

Understanding Survivors' Experiences: Common Reactions to Sexual Violations

Stage 1: The Initial Shock or Acute Stage

- Victims experience a sense of crisis, loss of control, confusion and a sense of unreality. The victim may feel a great deal of confusion and have a hard time make decisions.
- Different response styles are possible: an individual may be very expressive (crying, easily startled, “hyperalert”, “hysterical”) or withdrawn (numb, disconnected, quiet, no obvious emotion) or some combination.

Stage 2: The Denial or Pseudo-Adjustment Stage

- Attempts to go on with life “as usual.” Victims want to forget the assault.
- Victims do not usually seek help during this stage.
- You cannot force anyone out of the denial stage, nor should you try. This is an effective way of dealing with trauma temporarily. You might let the victim know that sooner or later the event will resurface. Communicate that this is a normal reaction and that there are resources ready to help whenever they need/want them.

Stage 3: Reactivation or Decompensation Stage (“Life falls apart”)

- This phase is usually triggered by some event that stirs up memories associated with the assault.
- In this stage, the real problems start to surface and victims are likely to seek help from friends, family and advocates. This can be confusing for family and friends who were under the impression that they were over the sexual assault.
- Victims may experience depression, suicidal ideation, feelings of guilt, shame, helplessness or confusion. They may experience academic and relationship difficulties, physical symptoms (headaches, gastric problems), nightmares, flashbacks and changes in eating and sleeping patterns.

Stage 4: The Anger Stage

- When the victim begins to acknowledge the fact that they had no control over what happened and they let go of some of their self-blame, they may begin to experience intense feelings of fear, anger and rage. The victim may be angry at everyone except the perpetrator because he is the “least safe target” for the victim’s anger.
- This stage also usually involves a grieving process: victims may begin to identify their personal losses and start to face the pain around those issues.

Stage 5: The Integration Stage

- The assault and the events surrounding it are viewed as significant life experiences integrated among other experiences. The event becomes part of the past and is gradually acknowledged as an event that continues to impact who the survivor is.

Remember that rape and sexual assault happen in all communities. Male survivors, survivors of color, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender survivors all experience similar reactions to those described above. However, they are also likely struggling with the additional burdens of stereotypes, racism, homophobia and other oppressions, often leaving them feeling even more isolated, confused, ashamed, frightened, and less likely to seek support.