

FACT SHEET — *This fact sheet is for women of all ages.*

How you may be feeling after sexual assault

If you've been sexually assaulted, you'll have your own personal, private experience. But it can help to know that a lot of what you're feeling is felt by other women who've been sexually assaulted too. Just as there are common patterns of sexual assault, there are common responses too.

Powerlessness and loss of control — *"I feel so helpless. Will I ever be in control again?"*

All forms of sexual assault involve an abuse of power and wresting control from the person attacked. It's uncommon you now feel you have no control over even the smallest things. So always remember, the sexual assault was not, and never will be, your fault.

Emotional numbness — *"I feel so numb. Why am I so calm? Why can't I cry?"*

After an assault, you may feel emotionally numb — or nothing. This is a shock response and it can be misinterpreted by those around you. For example, your friends may take it as an indication that you're in control of the situation, you're calm and relatively unharmed. Emotional numbness is not an uncommon reaction to severe trauma. It's your front-line defence against the overwhelming reality of what's happened.

Denial — *"Was it really sexual assault? I'm okay. I'll be all right."*

Following the initial shock (or months later) you may deny to others or to yourself what has happened. You may try to suppress the memories to try and regain control of your life. Ranking the severity of the assault is also a type of denial. For instance, some women feel that if their attacker did not penetrate them then they were not sexually assaulted, or, if their attacker did not ejaculate then it wasn't as bad. All forms of harassment and violation are wrong and can leave you with long-term damage if you don't seek help. Sexual assault is the fault of your attacker and needs to be reported.

Disturbed sleep

You may be having sleepless nights or nightmares. The nightmares may involve reliving the assault which indicates you have unresolved issues. As the healing process continues, the nightmares or sleepless nights will become less frequent. Remember, sexual assault is never your fault.

Flashbacks

Memories of the assault often return without warning. Sometimes these flashbacks will be so vivid that you might feel as if you're literally re-living the assault. You are not being further psychologically damaged and your healing journey progresses. We have a fact sheet called ['Coping with flashbacks'](#).

Guilt and blaming yourself — *"I feel as if I did something to make this happen. If only I hadn't ..."*

You may be thinking that you could have avoided the assault if you acted differently. These thoughts are linked to unhelpful myths about sexual assault which include 'victim blaming'. The behaviour and reactions of friends, family, police, lawyers and the media may reinforce the victim's own feeling that they 'asked for it'. Phrases like 'she shouldn't have been wearing that short skirt' steers blame away from the attacker who has violated someone else's human rights. Remember, sexual assault is never, never, never your fault.

Adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse sometimes think they should have had the ability to stop the abuse. They're seeing themselves as they are now — as adults — and forget that when they were a child, they didn't have their current levels of awareness and assertiveness. Abusers target children precisely because a child's thoughts and actions are easier to manipulate. Sexual assault never was, and never is, your fault.

Embarrassment or shame — *"I feel so dirty, like there is something wrong with me now. Can you tell that I've been raped? What will people think?"*

Many people feel intense shame, embarrassment, feel dirty and in some way 'marked for life'. You may also think you have brought shame on your family by talking or reporting the assault to the police. Cultural background factors can intensify these feelings. No one asks to be sexually assaulted and you've done the right thing by calling out the behaviour. Sexual assault is never your fault.

Loss of confidence — *"I feel I can't do anything anymore ... even the simplest things."*

A sexual assault is not only an invasion of your physical self but also your intellectual, social and emotional self. You may be shocked by the realisation that you can't always protect yourself. However, use this knowledge to empower you. Take precautions and educate yourself how to be more aware, assertive and safer. We have a fact sheet called ['How to feel safer'](#). Remember, sexual assault is never your fault.

Mood changes — *"I feel like I'm going crazy!"*

Your moods may swing from intense emotional pain to complete numbness. Or you might feel depressed, restless, deflated, confused or angry. These uncontrollable changes might make you think you're going crazy.

Unfortunately, they're normal responses to trauma and will lessen in intensity as you work through the recovery process. Remember, sexual assault is never your fault.

Low self-esteem — *“I’m disgusted by myself, by the memories. I’m just worthless.”*

Sexual assault disempowers, humiliates and degrades. It’s abuses of many fundamental human rights so it’s not surprising you might be left with low self-esteem. Sexual assault is the fault of your attacker.

Depression — *“How am I going to go on? I feel so tired and hopeless.”*

Depression can manifest in the form of inertia, fear, anxiety, self-hatred, numbness, loss of appetite, disturbed sleep, stress and a sense of meaninglessness. Many people’s previous assumptions about themselves, such as their rights and expectations, suddenly get lost and they’re left feeling totally undermined. Always remember, sexual assault is never your fault.

Fear — *“I’m constantly jumpy. A sudden noise, an angry voice, moving bushes and I am afraid.”*

After an assault you may be fearful of the dark, of being alone or going out by yourself. You may experience fear and dread about the possibility of being pregnant or getting an STD. And then there’s the fear of running into your attacker or having to come face to face with them in court. All these fears are common and real. Always remember, your human rights have been violated and the sexual assault is never your fault.

Anxiety — *“I feel so tense. I’m a nervous wreck.”*

Anxiety can create physical symptoms such as difficulty breathing, muscle tension, nausea, stomach cramps or headaches. These symptoms can ease by using some stress management strategies and working through your own healing process.

Hostility

You may feel hostile towards the gender of your attacker. For example, women who have been sexually assaulted by a man may feel angry at all men. Your hostility may also be directed at someone you feel should have protected you or given you more support.

These reactions are completely justified. They also represent the beginning of a natural, positive emotion that will help you to recover. They indicate that you’re beginning to view the world and yourself differently. Hopefully they’ll make you more aware of potentially abusive men and relationships. Also, they indicate you’re realising you’re not to blame and that your attacker is responsible. Sexual assault is never the fault of the person assaulted.

Anger — *‘I want to kill him; I hate him, everything, everyone.’*

Culturally, we’re discouraged from expressing anger. It’s an intense, draining difficult emotion and frequently directed at the wrong targets. It’s important that you’re angry with your attacker — they have violated your human rights. You may also feel angry others you have told about the assault or unsatisfied with your treatment by police and or the criminal justice system. Also, the media can perpetuate a culture of ‘victim blaming’. This is wrong. All forms of sexual assault involve an abuse of power.

Sexual confidence — *“I just can’t bear to be touched”*

Sexual assault involves aggression, hostility, derision, arrogance, domination, insensitivity and violence. It will be difficult to free your mind of these associations and they will impact your future sexual confidence. For any future sexual activity, you’ll need to feel in control and not be pressured into anything.

Alienation and isolation

If you’re unable to share your experience of sexual assault you may feel alienation, isolation and despair. Societal norms can prevent many people from speaking out. For example, ‘victim blaming’ may make some people feel that the abuse was their fault, so they don’t report it. Sexual assault is never the fault of the victim. People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may be denied access to mainstream support due to a language or cultural barriers. And, most tragically, people with an intellectual disability may not be able to communicate their experience at all.

Sexual assault is never your fault.

Sexual assault an abuse of your basic human rights. Sexual assault is the fault of the perpetrator

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