

# Coping with Rape and Sexual Assault

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1. Introduction
  2. Facts about Rape and Sexual Assault
  3. What To Do after a Rape or Assault
  4. Useful Contacts
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## 1. Introduction

Being raped or sexually assaulted is a very distressing experience with effects that can be long lasting.

Because the majority of rapes are reported to be against women this leaflet is written from the woman's perspective. However it is acknowledged that male rape exists and the University Counselling Service will offer support to all casualties of rape. Therefore throughout this page advice and suggestions are relevant to either gender.

Women who have suffered sexual attacks describe feeling:

- frightened
- guilty
- powerless
- angry
- ashamed
- depressed
- numb
- lacking self-confidence

Sometimes women have difficulty with eating or sleeping. They may lack concentration and find this makes academic work difficult. Every woman reacts differently and it is not unusual for feelings to change from day to day. In particular there can be a long gap between the assault and the emotional reaction. It can be difficult to talk about the attack to friends or family yet it is important to have understanding and support. It can be helpful to talk to a trained person in confidence - one of the University Counsellors, or a local Rape Crisis Centre - listed in contacts (section 4).

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## 2. Facts about Rape and Sexual Assault

The perpetrator of the rape may well be known to the woman.

There is a myth that sexual violence is only carried out by strangers. In fact the majority of offences are committed by a man known to the woman. He may be a friend, a partner, a workmate, a relative, a neighbour or a person in authority.

Rape is not always accompanied by other physical violence.

When a woman is sexually assaulted she may react in various ways. Some women scream or fight back; many become quiet - too shocked to speak or cry out. Paralysed by fear, they may be unable to resist. If violence is threatened some may take the decision to struggle less in the hope of getting away with the least amount of physical harm. Consequently, they may or may not have torn clothes or signs of struggle afterwards. Verbal intimidation, threats or emotional blackmail may be used by the assailant. Therefore a woman does not need to show physical injuries to prove she has been assaulted.

Rape and sexual assault, whether by a stranger or a friend, is never the woman's fault.

Rape and sexual assault is always more about the use of force or power to humiliate, control, hurt or violate a woman than about sexual desire or passion. There is evidence to suggest that a very large number of attacks are premeditated. The appearance of the woman in terms of status, age, cultural background, occupation, previous relationships is irrelevant; any woman can suffer sexual assault or rape.

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### **3. What to do After a Rape or Assault**

Women will react differently after sexual assault or rape. It is important to trust and validate your feelings and do what you need to do in order to recover. This may entail telling a friend, going to a place where you feel safe or having a bath or shower or crying.

In order to cope with the trauma of the event many women will just try to carry on as normal and not tell anyone for a long time. However, often distress can surface a considerable time after the event. No matter how much later, a woman can always seek help from counsellors, GPs etc. Do not feel you have to cope on your own simply because you did not report the incident soon after it happened.

#### **Health Issues**

Many women who have been raped or sexually assaulted are concerned about their health. Hospitals and GPs must see you on a confidential basis and not report the assault to the police unless you request this.

You may decide to be tested for pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. If you prefer not to use your GP there are clinics which offer free and confidential advice. The Genito-Urinary Clinic, is situated at the Royal Hallamshire Hospital - listed in contacts. Here testing is carried out for sexually transmitted disease and HIV antibodies.

Women may have bruising and other injuries that need immediate attention by visiting a Casualty Department at a local hospital. Local to RHUL are St Peter's Hospital in Chertsey and Ashford Hospital - listed in contacts.

## **Reporting to the Police**

Sexual violence is a criminal offence and you can, if you wish your perpetrator to be prosecuted, report the crime to the police. It is your choice. You can do this later if you wish but the reason for reporting a sexual assault immediately is so that forensic evidence can be taken. Evidence will be collected by means of a medical examination by a police surgeon - who will be a GP employed part-time by the police.

If the attack was physically violent the police forensic team may also wish to visit the scene of the crime to collect more evidence.

When you go to the police station you can take someone with you, such as a friend or professional worker. You will be interviewed by an officer who has had special training (this would usually be a woman and you can specifically request this if you wish).

Today the police are trained to use tact and sensitivity. No one has the right to ask you to disclose any personal details about your previous relationships and sexual life.

If you have reported a sexual offence you have the right to withdraw the complaint at any time. The police may require clothing to be left for forensic examination. The police station can provide you with other clothing, but it is a good idea to take a change of clothes with you.

If you are very traumatised after the assault you may arrange another time for a statement to be made. If English is not your first language the police can arrange for an interpreter to be present. The police officer will explain police procedures to you and give you advice and information of the next stages including the court process.

The University of Sheffield, in line with other Universities, has a duty to report any crime of which it learns to the police. This is particularly important when other students may be at risk. Therefore a member of the College staff cannot keep confidential information regarding rape and sexual assault unless they are working within a formal counselling or medical setting. The College will support any student wishing to make a report to the local police station, with whom College has a good working relationship.

The Counselling Service (and the Health Centre) are not subject to this duty and so do offer confidential support within their normal code of practice.

#### **4. Useful Contacts**

Casualty - Northern General Hospital, 243 4343

Genito-Urinary Clinic, Royal Hallamshire Hospital - 276 6928

Sheffield Rape and Sexual Abuse Counselling Service - 244 7936

Survivors (male rape) - 279 6333 (Helpline Mon 6-8pm, answerphone other times).

Family Planning Clinic - Central Clinic 271 6816, other clinics - 271 6716

Sheffield Pregnancy Crisis Service - 279 6734

LIFE (Pregnancy Care) - 275 8107

National Aids Helpline - 0800 567 123

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