



After Sexual Assault

A Recovery Guide for Survivors

SAFE HORIZON

24-Hour Hotline: **212 227 3000**

www.safehorizon.org

SAFE HORIZON hopes this guide will help the recovery of anyone whose life has been affected by a sexual assault. The Rape Crisis Program at Safe Horizon provides individual and group counseling, workshops, support, practical assistance, and information to victims of sexual assault and their families.

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You Have Survived a Trauma

Rape and sexual assault are traumatic experiences that may interrupt your life at home, at work, and at school, affecting your relationships with friends, family, and co-workers.

This guide can help you to begin sorting out your emotions and concerns and to understand the facts surrounding sexual assault.

You have survived, and now you can begin to recover. Although this process is often slow and confusing, with understanding and persistence you can accomplish a great deal. You have control over how you recover.

The reassurance and support of friends, family, or significant others is very important during this time, but their reaction to your experience may not be what you anticipate or would like it to be. People in your life will

react in different ways; some may express blame, others may give you their full support. If you feel ready, you should allow those who offer their support to help you through this period—it will aid you in your recovery process. But the decision to talk about your experience is a personal choice. You do not have to share your experience with anyone until you feel ready.

When you are ready, Safe Horizon can help. Call one of our rape crisis programs listed at the end of this guide, or the Rape, Sexual Assault, and Incest Hotline at 212 227 3000. Our counselors are available for private, confidential conversations 24 hours a day.

Survivor's Bill of Rights

You have the right to be believed.

You have the right to be given the same credibility as any other crime victim.

You have the right to seek and receive help.

You have the right to courteous, efficient treatment.

You have the right to be treated with dignity and respect, without prejudice against race, class, lifestyle, age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or occupation.

You have the right to accurate information, presented in a way that you understand.

You have the right to ask questions.

You have the right to make your own decisions.

You have the right to change your mind.

You have the right to get help and support from others.

You have the right to heal.

Facts about Sexual Assault

The first step in recovery is to know the facts. “Sexual assault” is a general term that includes: rape, incest, child molestation, marital rape, date rape, sexual harassment, sodomy, sexual abuse, voyeurism, and indecent exposure.

Sexual assault is a violent act committed primarily by a perpetrator who needs to feel powerful and in control by forcing someone else to participate in unwanted sexual activity.

Often, the victim fears for his or her life or physical well-being and feels that there is no choice but to do what the attacker wants. But submission does not equal consent. If you submit, it does not mean that you agreed to or accepted the situation. A victim is never responsible for being sexually assaulted. The responsibility for the assault lies with the attacker.

What to Do to Help Yourself

Sexual assault can cause significant trauma and disrupt your physical and emotional health. Your recovery path will take many stages, but the important thing is to take care of yourself.

IMMEDIATE ACTION AFTER BEING SEXUALLY ASSAULTED

After you have been sexually assaulted, it is important to see a doctor before washing or taking a shower so that physical evidence can be collected. Even though you may not feel ready at this time to consider pressing charges against your attacker, the physical evidence will be preserved in case you decide to press charges at a later date.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF PHYSICALLY

The idea of seeing a doctor may seem unpleasant, but it is important for you to see a medical professional. Medical attention will help your immediate physical health and may prevent further damage to your health. You don't have to go alone. Having a family member or friend with you during the examination can help you feel at ease during the procedures. Your Rape Crisis Program counselor may also be able to arrange for an advocate to accompany you.

Ask your medical professional to explain what he or she is doing before the examination so that you know what to expect. Make sure your doctor understands your situation. You may be more sensitive than a person who hasn't been assaulted and may need more time and reassurance during medical procedures, no matter how routine. You have the right to interrupt or refuse any medical procedure you do not wish to undergo.

You can get treatment for your physical injuries and be tested for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, either at a hospital or by your private doctor. Early detection of STDs is very important. Discuss any medical concerns you have with your doctor or counselor, but do not let concerns and fears prevent you from receiving the medical treatment you need and deserve.

Many rape survivors find that receiving medical attention helps them to regain a sense of control over their bodies.

For more information concerning your physical health, contact your local Planned Parenthood affiliate at 1 800 230 PLAN or www.plannedparenthood.org.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF EMOTIONALLY

Many rape survivors feel isolated in the aftermath of the assault. In order to reduce those feelings, reach out for support to those who are close to you: call family members, friends, or a Rape Crisis Program counselor. It might help you feel better to have someone to talk to, and you might want people around you so that you feel safe.

Consider professional support or counseling. Having someone to talk to about how you are feeling may help you to deal with the emotions you are experiencing. Additionally, a counselor can help you express your needs to others and learn how to get those needs met.

CONSIDER YOUR LEGAL RIGHTS AND KNOW WHAT SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE

One of the most important decisions you may struggle with is whether or not to report the crime to the police. Whether or not you decide to press charges, you deserve

support and should know about the range of services available to you. You may report the crime and still decide not to prosecute. You have the right to be notified of judicial proceedings against the accused if you decide to prosecute, and you may submit a victim impact statement when the defendant is sentenced.* The New York State Crime Victims Board may be able to reimburse you for your direct out-of-pocket expenses caused by the crime. There are many other general rights that a victim has, and you should explore these with a counselor or someone you trust who knows the law. Refer to our hotline or programs listed at the end of this brochure as a resource.

* The Rights of Crime Victims, New York State Crime Victims Board (1999)

Your Response to Sexual Assault

Your response to an assault may cover a wide range of physical and emotional symptoms, even some that may not seem to result directly from the attack. Learning to recognize these responses will help you gain control of them. You may experience these symptoms immediately or later in your life, or you may never experience any of them. Every survivor responds differently. You may even experience some symptoms that are not on this list.

POSSIBLE PHYSICAL RESPONSES AND SYMPTOMS

Muscle tension	Changes in sleeping and eating patterns
Pain	
Shortness of breath	Flashbacks
Injury	Nightmares
Gynecological disturbances	Involuntary shaking
Fatigue	Sexual dysfunction

POSSIBLE EMOTIONAL RESPONSES AND SYMPTOMS

Feeling dirty	Suicidal thoughts
Anxiety	Denial
Shock/numbness	Preoccupation with safety
Embarrassment	Guilt or self-blame
Feeling of loss of control over one's life	Shame
Relief	Apprehension
Fear	Indecision
Grief	Feeling stuck
Depression	Changes in perception of the world
Loss of trust	Crying or inability to cry
Anger	
Irritability	

Counseling

Sexual assault can change your feelings about yourself and those around you. You may not feel the way you did before the assault—physically, emotionally, socially, or sexually. Counseling can help you deal with these issues and aid you in your recovery.

INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING

Safe Horizon's Rape Crisis Program counselors will listen, clarify, support, and explore options with you. Individual counseling sessions with a supportive counselor can help you identify issues you would like to resolve surrounding the assault. Together, you will develop appropriate and attainable goals for yourself.

GROUP COUNSELING

Group counseling will give you the opportunity to share your feelings with other survivors, and although each

person recovers at a different pace, group counseling provides an environment in which survivors can share their experiences along with their techniques for recovery. Many group members find inspiration and motivation in the stories of other victims and get a unique kind of support that helps them return to the lives they led before the assault.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

If you have experienced a sexual assault, you may be left with painful wounds that are invisible to others but very real to you. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can occur when people experience terrifying situations that they cannot control. In cases of sexual assault, symptoms can include all of the responses listed previously. These symptoms can intrude into your daily life and prevent you from working, maintaining relationships, or completing everyday tasks. If you feel this is happening, you may want to seek help. A counselor can help you identify and overcome PTSD, which is a normal reaction to a violent assault.

VICTIMS WITH PTSD MIGHT ENCOUNTER:

- Intrusive flashbacks, dreams, dwelling on the assault
- Persistent or intense distress, anxiety, panic attacks, stress, sleep disturbance, irritability, fear, including anger, apprehension, indecision, difficulty in concentrating, being easily startled, heightened awareness, and sensitivity
- Feelings of detachment, feeling like you are a different person now
- Persistent avoidance of people, places, things associated with the assault
- Ambivalence or uncertainty about the future
- Avoidance of normal daily activity
- Depression
- Reliving the event as if it were still occurring

Some Additional Information

The following list may help you feel better about your experience since the assault:

- Accept that many of your responses are normal even if they do not feel comfortable.
- Coping means different things to different people. Develop a routine that is comfortable for you and that has a positive outcome. Having a routine can be very stabilizing in the face of traumatic stress.
- Recognize that your assault will also affect others around you and that their reactions may vary.
- Take care of your health. A regular diet can lead to well-being. Sugar and caffeine can increase your stress level. Alcohol and drugs may delay some reactions and ultimately make them worse.

- If you find you are abusing alcohol or drugs, you should see a counselor immediately.
- Allow time for adequate amounts of rest and relaxation. Some techniques to consider are meditation, deep breathing, listening to music, reading, religious rituals, or anything that focuses and relaxes you.
- Physical activity is a great stress-reducer, even a short walk. Try to work some exercise into your daily routine.
- We all need people. Social contact can make you feel less isolated and more connected. Supportive listeners can include friends, family, religious leaders, teachers, professional counselors, or counseling groups.

Recovery takes time. Patience and understanding are important in the recovery process. In addition to the support of friends, family, and loved ones, there are also professional counselors and Rape Crisis Program personnel who can assist you. Safe Horizon's Rape Crisis Program has trained counselors who can play an important role in your healing process.

Survivor's Measure of Growth*

Use the checklist below to measure your recovery and to help you develop your own list of goals.

- I acknowledge that something terrible happened to me.
- I am beginning to deal with my feelings about the assault.
- I am angry about what was done to me but recognize that my anger is not a constant part of my feelings. It intrudes into other parts of my life in a negative way.
- I can talk about the assault experience with a counselor or a therapist.

- ❑ I am beginning to understand my feelings about the assault.
- ❑ I can give responsibility for the assault to the person who attacked me. The responsibility is not mine to accept.
- ❑ I could not have prevented the assault, and I recognize that I did the best I could to get through it.
- ❑ I am developing a sense of my own self-value and am increasing my self-esteem.
- ❑ I am comfortable with choices I make for myself.
- ❑ I am developing a sense of being at ease with the subject of my assault.
- ❑ I recognize that I have a choice about whether or not to forgive my assailant(s).
- ❑ I recognize that I have begun to get back control in my life, that the assailant does not have power over me.
- ❑ I recognize that I have the right to regain control.

**From the New York City Task Force Against Sexual Assault*

How to Contact Safe Horizon

SAFE HORIZON is the nation's leading nonprofit victim assistance, advocacy, and violence prevention organization. With a staff of over 800, Safe Horizon offers 75 programs throughout New York's five boroughs. Our programs in community offices, shelters, courts, police precincts, and schools help over 250,000 New Yorkers every year.

Rape, Sexual Assault, and Incest Hotline **212 227 3000**
(24 hours a day)

Bronx Rape Crisis Program **718 933 1000**

Brooklyn Rape Crisis Program **718 827 4700**

Queens Rape Crisis Program **718 291 2555**

Staten Island Rape Crisis Program **718 720 2591**

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