



## CARING FOR YOURSELF

### A Guide to Recovery Following Sexual Assault

The following information may assist you to take care of yourself. As you read it, you will get some idea about the things you need to consider and what you might expect as you begin the process of recovery.

#### WHAT IS SEXUAL ASSAULT?

*“Could what happened to me really be sexual assault?”*

The term sexual assault (also called rape) is used to describe any form of sexual behaviour or act that happens without your consent. You have been sexually assaulted if someone forces or coerces you to have anal, oral or vaginal intercourse or to participate in any other type of sexual activity to which you have not given consent or were not able to give consent.

Sexual assault happens to women and men of all ages and from all walks of life. You can be sexually assaulted in your home, at your workplace or on the street. A trusted friend, a close relative or a complete stranger can assault you. There is no such thing as a ‘typical’ sexual assault.

#### HOW YOU MAY BE FEELING

*“I remember sitting in the examining room and thinking, ‘This can’t be happening to me. There must be some mistake.’”*

*“For a long time, I was totally numb. I think I was too afraid to allow myself to feel anything.”*

You may be surprised by your emotional reactions. You may be alarmed by the intensity of your feelings or shocked by how calm you feel.

*“I was so embarrassed and so ashamed. When I returned home from SARC, I stood in the shower for hours. I could not make myself feel clean again.”*

There is no right or wrong way to feel after you have been sexually assaulted. The emotions you are experiencing are the right ones for you.

*“I spent the first few days crying and then I became really angry. I was enraged that he would do this to me. I trusted him!”*

*“I feel like this is all my fault.”*

You may feel that what has happened to you is your fault – that you did something to cause the assault. You didn’t. You did not make or want this to happen.

## HOW DO I GET THE SUPPORT I NEED?

*“My way of dealing with the assault was to throw myself into my work. I didn’t want to talk to anyone about it; not family, not friends, no one. I now know that I needed to get my feelings out, but at the time, I just wanted to retreat into a cocoon where I could feel safe again.”*

*“I spent hours talking to my sister about what had happened. She did not really understand what I had been through, but she listened to me. That is all I really needed: a listening ear.”*

As much as you may want to avoid thinking about what has happened to you, it is important to seek out the help and support you need. This is a way of taking care of yourself. It can also help to determine how well you are able to recover from the assault. Talking about the assault can take you past the self-blame that some people feel and help you to start the healing process.

Some people who have been assaulted choose to seek out the services of a professional counsellor to help them work through their feelings about the assault. You may want to see a school counsellor, a SARC counsellor or someone from Community Mental Health.

Other people prefer to talk to friends and family members about the assault. If you think you would like to do this, it is important to think about the best person to tell. You might want to ask yourself the following questions to help your decision:

- Would this person respect my privacy?
- Would this person listen without blaming me for what happened?
- Would this person feel like they should tell me what to do?
- Would this person be prepared to support me during this difficult time in my life?

Sometimes, when talking to friends or family, they do not respond how we would like them to respond. You may want to give them the sheet “Caring for a Friend or Family Member following Sexual Assault” to read.

## MAKING A NEW BEGINNING

*“Will I ever feel safe again?”*

It may take time and energy to heal after you have been sexually assaulted. Don’t expect yourself to feel better right away. Be patient with yourself and give yourself the time you need to figure out how this experience has affected you.

In the days following the assault, you may find yourself experiencing a range of physical and emotional reactions, including:

- A feeling of being isolated and apart from others
- Thinking that no one understands what you are experiencing
- Confused thinking and the inability to think clearly
- Changes in your sleeping patterns and experiencing nightmares
- Physical symptoms such as headaches, nausea, stomach aches, loss of appetite, fatigue
- Feeling dirty
- Emotional reactions such as shame, guilt, anger, rage, fear
- Feeling a sense of grief and loss
- Not being able to stop thinking about the assault
- Feeling responsible for the assault
- A change in the way you feel about sex
- Not wanting to be touched by anyone
- Finding it difficult to trust others
- Feeling unsafe when alone
- Feeling nervous and anxious
- A lack of self-confidence

It is important to recognise that the emotions you are experiencing are part of the healing process. These reactions can help you to understand how the sexual assault has affected you. Taking the time to understand these reactions is an important part of the recovery process.

It is important to take care of yourself, to seek out support and to obtain answers to any questions you may still have after reading this. While the journey to recovery is not made in a day or a week or even a month, with support and caring from friends and family and with the support of a counsellor, if that is what you want, you will begin to feel in control of your life again.

For additional support and information, or to discuss counselling, contact the Sexual Assault Resource Centre on (08) 9340 1828 or freecall 1800 199 888. Crisis counselling support is available 8.30am to 11.00pm daily.