

How Can I Expect To Feel?

Sexual assault is a traumatic event that can have tremendous emotional consequences. As in all crises, people tend to cope in very different ways. It is important that you feel safe and that you understand all the campus and community resources that are available to you. You are not alone. There are people who can and want to help you.

Though each person is unique, the following list summarizes the range of emotions you might expect to feel in the days, weeks or months after a sexual assault. This list is included not as a mechanism to tell you what to feel, but rather to help you understand that what you're feeling is absolutely reasonable.

Please be open and honest with friends, parents, counselors, etc. about your emotions so they can provide the support that you need.

- Emotional Shock. "I feel so numb.", "I can't believe this happened to me."
- Shame. "I feel so dirty.", "I can't let anyone see me like this."
- Disbelief. "Maybe nothing happened.", "Am I over-reacting?", "Why me?"
- Powerlessness. "There's nothing I can do.", "I give up."
- Embarrassment. "What will people think?", "What do people know?"
- Fear. "What if I'm pregnant?", "What if my attacker sees me again?", "I have nightmares every night.", "I can't be alone."
- Depression. "I don't want to do anything.", "How will I survive?", "When will I feel okay again?"
- Guilt. "This is all my fault.", "If only I had ..."
- Confused. "I don't know what my schedule is.", "I can't remember anything anymore."
- Memories. "I keep having flashbacks.", "I see my attackers face everywhere."
- Paranoia. "My attacker is after me.", "I can't trust anyone.", "Everyone knows I've been raped."
- Denial. "Nothing happened.", "It wasn't rape."
- Anxiety. "I can't eat or sleep.", "I can't breathe.", "I feel overwhelmed by everything.", "Who can I trust?"
- Anger. "I want to hurt myself.", "I want to hurt the person who raped me."
- Physical Stress. "My stomach hurts.", "I have a migraine."
- Sadness. "Will I ever be happy again?"

It is important to remember that the above emotions are normal and, for many, just temporary reactions to an abnormal event. With help and support, the fear and confusion will lessen with time, but the trauma may continue to disrupt your life for a significant amount of time.

No matter how much difficulty you are having trying to cope with your emotions, it is important to remember that you are not “crazy” or “mentally ill”. The recovery process may actually help you develop new coping mechanisms and recognize strengths that you never knew you had before.

Talking about the incident often helps you feel better and take back control of your life, but it may be very hard to do, especially at first. You may feel VERY strongly that the best approach for you is to forget that anything happened, to just move on with your life. This is common and can last for months. Unfortunately, many victims of sexual misconduct who choose to “move on” eventually reach a point in their lives when they feel the need to address the complex emotions that follow a sexual assault. Please strongly consider talking to a therapist, social worker, counselor, hotline volunteer and/or rape crisis counselor. Talk with someone who can help you regain some control in your life.

Deciding to talk with someone may take some time. That’s okay. In the meantime, here are some ways that you can TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF:

- Surround yourself with compassionate, supportive people who will validate your emotions and act as a resource.
- Try to remember that you are safe. The assault is over. If you fear for your safety, please talk with a member of law enforcement (off-campus) or campus safety (on-campus).
- Try writing or keeping a journal as a way of expressing your emotions and collecting your thoughts.
- Allow yourself more time to relax, exercise, and indulge in activities that bring you peace and satisfaction.
- Concentrate on eating a well-balanced diet and getting enough sleep. In addition, stay away from caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol.
- Use recommended stress-reduction techniques like yoga, jogging, aerobics, massage therapy, prayer and/or meditation.
- Give yourself permission to talk about the assault, if you want to, with those whom you love and trust. Talking about the assault can help you heal and take control of your life.