

Intimacy and Relationships after Sexual Assault

Sexual assault can affect how people feel about intimacy, relationships, sex and their bodies. It is normal and common for intimacy and sexual contact to be impacted after sexual assault.

There is no “right” or “wrong” way to feel after sexual assault. Sexual assault can affect relationships in some of the following ways:

- Changes in desire (less or more interested in sex)
- Feeling disconnected from your body
- Difficulty with trust
- Difficulty being naked or taking off clothes
- Feeling unsafe, anxious or triggered during intimacy
- Seeking more sexual contact as a way of coping or regaining control
- Disassociating or “day dreaming” during intimacy
- Avoiding relationships or sexual contact
- Feeling pressure to “be normal” or “get back to how things were”
- Avoiding being touched
- Pain or physical discomfort during sex

Important things to know

- There is no correct timeline for feeling ready to be intimate.
- Some people respond to trauma by seeking more sexual contact while others withdraw
- It is normal for your boundaries to change over time, and it is okay to go slowly or not at all
- You **do not** have to engage in any sexual activity
- Your body is reacting to keep you safe – you have the right to make choices about your body
- Intimacy should not involve pressure, fear or obligation
- Cultural, community and personal beliefs can shape how someone understands intimacy, relationships and recovery – these can influence what feels safe, comfortable or possible throughout recovery

What can help

The main thing you can do is move at your own pace. This is all part of your recovery journey. Some other things that might help include:

- Communicating your boundaries
- Starting with non-sexual forms of closeness (non-sexual touching, holding hands, hugging)
- Self-touch and self-pleasure
- Learning to feel more grounded and safe
- Talking to a counsellor or someone you trust

For people in relationships

If you can, it is helpful to communicate what helps you to feel safe or unsafe with your partner. Without support or guidance, your partner may not always understand what you need from them. It is not your responsibility to manage their reactions or sexual needs, and your partner can access support from a service such as SECASA to help them understand how to best support you. Some couples may find it helpful to access support together, such as through a sex or couples therapist or from books or websites. Communicating your boundaries, and respecting your partner's boundaries, can ensure your sex and intimacy is healthy, respectful, pleasurable and safe for everyone.

Where to get help

You can call SECASA to speak to an intake counsellor on **8769 2200 – opt 1** during business hours. For afterhours crisis support, call the Sexual Assault Crisis Line on 1800 577 011.

SECASA can work with victim-survivors directly, and can also provide counselling to supportive partners, family members and friends who have been impacted.