

After the crisis: self-care for you

Your safety and health come first

Get to a safe place. Go somewhere you feel secure and protected. Phone the police if you think you're still in danger or at risk. If possible, call a relative, friend or neighbour you trust and ask them if they can be with you.

Get medical care. Your emotional and physical health is very important. If you have just experienced a sexual assault, you may have internal or external injuries that require medical attention. There may also be some risk of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections. Call the closest sexual assault service for information about where to go in your community. If you don't have a sexual assault service in your area, go to a hospital emergency unit, your doctor's office or a walk-in clinic as soon as possible.

As someone who has experienced a sexual assault, you should be treated with dignity and respect at all times. Receiving medical treatment, as well as sexually-transmitted infections prevention, will help you to feel better physically and can also reduce anxiety or stress you may feel later on.

Prevent pregnancy. The possibility of becoming pregnant can be a major worry following a sexual assault. You may want to talk to a nurse or doctor about the risk of becoming pregnant, and what can be done to prevent it. It's very important to receive appropriate pregnancy prevention treatment within 72 hours after the incident. If more than 72 hours has gone by, getting medical attention is still very important so that you understand what treatment options you have at this time.

Your feelings after sexual assault

Every reaction is different. Sexual assault is a traumatic, deeply personal experience. There is no right or wrong way to feel or to respond. Reactions can be physical, emotional, mental or spiritual -- or any combination of them.

Whatever emotions or sensations you're feeling are your mind and body's natural responses to what has occurred. If your assault is very recent, you may be in shock. This can mean that you feel numb, unemotional or in a state of total disbelief. You may cry, shake, laugh or be physically sick. These are all normal responses.

Try talking to someone. The hours immediately after a sexual assault are very confusing, and making decisions is difficult. You may feel a need to be nurtured and comforted, and you don't have to cope with your experience alone. Being able to talk to someone you trust, such as a relative, friend, teacher or counsellor, can be an important step in your process of recovery and healing.

The sexual assault services listed above have people there who will listen to you. They can also arrange for you to meet with a counsellor experienced in supporting people who have been assaulted.

Thinking about reporting to police

You've just had an extremely traumatic experience, and it's natural to feel shocked, bewildered and unable to make decisions. You're struggling to cope with immediate needs like personal safety and getting medical care.

There is no right or wrong answer about reporting what has happened to the police, only what the right choice is for you. You might not feel like doing it right now, but you may want to later on.

Telling the police right away may not mean you have to go all the way through the process, but in some areas you are expected to do so when you report. In some areas of the province, the police may give you some time to think about proceeding; however this is not always the case. It's important to know that if you do report, the case may not proceed to charges or to court. Telling the police soon after the assault does give them accurate information and, potentially, access to more evidence that can be used if you decide to proceed in the future.

If you think you would like to report the incident to police, you can call them directly or contact your area sexual assault service or victim services for their support in doing so.

If you want to report the assault to police, don't wash, bathe or change your clothes until you have been looked after and a medical examination is done. It's natural to feel dirty after your experience, but it's important to save any evidence that may still exist on your body or clothing.

If you decide to change your clothes, put everything you were wearing in a sealed bag to give to police, including your underwear. Don't wash them first.

This is NOT your fault

People of every age, race and cultural background experience sexual assault. You did not choose to have this happen to you. Sexual assault is NEVER the fault of the survivor.

It doesn't matter where you were or how you were behaving. It doesn't matter what you were wearing or saying. It doesn't even matter whether you were drinking or using drugs. You did not deserve to be assaulted or abused. Nobody does.

It's not your fault. The person who did this to you is entirely responsible for what has happened. That person has committed a crime.

You've been sexually assaulted. You may be struggling to cope with the challenges of caring for yourself and taking another step or two along the path of healing. Every step you take, and every day that passes, moves you further away from that traumatic experience and closer to your recovery.

The people who love and care about you want to provide as much comfort and support as they can. But good self-care is also an important factor in your recovery. Self-care strategies are most effective when they become a top priority -- and a habit.

Physical self-care for you

Maintain good medical care. It's easy to put off going to the doctor or clinic, but be sure to make and keep those appointments. If you don't, small health problems that might have been simple to take care of can become a lot more complicated.

Get plenty of sleep. Most people require seven to 10 hours of sleep per night. The key thing is to ensure a peaceful environment that will maximize your ability to get as much rest as your body needs. Sleep heals!

Eat right. Food provides both nourishment and comfort. It's not always possible to organize your life to ensure three good meals every day, but you should at least try to eat a healthy, balanced diet that delivers solid nutritional value. As long as you don't overdo them, occasional treat foods and goodies are also can also give you a psychological mini-boost.

Stay active. This is one of the most overlooked areas of self-care. You should try to achieve 30 minutes of exercise at least five times per week. If you enjoy activities like cycling, jogging, golf or team sports, try your best to keep them a part of your lifestyle. Even a quick lunchtime walk in the sunshine will get your blood pumping, muscles moving and help reduce negative feelings, stress and depression.

Emotional self-care for you

Meditation soothes your spirit. Many people find value in using relaxation techniques to restore and maintain their emotional health. This example is a good place to start:

- Sit or stand comfortably with your back straight and feet flat on the floor.
- Place one hand on your belly button and breathe in slowly through your nose for a count of four, letting your tummy expand as you inhale. Concentrate on relaxing your tummy muscles as you inhale.
- Hold your breath for four seconds, and then exhale slowly through your mouth for another count of four. Try to keep the rest of your body relaxed; your shoulders should not rise and fall as you breathe.
- Keep counting and repeating this deep inhale-hold-deep exhale cycle, and you should begin to feel a calming effect.

Keep a diary. Some people find that recording their thoughts and feelings in a journal or diary helps them to manage their emotions.

Counseling. Joining a support group or talking with a professional counsellor experienced in supporting people who have been sexually assaulted may be helpful to your healing process.

AASAS member agencies are able to help people who have suffered sexual abuse or sexual assault, or whose life is affected by a loved one's experience. If you're ready, you can [click here](#) to connect with resources in your community.

Nurture your relationships. Your emotional self-care can also involve the people in your life who make you feel good about yourself. Make it a priority to spend quality time with these friends and family members. You may also feel comfortable connecting with a support group for survivors of sexual assault or abuse; other members can relate to your situation.

Set some boundaries. Be careful to avoid people who are unable (or unwilling) to listen to you, who want to dismiss or analyze your experience or who leave you feeling depressed. Cutting negative family members out of your life may not be an option, but you can control the amount of time you spend around them (avoid open-ended time commitments, for example) or see them only as part of a group. If there are days when you just don't feel like communicating with the world, screen your calls or turn off your phone; there's no rule requiring you to answer every ringtone.

Get involved. Many survivors have full, busy lives -- families, jobs, school. Finding time to enjoy leisure activities can be a big challenge, but this is a vital part of your self-care. Get involved with other people in a hobby, sport or volunteer organization that you really love. Being part of a group-oriented activity or project can be motivating. When you have plans for doing "fun" things, be sure to mark them on your calendar and treat them as important!