

Handout on Rape Related PTSD

Rape-trauma syndrome (RTS) is a form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that is often experienced by survivors of rape and attempted rape. Not all survivors will experience RTS in the same way. Rather, this handout outlines possible reactions.

Stage 1: Acute Disorganization (days to weeks; three months common)

A. Immediate Reactions

1. Shock “Did it really happen?” “Why me?”
2. One of two coping styles is usually used
 - a. Controlled — Talks about assault in a flat voice, shows no emotion, numb
 - b. Expressed — Visibly upset, angry, fearful, anxious

B. Physical Reactions

1. Shock — (Unable to concentrate, blood pressure change, rapid pulse)
2. Sleeping or eating changes
3. Symptoms in the area of the body that was attacked
4. Loss of sex drive, other sex disturbances
5. Fatigue

C. Emotional Reactions

1. Fear (of retaliation, of meeting the attacker, of being alone, of opinions of others, of dying, of further injury)
2. Helplessness, loss of control
3. Repression, denial
4. Minimizing the incident (“He didn’t really hurt me.”)
5. Shame, self-blame, guilt, humiliation, embarrassment, degradation
6. Unwilling to talk about all or part of the incident
7. Anger, revenge, retaliation
8. Can’t cope with own rage and hostility
9. Irritation
10. Mood swings, over-reactive
11. Overprotective
12. Depression
13. Lowered self-esteem
14. Anxiety
15. Can’t concentrate
16. Can’t care for self, perform on job/in school, impacts interpersonal relationships

Stage 2: Denial Phase (one to three months)

A. Avoids Discussion and Thoughts of the Rape

1. Does not express own anger
2. Attempts to forget the whole thing
3. Puts the rape “in the past”
4. Stops thinking of the assault every day

Stage 3: Long-Term Reorganization (six to 12 Months)

- A. Physical Changes
 - 1. Vaginal problems
 - 2. Menstrual changes
 - 3. Headaches, stomach cramps
 - 4. Eating/sleeping disturbances
 - 5. Easily startled

- B. Psychological Changes
 - 1. Nightmares about the rape
 - 2. Flashbacks
 - 3. Fear of crowds, being alone, sleeping, similar locations to rape scene
 - 4. Lowered self-esteem

- C. Social Changes
 - 1. Trades freedom for security
 - 2. Changes daily routine
 - 3. Stays home more
 - 4. Drops out of school/work
 - 5. Changes in frequency of time spent with family
 - 6. Moves, changes jobs, phone number
 - 7. Lack or loss of support from significant others

- D. Sexual Changes
 - 1. Fear of sex
 - 2. Lack of sexual desire or may greatly increase frequency of having sex

Stage 4: Integration/Recovery (after Reorganization)

- A. Resolution
 - 1. Feels safe and in control
 - 2. Can trust people again
 - 3. No longer fearful
 - 4. Blames the rapist
 - 5. Pursues legal action
 - 6. Believes self to be normal
 - 7. Expresses and resolves anger
 - 8. Assault becomes integrated into personal history
 - 9. Compassion and advocacy for survivors

Note: Time frames listed throughout the handout are approximate and assume the survivor discusses her emotions soon after the assault, and receives appropriate support. Without support, several years or decades may pass without progression; regression to a previous stage can be triggered by situational events.