



# COMMON RESPONSES TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE & HOW TO HELP

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Understanding common responses to sexual violence is critical for anyone who works with survivors. Always remember that there is no universal response to sexual violence -- every survivor responds and copes differently. Furthermore, there is no universal way to be helpful.

Some suggestions, however, may be helpful to any survivor. Coping and healing are always facilitated by good nutrition, sleep, exercise, and minimal use of substances that alter thinking, feeling, breathing or bodily functions. Knowledge and information are generally helpful to all survivors, especially information about regional Rape Crisis Centers, where they can participate in individual or group counseling when responses affect safety or interfere with daily life.

*Note: Responses discussed below are common to many types of trauma or stress, and should not be used as indicators that sexual violence has occurred.*

*Common Responses Adapted from original work by Miriam Silman, MSW*

## Common Emotional Responses To Sexual Violence

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Some of the most important ways to help are: to acknowledge and normalize emotional responses, to educate the survivor about what emotional responses are and why it makes sense that s/he feels this way, and to take them seriously and recognize how debilitating they can be. If any of these responses persist for more than a few weeks, or if they are severe enough to interfere with the survivor's daily functioning and relationships, a referral to a Rape Crisis Center or other experienced professional is indicated. If you are unsure whether referral for additional help is necessary, it is better to be cautious and make the referral.

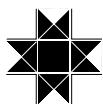
### *Common Emotional Responses*

### *How you can help ...*

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#### ANXIETY

- ◊ Excessive **worry** or extreme **fear**, beyond what is considered "normal," i.e., interfering with daily functioning and producing uncomfortable physical symptoms.
- ◊ Assist in identifying ways to feel safe (i.e., alarms, cell phones, etc.) and support efforts to counter anxiety (i.e., yoga, meditation, relaxation, etc.).
- ◊ Listen and encourage talking about these anxieties.
- ◊ Go slowly and explain what is happening to minimize anxiety reactions.



**DEPRESSION, SADNESS, GRIEF**

- ◇ **Depression** is extremely common among survivors of sexual violence. Though it may be severe and overwhelming, others may minimize it. Depression may result in **suicidal ideation** or attempts, or other behavioral responses (see below).
- ◇ **Grief** can result from loss of control, loss of trust in others and the world, loss of self-confidence, and loss of happiness and well-being.
- ◇ Educate the survivor about signs of depression and grief.
- ◇ Take suicidal ideation seriously and immediately refer to a Rape Crisis Center or other experienced professional.
- ◇ Listen and encourage the survivor to talk about these feelings of depression and grief.
- ◇ Remove guns, other weapons, and potentially lethal substances to reduce potential acting on suicidal thoughts.
- ◇ Take these feelings and expressions of grief or depression seriously.

**GUILT**

- ◇ Survivors often feel guilty for having somehow caused the violence. This is actually a way to regain a sense of control and a sense that future assaults can be prevented (i.e., if there is an identified vulnerability, then one might become less vulnerable by changing that characteristic).
- ◇ Survivors also may feel guilty for causing their family and friends pain and suffering, for having changed, for not being able to do or enjoy certain things, etc.
- ◇ Acknowledge feelings of guilt without dismissing them as irrational, as dismissal can strip away any sense of control and leave one feeling more vulnerable.
- ◇ Help identify strengths and understand that what s/he did at the time was the best decision at that time.
- ◇ Reinforce that only the perpetrator is truly responsible for the violence, even if risky behaviors were involved.
- ◇ Recommend support groups and other first-person accounts, to help the survivor see that the victims are not responsible for the assault.

**SHAME**

- ◇ May be profound, and lead to withdrawal, isolation, exacerbated depression, and/or suicidal ideation.
- ◇ Even though shame may seem irrational to an outsider, it is very real and often debilitating for the survivor.
- ◇ Always treat the survivor with the utmost respect.
- ◇ Be open, non-judgmental and matter-of-fact when talking about sexual violence – do not avoid it.
- ◇ Remind the survivor that sexual assault is a crime of power, much as a mugging is a crime of power.
- ◇ Allow the survivor as much control as possible over information related to the assault.

**ANGER**

- ◇ Can be **beneficial**, especially as a motivator, as a counter to depression, and by helping ensure the survivor does not take full responsibility for the violence.
- ◇ Can also be **disruptive**, especially if it manifests in physical aggression, self-injurious behavior or attempts at revenge, or if it worsens depression (usually when anger is global, i.e., directed at a world that allows sexual violence).
- ◇ Normalize feelings of anger and even rage.
- ◇ Reframe anger as a response that can be beneficial.
- ◇ Identify possible releases, including physical exercise.
- ◇ Identify who or what the anger is directed towards and whether there is any plan for revenge.
- ◇ Take threats seriously against self and others; take necessary steps to protect the survivor and others as indicated.
- ◇ Assist the survivor in finding legal and non-violent ways of expressing and releasing anger.

