

Why Me?

*Dealing with the Trauma of
Sexual Assault*

Ynys Saff Sexual Assault Referral Centre,
Cardiff Royal Infirmary

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The Experience

What is sexual assault? It is any kind of sexual activity that you do not agree to. Rape and sexual abuse are what many of us think of as sexual violence. Having someone touch you without permission or threaten you sexually can also cause feelings of fear and intrusion and are also types of sexual assault.

Sexual violence can happen to anyone. It affects women and men, girls and boys, regardless of your age. It can happen anywhere, including your home or work. It can be very upsetting leaving you overwhelmed with a lot of difficult emotions and thoughts. You may also have uncomfortable or painful physical feelings.

You may not know how to deal with sexual violence after it has happened. You may try to understand it by asking questions like, 'Why me? Why was I attacked by a stranger? Why did someone I know and trust hurt me? What was it about me that made this happen? Was I asking for it? Is it my fault? Am I a bad person? Did I deserve it?'

Many people live in shame thinking it was their fault that they were attacked. These feelings can cause you to act in ways that make you feel more in control of your life.

Women's Safety Unit 02920 222022

This service provides free support and information to women who have experienced domestic and sexual violence.

All Wales Domestic Abuse Line 080880 10800

Cardiff Women's Aid 02920 460566

www.cardiffwomensaid.org.uk

Provides services to women and their children experiencing domestic abuse. Offers 24 hour on call service, emergency accommodation, outreach support and counselling services.

Community Advice and Listening Line

0800 132737

Mens Advice Line 08088010327

www..mensadviceline.org.uk

Support and signposting services for men experiencing abuse.

For Example: change your hairstyle or the way you dress, not go out in the evenings put on weight, move home, change jobs, or not trust anyone.

For those who have been sexually assaulted it may feel like the worst thing that could possibly happen. To survive the assault is not enough, you need peace of mind.

After the Assault

There are usually a lot of different emotions after sexual assault. Confusing thoughts, emotions and sensations are normal reactions to stress and assault.

Immediately after: Feeling shocked or numb is common. Feelings like fear, shame, guilt or anger may be very strong. Some people 'block' the whole experience by trying to pretend the assault did not happen.

Days, weeks and months later: After shock, you may feel out of control and disorganised. This can happen as you start to deal with a difficult experience.

After an attack, you may feel afraid of being pregnant or having a sexually transmitted infection. You may also feel that your body is 'dirty' a feel a need to wash a lot.

You do not need to tell anyone about the assault, if you do not want to. But it is very important that you seek medical help about these fears as soon as possible.

You may find that you can't stop thinking about the assault and that you have strong memories of the event. These are sometimes called flashbacks. They may cause upsetting feelings, and you may be unable to remember important parts of what happened. Sometimes you may see, hear and smell things that remind you of the attack. You may experience feelings of distance from the world around you. You may have muffled hearing or a hard time focusing on something. You may also find yourself denying that it happened.

After the attack you may have physical injuries that need medical care. You may notice changes in yourself that worry you. It is common for women's menstrual cycles to not happen at the normal time, or be lighter or heavier than normal. Other changes experienced by both men and women may be: loss of appetite and body weight, increase in appetite and body weight, feeling sick, having diarrhoea or not being able to go to the toilet, sleeping problems and nightmares, moody, feeling tired or not having energy, crying a lot, and having problems in sexual relationships.

Helpful Organisations

Ynys Saff/Safe Island **02920 203579**
Sexual Assault Referral Centre providing crisis intervention, advocacy and support services to victims of sexual violence.

Victim Support **0845 3030900**

www.victimsupport.com

A national charity helps provide free and confidential support to help you deal with your experience, whether or not you report the crime.

Brook Advisory Service **0800 0185023**

Provides free and confidential sexual health information, pregnancy advice and services specifically for young people under 25.

New Pathways **01685 379310**

www.newpathways.co.uk

Provides crisis support and counselling services to men women children and young people who have experienced sexual violence.

Additional Helpful Organisations

Samaritans **08457 909090**

A 24 hour, confidential emotional support helpline for anyone in crisis.

- Talk to staff at the sexual health clinic when you go for a check up. They are available to talk with you about any concerns you may have.
- There are books available in public libraries and bookshops which may be able to help you work through your feelings. Look under the Popular Psychology section.
- Do not blame yourself. When someone attacks another person, it is their fault. You are not to blame.

Medical Advice and Treatment:

Cardiff Royal Infirmary GUM Clinic: 02920 335208

Health Advisors 02920 498900

At the GUM clinic you will get free, confidential advice and treatment. You can go to a GUM clinic anywhere in the country, it doesn't have to be your local one and you don't have to be referred by your doctor.

Family Planning Association (FPA) 0845 1228690

www.fpa.org.uk

Sexual health charity which provides confidential information and advice on contraception, sexually transmitted infections, planning a pregnancy, pregnancy choices and sexual wellbeing.

Common Emotional Responses

Self Blame and Guilt — A lot of people think it was their fault or that they were partially to blame for the attack. This is not true. You are not to blame for what happened, it was not your fault.

Fear and Anxiety — Sometimes you may be afraid when you are near the place, or a place similar to where the attack happened. You may also feel this way when you see someone who looks like the person who attacked you. These feelings may also be more general and happen when you aren't around those types of places or people. You may fear being attacked again, be afraid about having contracted a sexually transmitted infection, be afraid of going out or going to some places, scared that people will think badly of you or be afraid that you are breaking down and losing control. Such fears bring symptoms of anxiety like thoughts racing through your mind, your heart pounding, shakiness, trembling and sweats, getting butterflies in your stomach, and panicking,

Anger — You may be angry about the assault or with the attacker. You may also believe you let it happen by not doing something different. You may be moody or unhappy towards people you think do not understand what you are feeling.

Helplessness and Loss — You might feel helpless because of the feelings you are having. You may also not want to do things on your own, not feel good about yourself, or not trust other people. These feelings are normal.

Horror, Distrust and Degradation — What happened to you and what you saw may leave you with a sense of shock. You may also feel disgusted at yourself or your attacker for what he or she did to you. And you may feel bad about the acts you were forced to do.

Constant Questioning — Trying to understand what happened to you is normal. Asking your self 'Why Me? Why did I trust them? Why did I not fight more? Why did I agree to certain sexual acts? Why can I not forget what happened? Why did I let this happen to me?' are all common questions people ask themselves after a sexual attack.

Long Term Impact

We all need to deal with painful things that happen in our lives. But it is usually easier to cope with experiences that we somehow can expect. There is no way to be prepared for sexual violence. It can change your beliefs about yourself. It can also affect past, present and future relationships.

Television, radio and newspaper coverage can give you unpleasant feelings and memories. Someone talking about sexual assault can also make you think about your experience. While you will never forget what has happened to you, everything you experience eventually becomes part of who you are and how you relate to others.

What Helps?

Here are some ways to help you in the process of coming to terms with what has happened:

- Try not to bottle up and ignore your feelings.
- Try to talk to family and friends who you trust. Tell them about what has happened, how you feel and how they can help you. They can give you emotional support, advice about going to a doctor and information about what would happen if you decided to tell the police.
- Take care of yourself. Give yourself time to absorb the shock of the experience. Try and get adequate sleep and rest, eat regularly, and exercise.
- Try not to use alcohol or drugs to 'switch off' your mind. Whilst these may make you feel better at the time, if you use them too long they can have bad effects.
- Talk to your GP if you have any physical injuries or other problems you may be experiencing.