

Rape Trauma Syndrome

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Overview

What is rape trauma syndrome?

Rape trauma syndrome is the emotional, physical and behavioral response to rape and other forms of sexual assault. It's a type of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) specific to nonconsensual sexual acts.

Everyone's response to trauma is different. You might feel angry, confused or betrayed. You might try to deny what happened and push your thoughts and feelings away. You might experience unexpected outbursts of emotion while doing ordinary tasks like folding laundry or brushing your teeth.

Experiencing trauma impacts your physical and mental health. What you feel may or may not relate to what others experience. But the feelings you feel are real. What happened to you is real. And it wasn't your fault. Healthcare providers are available to help you after rape or sexual assault.

What is rape?

Rape is a form of sexual assault where you're forced to engage in sexual acts (vaginal, anal or oral) against your will or without giving consent. Often, someone uses physical force against you to commit rape. However, rape also occurs when someone uses threats of violence, emotional force or manipulation to engage in sex.

All rape is wrong and illegal. You're never to blame for someone else's actions.

How common is rape?

More than 433,000 Americans older than 12 experience rape or sexual assault each year. Sexual assaults affect all ages and sexes:

- 1 in 6 females will experience an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime.
- 1 in 33 males will experience an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime.
- Approximately 60,000 children experience sexual abuse every year.

How many people experience rape trauma syndrome?

As many cases of rape or sexual assault go unreported or victims aren't diagnosed by a healthcare provider, the exact frequency of rape trauma syndrome is unknown. As a

type of post-traumatic stress disorder, an estimated 94% of women experience symptoms of PTSD two weeks following sexual trauma.

Symptoms and Causes

What are the stages of rape trauma syndrome?

There are three stages or phases of rape trauma syndrome:

- **Acute or immediate phase**: This phase happens when you're experiencing trauma and shortly after as you're trying to understand what's happening. This stage can feel like you're in a mental and physical fog. People in this stage often feel overcome with emotion, unable to see what's next or gather the strength to complete their daily routine. Anxiety, mood swings and confusion are common symptoms.
- **The underground phase**: This phase occurs when you try to move on from your trauma to get back to your life. People in this stage may try to block out the memory, refuse to acknowledge it happened or downplay its severity. This phase can last for months to years.
- **Reorganization or resolution phase**: This phase happens when you recognize your trauma and take steps to adapt. You move from a victim to a survivor during this stage. You may need to face your trauma and confront triggers, which can be extremely overwhelming and stressful. But you learn how to manage this trauma and cope.

Each stage comes with its own symptoms and can vary from person to person. Your progress likely isn't linear through each phase — you can even repeat phases. Remember, there isn't a certain way you should feel or react to trauma. Researchers named and classified these phases after observing lots of people's similar experiences.

What are the symptoms of rape trauma syndrome?

Symptoms of rape trauma syndrome may include:

- Anxiety.
- Confusion or disorientation.
- Depression.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Flashbacks.
- Mood swings.
- Nightmares and difficulty sleeping.

You might experience these symptoms and/or others at any stage (this isn't an exhaustive list). These symptoms can affect your ability to function in your day-to-day life. Not everyone experiences the same symptoms.

It's also common to feel physically unwell after a traumatic experience including:

- Chronic pain.
- Dizziness or fainting.
- Gastrointestinal issues.
- Headaches.
- Loss of appetite.
- Muscle stiffness.
- Sexual dysfunction.

What does rape trauma syndrome feel like?

When you're processing trauma, you'll likely experience several strong emotions like:

- Anger.
- Degradation.
- Disbelief.
- Fear.
- Guilt.
- Hopelessness.
- Humiliation.
- Sadness.
- Shame.
- Shock.
- Worthlessness.

These feelings can be overwhelming. Emotions can trigger (happen suddenly) without notice. These feelings don't go away overnight and you might experience them for the rest of your life. Some of these feelings may make it hard to seek treatment at first. Even though your feelings are real, don't let them prevent you from seeking help or medical care.

From the outside, it may be difficult for friends and loved ones to understand what you're going through. They might only see your emotions and react to them. Your interpersonal relationships may strain after trauma. This can happen because you may not want to relive a traumatic experience to explain it to someone. Your experiences are your own and you shouldn't share personal information with others unless you feel comfortable.

When working with a healthcare provider or mental health professional, you'll approach past experiences when you're ready, but don't wait to seek care.

What causes rape trauma syndrome?

Experiencing sexual trauma can cause rape trauma syndrome. This includes any sexual act or behavior that you don't consent to, like:

- Attempted rape.
- Rape (penetration).
- Forced sexual contact or touching.
- Forced acts of sex.

Sexual trauma can happen to anyone, by anyone. The act could be done by someone you know well, like a spouse or friend, or someone you don't know. Sex isn't a right. It's not something you owe to someone else.

Remember, what happened to you isn't your fault. You're not to blame. Rape and other types of sexual assault are a crime.

What are the complications of rape trauma syndrome?

The effects of rape and sexual assault can have a significant impact on your emotional well-being and ability to feel safe. Many people who experience rape trauma syndrome also experience:

- Substance use disorder.
- Suicidal ideation (suicidal thoughts).
- Self-harm.
- Suicide.

If you're having thoughts about self-harm or suicide, call or text 988 (U.S.). This is the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. A trained and experienced counselor is available to talk to you 24/7. You don't need to be in a crisis to contact 988.

Diagnosis and Tests

How is rape trauma syndrome diagnosed?

If you experienced sexual assault, you probably have symptoms of rape trauma syndrome without knowing your symptoms fit a medical condition.

A healthcare provider, especially one who specializes in mental health conditions, like a psychologist or psychiatrist, will diagnose rape trauma syndrome. They'll learn more about your symptoms and experiences with trauma before making a diagnosis.

Your provider may offer different assessment tools to identify the symptoms you experience, how severe they are and track how they change over time. These assessments include a variety of questions about your emotional well-being.

It's important that you're honest and open with your providers. Your providers won't judge you or blame you. Their intention is to do no harm. It might feel like the only way to "move on" is to tuck these difficult topics away and pretend they didn't happen. But

you deserve the space and time to heal safely with support from your providers. They'll help you process any of your feelings and experiences.

What should I do if I was raped or sexually assaulted?

First, take a deep breath. You're likely to feel a lot of emotions after a traumatic experience. If you're not already in a safe place, find one as quickly as possible. If you're unable to get somewhere safe, call 911 or your local emergency services number. You can also contact the National Sexual Assault Hotline (1.800.656.4673) at any time.

It's important to seek medical care if you've experienced a sexual assault. Go to the emergency room. At the hospital, a healthcare provider will:

- Check for and treat any physical injuries.
- Perform a physical exam, which includes examining your genitals and doing a pelvic exam (for women).
- Photograph and document your injuries.
- Collect samples of blood, saliva, vaginal and anal secretions, clothing fibers, hair from your head and genitals as well as scrapings from underneath your fingernails. Your provider may use a rape kit to store and collect this evidence.
- Conduct a blood test to check for infections.
- Check for STDs and review emergency contraception options.
- Take a urine sample to check for date-rape drugs.

Undergoing an exam after sexual assault can be extremely stressful and uncomfortable. You'll be asked a lot of questions, and you might not feel well enough or have a clear mind to respond fully. Physical touch may make you recoil. Your providers will talk to you through the exam and let you know exactly what they're doing and why. If you need time or space, be open with your provider. They want to make sure you're safe.

Management and Treatment

How is rape trauma syndrome treated?

Treatment for rape trauma syndrome is a combination of the following:

- Psychotherapy, cognitive behavioral therapy or psychodynamic therapy.
- Medications to treat symptoms like anxiety and depression.

Talking to a healthcare provider and mental health professional is a way for you to get the care your body and mind need and the support you deserve. You might find it hard to open and trust other people. Your care team will provide a safe space so you can work through your daily challenges and experiences without judgment, at the speed you choose.

Treatment for rape trauma syndrome doesn't cure it. Instead, it helps you process your experiences. Your life will be different after experiencing trauma, but it doesn't need to define who you are or control your life. Help is available.

Outlook / Prognosis

How long does rape trauma syndrome last?

There isn't a specific timeframe that controls how long rape trauma syndrome lasts. Symptoms might come and go. It may take time to feel well enough to ask a healthcare provider or mental health professional for help. You might reach a point of stability, and then, symptoms can trigger again. You'll heal at your own pace because you're in control of your body and mind.

Prevention

How can I protect myself against rape and sexual assault?

Rape can happen to anyone at any time. There's no sure way to prevent rape or sexual assault.

Living With

When should I see a healthcare provider?

See a healthcare provider and talk to a mental health professional if you've experienced sexual assault. Be honest and open with what you're experiencing. They'll make sure you're safe and have all the resources you need to feel well.

A note from Cleveland Clinic

Rape and sexual assault can leave permanent physical and emotional scars, but they don't define who you are as a person. You might feel fear, guilt or anger immediately after the experience. Or you could push your feelings aside to get back to your routine.

Even if you feel OK, you should still talk to a healthcare provider and a mental health professional. Healing takes time and doesn't always happen in an order that makes sense. But it's worth it, and so are you. You may participate in individual or group therapy to help you heal after trauma.

Reach out to the National Sexual Assault Hotline (1.800.656.4673) at any time if you need immediate help or feel like you need someone to talk to right away.