

FACT SHEET — *This fact sheet is for men, family, friends, educators and members of community groups.*

## Am I supposed to feel this way after sexual assault? – Issues unique to men

Sexual assault is a trauma and all human beings will experience similar reactions after the assault. *Trauma* is a term that professionals use to describe the universal reactions after sexual assault. It's not an illness nor an abnormal reaction. It is a normal reaction to an abnormal event. The list below details common reactions and feelings following sexual assault. Though each person and situation are unique, the list will help you understand that what you're experiencing is normal.

### Common reactions and feelings following sexual assault

Emotional shock	I feel numb. How can I be so calm? Why can't I cry?
Disbelief and/or denial	Did it really happen? Why me? Maybe I just imagined it. It wasn't really rape.
Embarrassment	What will people think? I can't tell my family or friends.
Shame	I feel completely filthy, like there's something wrong with me.
Guilt	I feel as if it's my fault, or I should've been able to stop it.
Depression	How am I going to get through this month? I'm so tired! I feel so hopeless.
Powerlessness	Will I ever feel in control again?
Disorientation	I don't even know what day it is, or what I'm supposed to be doing.
Flashbacks	I'm still re-living the assault! I keep feeling like it's happening all over again.
Fear	I'm scared of everything. I'm afraid to go out. I'm afraid to be alone.
Anxiety	I'm having panic attacks. I can't breathe! I can't stop shaking.
Anger	I feel like killing the person who attacked me!
Physical stress	My stomach (or head or back) aches all the time. I feel jittery.

### Issues unique to men following sexual assault

Male sexual assault is under-reported and therefore society talks about it less. Apart from the occasional bad prison joke most of us never hear about male sexual assault. But it does happen. Society's need to deny the existence of male sexual assault is rooted in the idea that men are immune to being victimized. The mythology goes that if they're truly a real man then they'll be able to fight off any attacker. How many movies or TV shows have we seen in which the male hero fights a group of other men over a tiny verbal insult? Society reinforces the idea that men can't be forced to do anything they don't want to do because men are led to believe they're the ones with all the power.

## **A lot of men do not seek help following sexual assault**

For most men the idea that they could ever be a victim of sexual assault is impossible to accept. For men who have experienced sexual assault these beliefs can lead to intense feelings of guilt, shame and inadequacy because society therefore refuses to discuss or accept that sexual assault happens to men too. Unfortunately, this means that few men seek help after being sexually assaulted. Only 5 to 20% of all victims of sexual assault report the crime. The percentage for male victims is lower and leave many men suffering in silence following an assault.

Men who have experienced sexual assault may even question whether they deserved it or somehow wanted to be sexually assaulted because, in their minds, they failed to defend themselves. Men frequently see their assault as a loss of manhood and get disgusted with themselves for not fighting back. These feelings are normal, but the thoughts attached to them aren't necessarily true. If you're a man and have been sexually assaulted, remind yourself that you did what was necessary at the time: you survived a potentially life-threatening situation. There's nothing un-masculine about that.

## **Self-destructive behaviour**

Following sexual assault some men punish themselves by getting into self-destructive behaviours because they don't know how to cope with the feelings of guilt, shame and anger. This behaviour can manifest through increased alcohol or drug use and unwarranted aggressiveness. Many men pull back from relationships and so end up feeling even more isolated so the cycle of destructive behaviours continues.

## **Society and homophobia**

There is already enough homophobic sentiment in society to make many gay men suffer from internal conflicts about their sexuality. Some sexual assault of men is 'gay-bashing', motivated by fear and hatred of homosexuality. In these cases, perpetrators use verbal abuse, saying that the victim deserved to be sexually assaulted. For gay men, sexual assault can lead to feelings of self-blame and self-loathing attached to their sexuality. Being sexually assaulted may lead a gay man to believe that somehow 'he deserved it and was paying the price' for his sexual orientation. Unfortunately, this self-blame can be reinforced by the ignorance or intolerance of others who blame the victim by suggesting that somehow, he provoked the because he was gay. Gay men may also hesitate to report a sexual assault due to fears of blame, disbelief or intolerance by police or medical professionals. As a result, gay men may be deprived of legal protections and essential medical care following an assault.

## **Heterosexual men**

For heterosexual men, sexual assault causes some confusion or questioning about their sexuality. Many people believe only gay men are sexually assaulted, so a heterosexual man may begin to believe that he must be gay or that he will become gay because of the assault. Perpetrators often accuse their victims of enjoying the sexual assault, leading some men to question their own experience. Sexual assault has nothing to do with sexual orientation, past, present or future. People do not become gay as a result of being sexually assaulted. Sexual assault is an abuse of power by the perpetrator.