

Surviving Sexual Assault

moving from victim to survivor

Although the
world is full
of suffering, it
is full also of
overcoming it.

- Helen Keller



UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

Recent Assault

In the case of immediate danger, call 9-1-1.

What To Do

Do not douche, bathe, or change clothes until you have talked with the police. You may destroy valuable evidence needed by the police. Preserving evidence does not mean you have to report. But it gives you the option.

Seek medical attention as soon as possible. **DO NOT WAIT**, even if you do not want to make a report to law enforcement.

Who To Call

If you are a UW student, call STOP at 307-766-3296 during business hours, or after hours 307-766-7897 and ask UWPD to call the STOP Violence Victim Advocate.

If you are a Laramie resident, call the SAFE Project Hotline at 1-800-230-3556.

If you are not a UW student, contact your area rape crisis program, by calling the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) at 1800-656-HOPE.

Call a close friend or relative for support.



Past Assault and Struggling

At UW, the STOP Violence program is available for students at no cost and can be contacted at 307-766-3296.

The SAFE project is available in the Laramie community and can serve your needs as well at 307-745-3556.

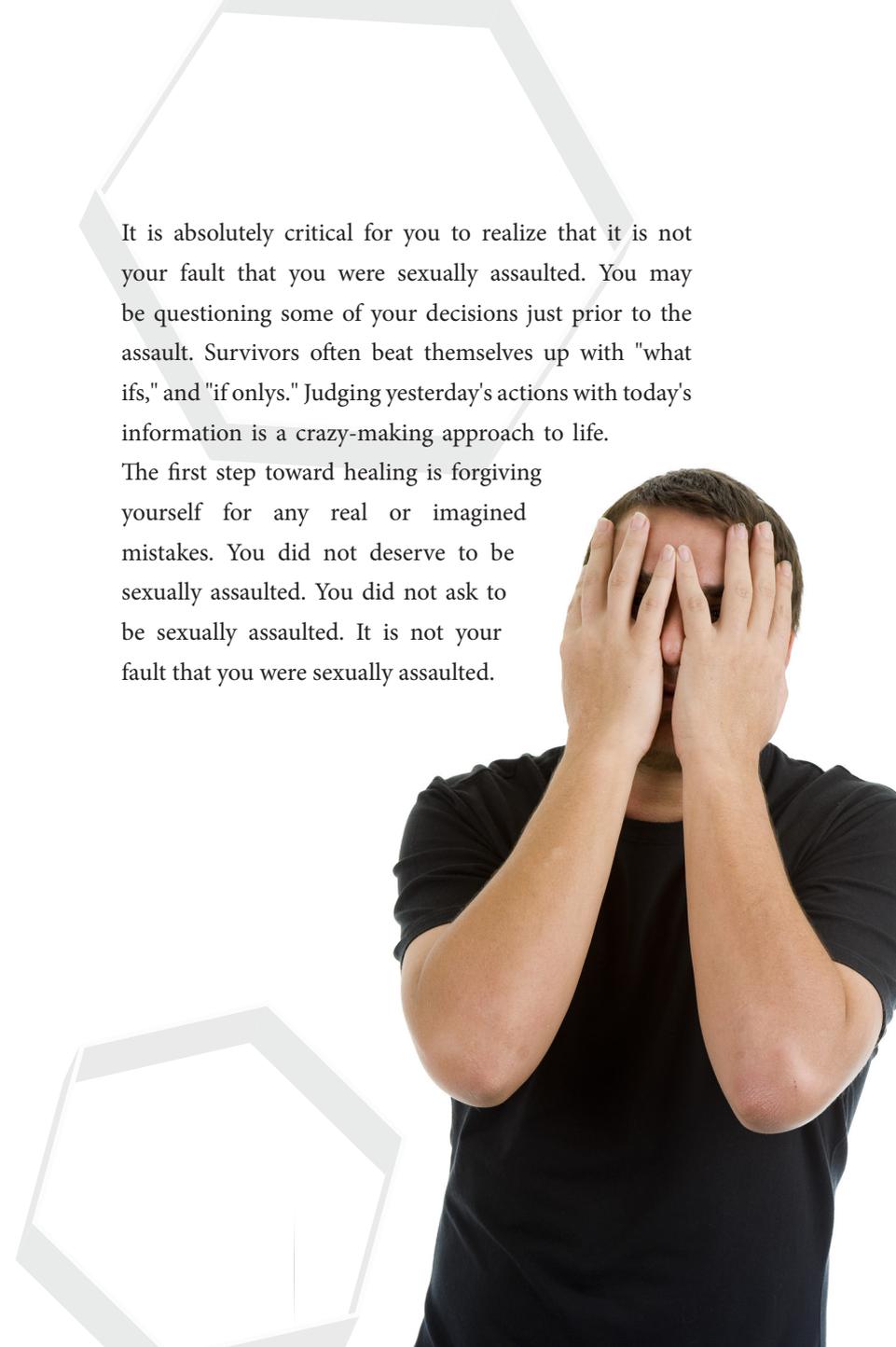
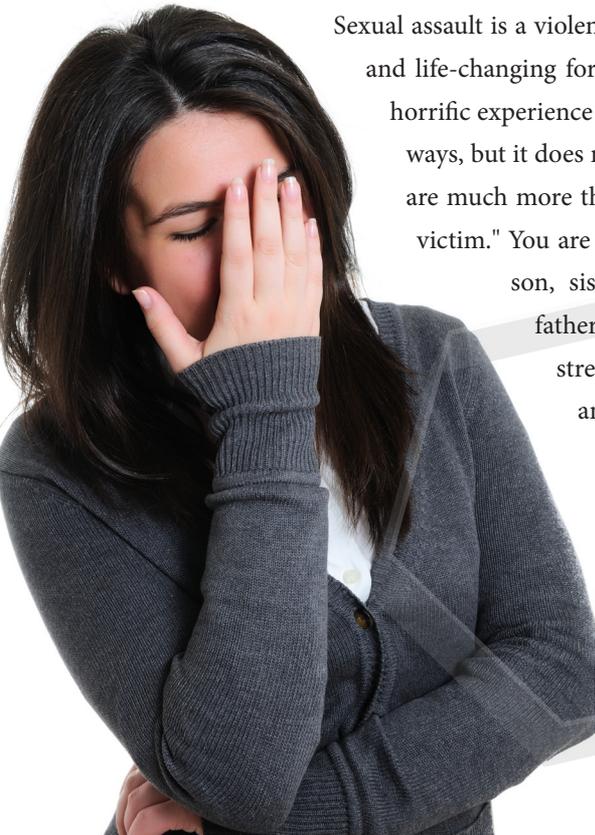
Outside Laramie, consult your area rape crisis center regarding counseling and support options.

Victimhood

The term sexual assault is used as a catch all, and therefore may have a variety of meanings. Usually the term sexual assault refers to a specific act of sexual violence. Sexual assault may refer to sexual assault, incest, touching of intimate body parts, or other acts of sexual intrusion without consent. It refers to acts of sexual violence perpetrated against an adult or child, by a loved one, acquaintance or stranger. Each state legislature has its own legal definition of sexual assault.

Sexual assault is a violent crime, which is traumatic and life-changing for those who survive it. This horrific experience will affect you in numerous ways, but it does not define who you are. You are much more than simply "a sexual assault victim." You are a friend, lover, daughter or son, sister or brother, mother or father. You are an individual with strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, interests and hobbies, goals and dreams. The sexual assault may have pushed some of this to the back burner for now, but it did not erase these important aspects of you.

It is absolutely critical for you to realize that it is not your fault that you were sexually assaulted. You may be questioning some of your decisions just prior to the assault. Survivors often beat themselves up with "what ifs," and "if onlys." Judging yesterday's actions with today's information is a crazy-making approach to life. The first step toward healing is forgiving yourself for any real or imagined mistakes. You did not deserve to be sexually assaulted. You did not ask to be sexually assaulted. It is not your fault that you were sexually assaulted.



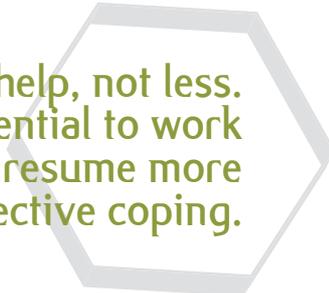
The Victim's Reaction

Sexual assault is always traumatic and those who survive often have severe stress reactions similar to those of people who have survived other life-threatening events, such as war or a natural disaster. There are four basic stages of reaction to a sexual assault.

Crisis: In the moments immediately following the attack, shock and denial are common. It's hard to believe the sexual assault really happened and impossible to understand why. The victim may feel strong emotions and appear very upset, crying or shaking. Or, they may be in shock, feel no emotion at all, and seem calm and composed or even cold and detached. All of these reactions are normal. During the crisis stage, the most common emotion is fear--fear of the attacker returning, of being alone, of places like the one where the sexual assault occurred or of people who remind the victim of the attacker. Victims often feel angry, depressed, confused and irritable. Many also feel guilty, ashamed and "dirty" because they believe the myths that blame victims for the sexual assault. There are many physical reactions after sexual assault, including pain, soreness, eating and sleeping disturbances. Some sexual assault victims may want to talk about their experience soon afterwards; others may wait until much later or may never feel comfortable talking about it. Some victims do not want to be touched after an assault and others want increased physical affection.

Denial: During this stage, the victim may deny any effects from the assault and may assure you that things are fine. This may be because they think everyone is tired of hearing about the sexual assault or because the victim is trying to shut out the pain and get back to "normal." In an effort to put the sexual assault behind them, the victim may also want to change lifestyles, jobs or residences. This stage can be brief or can last for many years. Sometimes while in the denial stage, victims may turn to destructive behavior (alcohol, drugs, eating concerns or overworking) to numb their feelings and go on.

Suffering: This stage is when the reality of the sexual assault sinks in. It is characterized by depression and feelings of loss. The victim's sense of security and control over their life has been devastated. Common reactions include fear, nightmares, changes in sleeping and eating, sexual problems, physical aches and pains, difficulty concentrating and loss of interest in usual activities. Anger, guilt, and shame are common. Victims may have frequent, disturbing memories of the sexual assault and "flashbacks," when it seems the assault is happening again. This stage is very painful for victims. Mood swings are common and it is not unusual for victims to misdirect anger towards loved ones or themselves at this time.



In a crisis, you need more help, not less.
A professional may be essential to work
through the assault and resume more
effective coping.

Resolution: This stage begins when the victim starts the long-term process of resolving their feelings about the sexual assault, the attacker and themselves. The goal of this stage is to move from "victim" to "survivor" and to integrate the sexual assault as an accepted, although painful, event in one's life. If integration is not achieved, the survivor may continue to have problems in many life areas.

Although all assault survivors pass through the four stages of healing, the passage is not always smooth or straightforward. A survivor may be in two stages at the same time, may return to a previous stage for a time, or get stuck in one stage. The STOP Violence Program can help with information, counseling and support during any stage of recovery. Call 307-766-3296 for more information and help.

“Doing the best at this moment puts you in the best place for the next moment.”

- Oprah Winfrey

Resiliency

If you are experiencing some of these impacts of social behavior following a sexual assault, it is important to know that these are normal reactions. It doesn't mean that you are "crazy" or "losing it." It does mean, however, that you are going through a very difficult and traumatic experience. This is something that you should not deal with alone. Utilize your support system and talk about your experiences with someone you trust. Talking with a victim advocate could be very helpful. An advocate can provide support, as well as valuable information on the medical and legal systems, and what to expect. It is also helpful to seek counseling. A therapist can help you work through the trauma of sexual assault and help you move forward. A support group would allow you to share experiences with other survivors, who can truly understand.

Impact on Social Behavior

- ▷ withdrawal
- ▷ afraid to be alone
- ▷ uncomfortable around other people
- ▷ difficulty trusting others
- ▷ afraid to leave home
- ▷ difficulty relaxing
- ▷ disruption in sexual relations
- ▷ hypersensitivity in relating to others
- ▷ difficulty/apprehension around the gender of the assailant, especially if they resemble the assailant

Taking Care of Yourself

- ▷ Within the first 24 - 48 hours, periods of strenuous physical exercise alternated with relaxation will alleviate some of your physical reactions.
- ▷ Structure your time--keep busy.
- ▷ You're normal and having normal reactions-- don't label yourself crazy.
- ▷ Talk to people--talk is the most healing medicine.
- ▷ Beware of numbing the pain with drugs or alcohol. You don't need to complicate this with a substance abuse problem.
- ▷ Reach out--people care.
- ▷ Keep your life as normal as possible.
- ▷ Spend time with others.
- ▷ Give yourself permission to feel rotten.
- ▷ Keep a journal--write your way through those sleepless hours.
- ▷ Do things that feel good to you.
- ▷ Realize that those around you are under stress.
- ▷ Accept offered help.



Becoming a Survivor

Healing and Feeling Empowered

Every survivor responds in their unique way.

The following are things which assault survivors have reported experiencing after sexual assault. Some of these may be similar to your experience, while others might be completely different. Sexual assault typically affects survivors on four levels - physical, emotional, cognitive, and social.

Physical Reactions

soreness/physical injuries - sleep disturbance -
appetite disturbance/eating concerns -
muscular tension -
nightmares - somatic illness
(headache, back pain,
diarrhea, ulcer, etc.) -
sexually transmitted
infections - pregnancy

Emotional Reactions

fear - shock - numbness - anxiety -
depression - shame/humiliation -
powerlessness - guilt - anger -
irritability - mood swings - sadness -
feeling vulnerable - decreased self-esteem

Thoughts & Worries

what will people think? - will they believe me? -
will they blame me? - why did this happen to me? -
what if I had done...? - what if I hadn't...? - will others hate me? -
if I forget about it, maybe it will go away - I deserved it because...

Other Side Effects

difficulty concentrating - confusion -
loss of memory for part of the assault - flashbacks -
reliving triggered by sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations or experiences

**It will be Okay!
You don't have
to suffer alone.**



Just The Facts

1 in 4 women are sexually assaulted in their lifetime.

82% of all sexual assaults are by people the victim knows.

Less than 5% of college students who are sexually assaulted report the crime to police.

60% of sexual assaults take place in the victim's own home.



STOP Violence Program

Dean of Students Office
University of Wyoming
1000 E. University Avenue
Department 3135
Knight Hall Room 118
Laramie, Wyoming 82071
www.uwyo.edu/stop

(307) 766-3296

Office Hours: 8am-5pm

After Hours: (307) 766-STOP (7897)

Resource produced by the STOP Violence Program
Distributed by the Dean of Students Office