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About Rape Crisis

Women and girls of all ages and backgrounds experience rape and sexual assault, and it can happen at any time in their lives. Because this is usually perpetrated by men they know, women and girls often don't report due to fear, shame or the feeling that they will be blamed or not believed.

Studies have shown that one in two young women will experience some kind of unwanted sexual contact before they reach the age of eighteen¹. This can range from flashing to rape and all of these experiences can have a lasting effect on the woman. As women feel more able to speak out about their experiences, the demand for justice for women increases, and over the past twenty years there have been a number of changes in legislation that reflect the seriousness of this crime.

'Violence against women is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation. And it is perhaps the most pervasive. It knows no boundaries of geography, culture or wealth. As long as it continues, we cannot claim to be making real progress towards equality, development and peace.'

Kofi Annan

General Secretary, United Nations, 1999

But it's not just young women who have experiences of rape or sexual assault. Babies, children, young women and women into their seventies, eighties and nineties experience rape. Our figures at rape crisis show that only about 40% of women will ever make a report to the police.

Since 1976 the Rape Crisis Centre has been providing free and confidential support to women and girls who have been raped, sexually assaulted or sexually abused, no matter when this has happened in their lives. We support women whether or not they have reported the incident to the police.

Attitudes about rape and sexual assault that blame women and excuse the rapist can serve to silence women. Many women choose not to report the rape to the police for a wide range of reasons and that must remain the woman's choice.

We are based in Glasgow but also offer services to women in Renfrewshire, East Renfrewshire, East Dunbartonshire, West Dunbartonshire and we work in partnership with service providers in Inverclyde.

Our services include telephone support, face to face support, letter and email support, groupwork and links to complimentary therapies. We have also developed a range of information booklets and leaflets covering issues such as Child Sexual Abuse, Self Harming, Ritual Abuse, Stalking and have a separate booklet on Legal Issues which gives information on procedures around going to court. All of our publications are free to women survivors of sexual violence, their partners, family members or friends.

This booklet is for family members, partners or friends who may be supporting women survivors of adult rape and sexual assault and gives information on the most common feelings expressed by women. We also have a library of publications that women/family members etc can borrow from us, free of charge.

Rape Crisis Centre
April 2007

What is rape or sexual assault?

At April 2007, the legal definition of rape is penetration of a vagina by a penis, by however small an amount. This has to have been ‘by force’ and ‘against her will’ – meaning that at the time the woman had not consented. The criminal intent of the offence includes ‘the intention to have intercourse with the woman without her consent or recklessness as to the matter of the consent’.² Because of this definition, oral rape, anal rape or penetration with other objects will only be defined as a sexual assault. In Scotland, rape can only be committed by men upon women – it is a crime of violence specifically against women.

The definition that states that a rape must be ‘by force’ implies that a violent struggle must have taken place and for many women this is not the case. The threat of violence or death is often used by rapists to force women to comply. In fact, the law only requires that threats of physical violence were made.

Our definition of rape and sexual assault (sexual violence) is wider than this legal definition. Sexual violence is any unwanted sexual behaviour that causes humiliation, pain, fear or intimidation and this can include unwanted kissing and touching, forcing someone to watch sexual acts, pornography, sexual harassment, or forcing a woman into prostitution.

Common feelings experienced by survivors and some coping strategies

A common myth around rape is that all women will react hysterically or tearfully after the attack. The truth is that women react in a range of ways and describe a wide range of emotions in the immediate aftermath of the attack, or in the hours/days that follow.

Shock

After rape, many women are in shock. This feeling may be so strong that a woman experiences disbelief. She may refuse to acknowledge what has happened, shut it out or have no immediate reaction at all.

Or the shock may be displayed by crying uncontrollably, laughing or talking continuously or with displays of anger.

Denial

Denial or minimising the effect of the rape is a commonly used coping mechanism. A woman may try to convince those around her, and more importantly herself, that everything is fine, and that she's alright physically and emotionally. This response may last a long time until a 'trigger' sets off an emotional or physical reaction to the attack.

There is no 'correct' response.

Physical Reactions

Apart from physical injuries that women sometimes receive during the rape, women may also have other physical reactions in the days following the attack. Sleeplessness is common, with women often being fearful of sleep in case the attacker returns. Nightmares are also common, sometimes revisiting the attack over and over again.

Women may also suffer loss of appetite, stomach pains or sickness, and may experience nausea any time they think of the attack.

A common response is that women will feel the need to wash over and over again, to 'wash away' the feeling or the smell of the rapist. For some women this can be harmful and it is important to ensure that only safe products are used for washing, **no household substances should ever be used.**

Emotional Reactions

Many women who have been supported by the Rape Crisis Centre have spoken about feeling that they would be severely injured or murdered while they were being raped and indeed rapists may use weapons or the threat of murder to control the women while the attack is taking place.

The extreme trauma that is associated with rape and the fear of death can lead to post traumatic stress disorder.

Blame

This is the most common reaction as we always look for a reason, an explanation for what has happened and why. And we try to apportion blame... and often this falls on the woman.

‘She should never have asked him into the flat.’

An invitation into someone’s flat is not an invitation for sex. We have the right to invite whom we choose into our home and to be confident that our safety will not be compromised. No man has the right to presume that he can force a woman to have sex under any circumstances.

‘Everybody was really drunk. It couldn’t really be rape if he was too drunk to know if she was saying yes or no.’

Alcohol is often blamed for rape or sexual assault. **Alcohol is not responsible.** The responsibility lies solely with the perpetrator. Alcohol is very often used to excuse men’s behaviour and to blame women for their ‘irresponsibility’.

‘She doesn’t have a mark on her – she should have fought him off.’

When we are in situations of extreme danger, our bodies will react in a way that it thinks will best protect us. For some of us we will run, scream, fight – but for some, our bodies will freeze and be unable to move. This is a natural reaction wherein our brain decides the most efficient way to ensure our survival. We are not in control of this and it may be that this response will mean that we are less physically injured during the attack.

'She's very calm – someone who's just been raped would be crying their eyes out'

Would they? How do you know? We often expect people to behave in a certain way and are then surprised when they don't. Many women who have experienced rape or sexual assault tell us that they believed that they would be murdered, perhaps because the rapist had told them this or because he had a weapon and threatened to use it. It's important we understand that all women respond differently to the trauma of rape, with calm, with hysteria, with denial, with tears, and that each of these responses is a perfectly normal response to a very abnormal experience.

Anger

Firstly, it's OK for a woman to be angry with this person, or people who have hurt and abused her. Anger is a very normal reaction to hurt and pain but we're raised to believe that it is a bad thing and should be suppressed.

People are scared of anger, and we can be scared of it when it's coming from someone we are close to who perhaps does not normally display anger openly. If the woman you are supporting is voicing or displaying anger against the violence that has been perpetrated against her she should be allowed to do this and be reassured that you understand the anger is not aimed at you. If women are unable to release the anger they feel they often turn it in on themselves, blame themselves, hurt themselves, or just swallow it and try to block it all out which can result in longer term physical and/or psychological problems.

Nightmares

It's also common for women survivors of rape to suffer sleep disturbance or nightmares. These may be an exact replay of the event or may be an abstract series of events that are hard to remember but are still upsetting.

Nightmares may be triggered by a date, a smell or a familiar place or person and can make her afraid to go to sleep. Talking about the nightmares and the feelings they bring up may help. It may also help for you, if possible, to reassure the woman that she can wake you up for support if the nightmares do not go away.

Flashbacks

Flashbacks are a natural reaction to the trauma of rape or sexual assault but they can be very frightening and women often describe feelings of fear, confusion, panic, being out of control, terror. This is because they can happen when least expected and can be triggered by a noise, a smell or by seeing something that reminds the woman of the attack.

Women experiencing flashbacks often believe they are going crazy and may be afraid to speak about their feelings, but it's a natural part of the healing process.

Sometimes women will try to avoid all the things that trigger flashbacks but the down side of this is that it can really limit what they do and where they go. But there are other ways to help alleviate the fear and panic that flashbacks cause. If you are with the woman when she experiences a flashback you can:

- Reassure her that it's a flashback and that, scary as it is, she is safe.
- Help her breathe. When she is having a flashback she will not be breathing normally and this can cause dizziness, shaking, sweating, feeling faint. When she starts breathing normally the feelings of panic will lessen.
- Give her time to recover. It will take a while for her to feel herself again so give her a bit of extra time to get back to her normal activities.
- Reassure her that you are there to support her. She may need to talk about her feelings when the flashback is over.
- Remind her that you are there, encourage her to stamp her feet or clap her hands to help ground her.
- Remind her that this is part of her healing process and she is a survivor.

Panic Attacks

Panic attacks are sudden, unexpected anxiety attacks that can include sweating, tightening of the chest, shortness of breath, numbness, tingling of the hands and feet or needing to go to the toilet, dryness of the mouth or feeling nervous and 'jumpy'.

When a woman first experiences a panic attack she may be confused, not sure of what is happening and frightened that she can't control it. But panic attacks are another way the body has of coping with the trauma of rape or sexual assault. If a body feels threatened, it responds with the 'fight or flight' response and a panic attack is an exaggerated form of this.

Although panic attacks are a body's way of coping with the memories of the attack, there are some substances that can make it worse.

These include:

- Alcohol, nicotine and caffeine and some drugs can make panic attacks worse. Also some prescription drugs can bring the attack on more severely. Withdrawal from some sedatives can have the same effect.
- Blood sugar levels being too high – this can be caused by junk food, overeating or too much fasting.
- Hyperventilating caused by stress can make a panic attack worse.

If a woman you are supporting has had a panic attack, wait until the attack is over and she is calm, then you may be able to talk to her about:

- Whether she can recognize when an attack is going to happen
- Her feelings – and if she wants to talk to you about them
- Breathing exercises she can do or ways she may be able to ground herself.

Self Harming/Self Injury

There are a number of myths around self injury – such as, 'it's a suicide attempt that failed' or 'it's attention seeking'. This is not the case. Self injury is a way of coping with emotional pain, it's a release when the pain becomes too much to bear.

Survivors who self injure are not insane or dangerous; they are just trying to cope with the pain in their lives without hurting anyone else. It's important to recognise that women who are self injuring need to have space to talk about their experiences, need to be believed and most importantly, need to be free of judgment.

There are a number of good publications about self harm that can be obtained from book shops or on loan from the Rape Crisis Centre library.

There are also a number of ways of helping a woman stay as safe as possible when she is self injuring:

- To use clean blades if she is cutting and never share with anyone else.
- To have a well stocked first aid box within easy reach.
- To ensure if wounds become infected they are treated by a doctor as soon as possible.
- If she has cut too deeply or cut a vein or artery by mistake, get help immediately.
- To ensure that burns are dressed as quickly as possible. If it's a large burn, get medical help immediately. Put the burn in cold water as soon as possible.

Drugs and Alcohol

Alcohol or prescription or non-prescription drugs are often used by women survivors as a way of coping with memories of sexual assault. Often drugs can be prescribed to assist the woman to cope with how she is feeling or to improve sleeping. Whilst this can be a very effective short term support it should be remembered that it is easy to become dependent and reliant on medication which numbs the pain. If you are supporting a woman who is using any drug excessively to deal with her memories, it may be useful to encourage her to have an open discussion with her GP about it. This will allow her, and her doctor to determine what the best treatment plan is for her.

Sometimes illicit drug use and/or excessive drinking is a problem for women who have abuse issues. Again, these mask the pain and stop women remembering and experiencing their feelings.

If heavy drinking or drug use is a factor it may be better that this is addressed by a woman prior to her entering into any kind of therapy or counselling. Whilst feeling the emotions and experiencing and acknowledging the pain she is in is extremely difficult, it is a vital part of the healing process.

Eating Disorders

Many studies have shown that a high number of women who have experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse, have eating disorders. For some women, control over their eating is a way of coping and expressing their emotions. Some women who are bulimic or compulsive eaters reveal that bingeing is their way of stuffing down the emotions they feel. Food becomes their only source of comfort and it can help to numb their feelings.

Some women who have experienced sexual violence believe that if they are too thin or too obese, it will make them unattractive. Some believe that by not eating they can just fade away and die. Others have expressed a need to be in control in the areas of food. Purging is a way for some to release their emotions. If they believe they cannot tell anyone about the rape/sexual assault and express the emotions they are experiencing, purging may be the only way they know how to get those feelings out. Many women feel relief and calm after purging.

Your feelings

If the woman you are supporting is a close friend, family member or partner, you may feel helpless as she tries to cope with what has happened to her, but you are not. You can play an active part in her healing by giving her the space to deal with what has happened, in her own time.

The Rape Crisis Centre can offer support to you by telephone, letter or email, or in person.

If your daughter has been raped, sexually assaulted or sexually abused

Finding out that your daughter has been raped or sexually assaulted may be one of the most distressing events in your life. You may experience some of the same emotions as your daughter: you may be in shock after finding out about the rape, you may experience anger and rage, you may try to deny that it happened or be confused – and this may last for many days or even weeks.

You may feel that you want justice for what has happened to your daughter but if she does not want to contact the police or tell anyone about the rape, you should respect her decision.

On the other hand, you may not want to speak about the rape; you may feel that she should put it out of her mind and try to 'get over it'. This may be the case if her attacker was known to her or to the rest of your family. But if she feels that she wants to report the assault to the police she should be supported through this process.

Support is available for you at this time, but it's important that the time is right for you. You may be under pressure from others who feel you 'need' some support or counselling. If and when the time is right for you to seek support, you can call the Rape Crisis Centre and we will offer you either telephone support or a face-to-face appointment. This part of our service is available to men, and all our services are free and confidential.

If your daughter is going to court, we can also offer support through this process and information on what it will entail.

If your partner has been raped

If your partner has survived a recent rape she may still be in one of the immediate phases – minimising the effect of the attack, shock, anger.

She may be telling you everything is fine, not to worry, it's not a problem. This is her way of coping and it would not be helpful to her to be forced to talk, though you may feel that you need to talk about it. It may be more helpful if you just reassure her that you are there if she needs to talk to anyone and find someone you trust to help support you through this time.

You might be angry with yourself; you might feel that you should have been there to protect her, that you should be able to 'fix' it. We all need to find an explanation, to make sense of why something has happened, to find someone or something to blame. It's important at this time for you to accept that you are not to blame for this act, and that your partner is not to blame. Talking through some of these issues may help. You can access support for yourself at the Rape Crisis Centre, even if your partner is not getting support from us.

It's also important to remember that there is not a timeframe within which your partner will be 'cured'. Often people will say 'It's been six months; she should have gotten over it by now.' We all respond, heal or deal with trauma at different rates and in different ways.

She may begin to feel that the world is not a safe place and may not want to go out on her own, or be at home on her own. Helping her to feel safe may help – speaking to your local community safety police officer about home safety, or finding information about personal safety from organisations such as 'Wise Women'³ may help to boost her confidence.

Your partner may have trouble with trust and intimacy or the sexual side of your relationship may be difficult for her. It can be difficult to know when to resume sexual relations, but it's important to be open and honest about how you feeling and to ask how your partner feels. She will need to go at her own pace and rebuild the trust you have previously shared.

Be aware that she might experience flashbacks during sex; there may be a movement or word that will trigger this. It may be useful to agree beforehand that if she says stop you will do so immediately and move

away from her, to give her time to gain control and feel safe again. This may help her to be reassured that she can trust again.

This may be a long process and it may be helpful to do things you used to do together before the assault – go to the cinema or go out for a meal and talk about a book you've read, the children, the film. Also give yourself permission to talk about it to each other when you need to.

If your partner was raped before you met her, you may think that it has nothing to do with you or that she should be over it by now. However, if she was raped by someone she knew and trusted this may have an effect on the development of your relationship.

As the relationship develops you may want to progress to the next phase but your partner may be wary, and afraid that you will betray her. If she was raped by an ex-partner this may compound her concerns about trusting someone new.

Some ways you can help...

- Listen to her if she wants to talk. You don't need to know every detail of the rape – and she may not want to tell you, but you can be there to talk about how she feels right now

but

- Do not force her to speak if she is not ready.
- Be consistent. If you are offering your support then be available.
- Make sure you have some support for yourself. You don't have to carry it all on your own.
- You may feel angry or rage against the rapist, but do not use that anger against your partner. Try to channel it through exercise or sports.
- Respect her privacy. If she doesn't want her story shared with anyone else, she has a right to confidentiality. You might want her to keep the rape a secret for your own reasons but may only serve to reinforce the shame and humiliation she already feels.

Going to court

If your friend, family member or partner's case gets to court you can get some advice from Rape Crisis about the process. You and the woman you are supporting will also have the opportunity to discuss this with Witness Services and perhaps pay a visit to the court beforehand.

When the woman you are supporting is giving her evidence you should be prepared for a direct assault on her character. The defence will use any means they can to discredit the woman as a witness – for instance if the rape happened at a party and the woman had been out late/drinking/wearing revealing clothing, this will almost certainly be brought up by the defence.

If forensic evidence shows that a sexual act has taken place (this will not necessarily be the case for a sexual assault) the perpetrator will have no option but to argue that this took place with the consent of the woman. Even if she has cuts or bruising consistent with a physical assault, he may allege that she wanted 'rough sex'.

Going to court can be a very traumatic experience but your partner, friend or family member can get support through the process from a Rape Crisis support worker and you can also access support from us at this time.

We also have an information booklet that explains the court process and this may be of help to you both.

Care for the Carer

If you are supporting a woman who is surviving rape or sexual assault it can be easy to forget that you need to look after yourself.

Don't forget to:

- Be gentle with yourself
- Remember that you are not a magician – you are human and you are a carer
- Find a quiet spot and use it when you need to
- Give support and encouragement but also learn to accept it yourself
- We are all likely to feel helpless at times, but caring and being there is important in itself
- Try to focus on the good things that have occurred during the day
- Give as much time to yourself as you do to others – you are important too
- Laugh and enjoy yourself

Recommended Reading

Rape Recovery Handbook

by Aphrodite Matsakis

New Harbinger Publishers

ISBN-10 1572243376

Survivor's Guide to Recovery from Rape and Sexual Abuse

by Robert A Kelly, Fay Maxted and Elizabeth Campbell

Rugby RoSAP

ISBN-10 0955103703

Hurting and Healing: How to Overcome the Trauma of Sexual Abuse and Rape

by Gloria Wade

Vega Books

ISBN-10 1843330954

Trust After Trauma: A Guide to Relationships for Survivors and those who Love Them

by Aphrodite Matsakis

New Harbinger Publishers

ISBN: 1572241012

Recovering From Rape

by Linda A Ledray

Holt (Henry) & Co

ISBN-10 0805029281

Partners in Healing

by Barbara Friedman

Resource Publications Inc

ISBN-10 0893902268

Lucky

by Alice Sebold

Picador

ISBN -10 033041836x

Telling: A Memoir of Rape and Recovery

by Patricia Weaver Francisco

Harper Collins Publishers

ISBN-10 0060930764

References

1. *'Teenage Tolerance: Exploring Young People's Experience and Responses to Violence and Abuse'*. Kelly, L Regan L (2000)
2. *Lord Justice General Hope in Jamieson v HM Advocate 1994*
3. *'Wise Women' is a Glasgow based service that is unique to the UK and proactively addresses women's fears & experiences of crime and violence through the provision of personal safety & confidence building courses. They can be contacted on 0141 550 7557.*

Have you had a good service from us?

We try at all times to ensure that the service we give to women is of the highest quality and to do this we have developed a clear and easy to use Complaints Policy.

If you are unhappy about any aspect of the service we have delivered, please do not hesitate to contact the Centre Manager to discuss this.

If you would like to make a formal complaint to the Rape Crisis Centre, please contact us for a copy of our Complaints Procedure.

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