an angry voice, moving bushes and I am afraid."

During an assault many victims fear for their lives. Often this fear is a direct result of the offender's threats. After the assault, a victim may be fearful of being alone or going out by themselves. They may experience fear generated by the possibility of running into the offender again or facing them in court. Medical fears about pregnancy, STD's or non-fatal strangulation risks are also common. All of these fears may represent real concerns.

If you previously experienced the world as mostly safe, this assumption may feel shattered now. You may now experience the world as being untrustworthy and unsafe. You may find yourself withdrawing from friends, family and the community. You may find that when you are in a group situation, for example at a party, you become hyper-vigilant and jumpy. Your experience of your surroundings and interactions with people may feel a bit unreal.

You may experience panic attacks, whereby severe anxiety manifests in physical symptoms such as difficulties in breathing, muscle tension, nausea, stomach cramps or headaches.

Surviving panic attacks:

- Remind yourself that your feelings are not dangerous or harmful. They are an exaggeration of your body's normal response to stress.
- Try not to fight your feelings, as the more you are willing to face the feelings, the less intense the panic will become.
- Remember to breathe slowly.
- Replace fear-related thoughts with more helpful ones. Try saying *"this is not dangerous, this will pass."*