

TWU Counseling Center

Becoming Whole Again: Healing from Sexual Assault

What is Sexual Assault?

In legal terms, sexual assault is sexual relations against a person's will and without consent. Some sexual assaults are committed by "strangers in dark alleys" but they may also be committed by someone you know who lives next door. Sexual assault by a friend, date, partner or casual acquaintance is the most prevalent form of sexual assault on college campuses. It is predicted that one in seven college women will be raped before graduations, and 90% will know their attacker. While the figures are much smaller for men, they also experience sexual assault.

The following information is designed to help you heal after a sexual assault:

What to Do if You've Just Been Sexually Assaulted

- Get to a safe place.
- Contact someone who can help you: a friend, the police (911), or other campus and community agencies.
- Do not shower, drink or eat, douche, or change your clothes. These activities destroy important physical evidence in the event that you decide to prosecute the assailant.
- Get medical attention. You may have hidden injuries and may want to explore options for preventing pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases.
- Write down everything that you remember happening, with as much detail as possible. This can help with your own healing process and in any legal action you might decide to take.

Remember - You are not to blame, even if:

- Your attacker was an acquaintance, date, friend or spouse.
- You have been sexually intimate with that person or with others before.
- You were drinking or using drugs.
- You froze and did not or could not say "no," or were unable to fight back physically.
- You were wearing clothes that others may see as seductive.

The Aftermath

How am I going to feel?? Am I going to go crazy??

Sexual assault is a crisis, and we all handle crises in different ways. Though each person and situation is unique, the following list summarizes the range of reactions to sexual assault that may help you know what's normal to expect.

- Emotional Shock: I feel so numb. Why am I so calm? Why can't I cry?
- Disbelief: Did it really happen? Why me? Maybe I just made it up.
- Embarrassment: What will people think? I can't tell my family or friends.
- Shame: I feel so dirty, like there is something wrong with me. I want to wash my hands or shower all the time.

G-4

- Guilt: I feel as if it's my fault, or I did something to make this happen.
- Depression: How am I going to get through this semester? I'm so tired. I feel so helpless. Maybe I'd be better off dead.
- Powerlessness: Will I ever feel in control again?
- Disorientation: I don't even know what day it is, or what class I'm supposed to be in. I can't remember my appointments. I keep forgetting things.
- Triggers: I keep having flashbacks. I'm still re-living it. I see his face all the time.
- Denial: It wasn't really a "rape."
- Fear: I'm scared of everything. What if I'm pregnant? Could I get an STD, or even AIDS? How can I ever feel safe again? Do people realize there's anything wrong? I can't sleep because I know I'll have nightmares. I'm afraid I'm going crazy. I'm afraid to go outside. I'm afraid to be alone.
- Anxiety: I'm having panic attacks. I can't breathe! I just can't stop shaking. I can't sit still in class anymore. I feel overwhelmed.
- Anger: I want to kill the person who attacked me!
- Physical Stress: My stomach (or head or back) aches all the time. I feel jittery and don't feel like eating.

Getting Back on Track

It is important for you to know that any of the above reactions are normal and temporary reactions to an abnormal event. The fear and confusion will lessen with time, but the trauma may disrupt your life for awhile. Some reactions may be triggered by people, places or things connected to the assault, while other reactions may seem to come from "out of the blue."

Remember that no matter how much difficulty you're having dealing with the assault, it does not mean you're "going crazy" or becoming "mentally ill." The recovery process may actually help you develop strengths, insights, and abilities that you never had (or never knew you had) before.

Talking about the assault will help you feel better, but may also be really hard to do. In fact, it's common to want to avoid conversations and situations that may remind you of the assault. You may have a sense of wanting to "get on with life" and "let the past be the past." This is a normal part of the recovery process and may last for weeks or months.

Eventually you will need to deal with fears and feelings in order to heal and regain a sense of control over your life. Talking with someone who can listen in understanding and affirming ways—whether it's a friend, family member, hotline staff member or counselor—is a key part of this process.

Ways to Take Care of Yourself

- Get support from friends and family—try to identify people you trust to validate your feelings and affirm your strengths.
- Talk about the assault and express feelings—choose when, where, and with whom to talk about the assault, and set limits by only disclosing information that feels safe for you to reveal.
- Use stress reduction techniques - hard exercise like jogging, aerobics, walking; relaxation techniques like yoga, massage, music, hot baths; prayer and/or meditation.
- Maintain a balanced diet and sleep cycle as much as possible and avoid overusing stimulants like caffeine, sugar, and nicotine.
- Discover your playful and creative "self." Playing and creativity are important for healing from hurt. Find time for noncompetitive play—start or resume a creative activity like piano, painting, gardening, handicrafts, etc.
- Take "time outs." Give yourself permission to take quiet moments to reflect, relax and rejuvenate—especially during times you feel stressed or unsafe.
- Try reading. Reading can be a relaxing, healing activity. Try to find short periods of uninterrupted leisure reading time.

G-4

- Consider writing or keeping a journal as a way of expressing thoughts and feelings.
- Release some of the hurt and anger in a healthy way: Write a letter to your attacker about how you feel about what happened to you. Be as specific as you can. You can choose to send the letter or not. You also can draw pictures about the anger you feel for your attacker as a way of releasing the emotional pain.
- Hug those you love. Hugging releases the body's natural pain-killers.
- Remember you are safe, even if you don't feel it. The rape is over. It may take longer than you think, but you will feel better.

For Family & Friends

Remember - After a sexual assault, the person needs to:

- Obtain medical assistance.
- Feel safe
- Be believed.
- Know she or he was not at fault.
- Take control of his or her life.

Things you can do to help -

- Listen-don't judge. Try simply to understand the survivor's feelings.
- Offer shelter. If possible, stay with the person at a comfortable, reassuring place.
- Be there and give comfort. The survivor may need to talk a lot or at odd hours at the beginning. Be there as much as you can and encourage the survivor to talk to others.
- Encourage the person to seek professional help.
- Be patient. Don't try to rush the healing process or "make it better."
- Accept the person's choice of what to do about the rape - don't be overly protective. Ask what is needed, help the survivor list some options, then encourage independent decision-making, even if you disagree. It is very important that the survivor make decisions and have them respected.
- Put aside your feelings and get support for yourself. It may be too overwhelming to deal with your angry feelings on top of the victim's. If you have strong angry feelings or feelings of blame toward the survivor, talk to a friend or call a hotline.

REFERRAL SOURCES

The TWU Counseling Center provides free and confidential counseling to currently enrolled students. Listed below are the telephone numbers for the Counseling Center and for other important resources.

Resource	Denton	Dallas Parkland	Dallas Presbyterian	Houston
Counseling Center	940-898-3801	214-689-6655	214-706-2416	713-794-2059
Student Life	940-898-3615	214-689-6697	214-689-6697	713-794-2157
TWU DPS	940-898-2911	214-689-6666	214-706-2333	713-794-2222
County Mental Health Center	940-381-5000	214-330-7722	214-330-7722	713-970-7070

Information provided by the University of Texas at Austin Counseling & Mental Health Center, www.utexas.edu/student/cmhc/booklets/rape/rape.html

**TWU
Counseling Center
Locations:**

*Denton
West Jones Hall
940-898-3801*

*Dallas-Parkland
FPH 120
214-689-6655*

*Dallas-Presbyterian
DPB 16
214-706-2416*

*Houston
Suite 2250
713-794-2059*