

FACT SHEET — *This fact sheet talks about women and sexual assault from a professional perspective.*

Impacts of sexual assault on women

There are many factors that influence how someone will respond and cope following sexual assault:

- their relationship to their abuser;
- the severity of the physical abuse;
- the extent of psychological abuse;
- the length of time between the assault and reporting;
- the frequency of the assault (one off or repeated);
- their dealings with police, health system and courts following the assault;
- their personal history; and
- responses from family and friends.

Psychological and emotional impacts

Immediate and short-term impacts

During a sexual assault it's common for women to experience feelings of disassociation or an intense fear of death. Being paralyzed by fear does not mean she wants the assault to happen. Even if she realizes that it's safer not to fight, this does not mean she wants it to happen. Failure to resist is not giving consent.

Anxiety and intense fear are the most common responses following sexual assault. Legal proceedings, medical examinations, being with men or in a location that reminds them of the assault can trigger flashbacks resulting in feelings of dread. Fears of contracting a sexually transmitted disease, HIV, or becoming pregnant are also common.

Fears of future attacks and other harm can follow sexual assault. If a woman has previously experienced the world as a safe place, this assumption can be shattered. She may now feel the world is untrustworthy and unsafe. This can lead to her avoiding social activities, work and her community. This is particularly profound when the perpetrator is her intimate partner.

For some women, a sexual assault may reinforce any thoughts she had about herself as a person with no value. She may already think the world is a dangerous place and that women like here aren't safe anywhere. She may think she has no control over this happening again.

Medium to long term impacts

Feelings of low self-esteem, self-blame and guilt can endure for months or years after a sexual assault. It's common for a woman to forget what happened or deny details. This can be a defence against the overwhelming feelings of confusion, shock and bewilderment. This is especially so in partner rape. Thoughts about suicide are more common amongst those who have experienced sexual assault than in the general population. And sadly, younger women have a higher risk of attempting suicide following rape.

Physical impacts

Physical injuries or medical problems can be a direct result of a sexual assault, from later complications, or from the psychological impact:

- damage to the urethra, vagina or anus;
- increased risk of contracting sexually transmissible infections;
- sexual and reproductive health problems
- unwanted pregnancy and decisions regarding abortion;
- irritable bowel syndrome;
- chronic diseases such as diabetes and arthritis;
- eating disorders;
- headaches;
- gastrointestinal issues and pelvic pain;
- gynaecological — dysmenorrhea (severe pain or cramps in the lower abdomen during menstruation), menorrhagia (abnormally heavy or prolonged bleeding during menstruation) and problems associated with sex.

Sexual assault can be associated with an increased dependence on alcohol, prescription medication and other drugs as way of coping.

Trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

PTSD is a collection of symptoms that often manifest following a traumatic event. Symptoms can include flashbacks (intrusive thoughts) and distressing memories; nightmares and other sleep disturbances; and anxiety and depression. These are normal and expected responses following sexual assault. They do not indicate that someone has propensity to depression or significant mental health issues.

Some researchers are critical of the term PTSD as it's a psychiatric diagnosis. It implies that the woman has a medical problem and that her symptoms are signs of a disorder rather than a normal response to a violent crime. Also, the symptoms included in the psychiatric diagnosis of PTSD do not include all the effects of sexual assault on women's lives. The PTSD term is also criticised for seeing the sexual assault as the only cause of the trauma and that it doesn't consider the gendered and cultured context in which sexual assault occurs.

Social and community impacts

If a woman has experienced sexual assault this will impact the way she interacts with those close to her and the community as a whole. Difficulties with communication, trust, sexual relations and failure to enjoy social activities are all common. Women may avoid social situations due to a heightened awareness of the potential for violence. Her work/life may be disrupted due to her avoidance of social situations, feelings of low self-worth and self-doubt. The reactions by her family, friends and partners will help or hinder her recovery.

The criminal justice system and health service providers (including counsellors) can also contribute to what has been termed 'the second rape'. This is when the woman feels she is being blamed for the assault. She is not believed or doesn't receive the help or services she needs — nor the empathy she is entitled to. This victimisation will make any existing psychological distress worse and delay her recovery.

Resilience and recovery

Recovery following a sexual assault is a multidimensional process. Women are both suffering and surviving simultaneously.

The following actions will aid resilience and healing:

- speaking out about sexual assault — by all the community;
- positive support through empathy, belief and understanding;
- understanding the community wide impacts of sexual assault;
- social acknowledgment of the gendered and cultural factors that lead to sexual violence; and
- a strong, empathetic system (police, health services, courts).

Who should I contact if I have concerns and need help?

- Call 000 if you're worried about safety, or anyone else.
- Sexual Assault Crisis Line (www.sacl.com.au) — 1800 806 292
- CASACV (casaCV.org.au) — 5441 0430
- Victoria Police Sexual Offences Child Investigation Team — 5444 6752
- 1800Respect (National Sexual Assault, Family and Domestic Violence Counselling Line) (www.1800respect.org.au) — 1800 737 732