



What's "normal" following an assault?

Every person will respond differently following an assault. Many things determine how you react including your usual coping strategies, personal history and the response you get from others.

Though everyone is different, some very common reactions include thoughts of disbelief (I didn't think this would happen to me) powerlessness (I did everything you're supposed to do and it still happened), and other emotions such as numbness, rage, guilt and self-blame.

Sometimes, the experience might start showing up physically. You might notice changes in your eating and sleeping habits, achiness, nausea or headaches. It's normal to have times when you are forgetful, unable to concentrate, feel tired or irritable and you may notice changes in sexual or intimate relationships. Many people report they are "on edge" or "jumpy" and have a hard time relaxing.

While these experiences are unpleasant, they tell you your body is processing what happened. It is normal to have some type of reaction to the experience of sexual assault so it's okay to give yourself permission to take time to care for your emotional and physical health.

Practice

It's good to practice either relaxation or mindfulness exercises on a daily basis. They can be especially helpful if you are struggling to fall asleep or if you experience a flashback and need some help slowing down. This exercise by Yvonne Dolan (2000) may help. It's a breathing exercise and is meant to be done quite slowly. It may take some practice to feel comfortable with it, but basically you name 5 things you see, 5 things you hear and 5 physical sensations you feel in the moment.

So it might look like this:

Take a deep breath

Say "I see.....(i.e. a clock)."

Breath

I hear.....

Breath

I feel.....

You repeat this sequence until you've gone through it 5 times.

As you bring yourself into the here and now you should notice feeling somewhat calmer.

Sexual Violence on Campus

Personal Recovery

Counselling Resources

U of L Counselling Services: (403) 317 2845

Lethbridge Family Services: (403) 327 5724

A collaboration between
Counselling Services (403) 317 2845
Health Services (403) 329 2484
Security Services (403) 329 2603



Taking Care of Yourself Following an Assault

“I think the most important thing that a person can do in the healing process is to be patient with themselves and to love themselves in the process.” Rev. Reanae McNeal

- Take care of your medical needs—It brings some relief and will help ensure you stay physically well.
- Nurture and maintain relationships with the people in your life that make you feel good about yourself. Even if you don't feel like socializing, just hanging out watching TV with a friend can be a big help.
- Consider joining a support group or accessing a health care provider, particularly if you feel the people in your life don't understand your experience of being assaulted.
- Work to stay engaged in your life. Experiencing a sexual assault can impact your motivation in wanting to do anything, but it's important to make time to get involved in a hobby, sport or volunteer work that doesn't have a connection to the perpetrator.
- Remember to eat—sometimes when people experience a sexual assault they can experience changes in appetite—either eating a lot of junk food, or feeling like they can't eat at all. Try to maintain a healthy diet.
- Try to keep regular sleep habits. Most people who experience a sexual assault report some changes in their sleep patterns immediately following the assault. They may find it extremely difficult to fall asleep at night, or may sleep more than usual. If you struggle to fall asleep try the relaxation exercise on the back page of this pamphlet.
- Get some exercise. It can be a very healthy way of managing the emotions that linger from an assault—even if your motivation is low a walk can recharge your energy levels.
- Trust yourself. If you worry you're becoming depressed or experiencing thoughts or feelings you are uncomfortable with you may choose to connect with a counsellor. They can help you develop strategies to cope with flashbacks, extreme emotions or changes in relationships.
- Give yourself permission to feel upset, angry, sad etc. This is an important piece of healing and recovery.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q How am I “supposed” to be reacting?

A You're supposed to react however it is you are reacting...there is no right and wrong response to an assault. You know yourself best, so the best strategy is to monitor your reactions and note any changes in your emotions, physical health and relationships. If you have any questions about what you've noticed you can contact Counselling Services at (403) 317 2845 to ask questions about the process of healing.

Q Does this mean I'm going to be “messed up”?

A Some images from the media tell us that if you're assaulted you will have mental health problems. This is not true. People who've experienced sexual violence do heal and go on to live healthy, fulfilling lives.

How do I know if I should get help?

Q Not everyone who's experienced a sexual assault needs to access counselling but many people find it helpful to check in with a trained professional to discuss what coping looks like for you. It can be helpful just to make contact with someone in case you have more complicated responses later.

Some of the things to watch out for include:

- Drinking or using drugs excessively
- Not eating for long periods of time
- Not sleeping or over-sleeping
- Engaging in self harm activities
- Thoughts of hurting yourself or others

These responses may occur following an assault, and may indicate that seeking professional help might be helpful.