

Impacts of Rape & Sexual Assault



People have very individual responses to the trauma of rape and sexual assault and the long-term effects also vary widely. Because of this, it is important to respect each person's way of coping. These impacts may occur many years after a rape or assault as well as in the immediate aftermath.

A person's behaviour in the aftermath of an assault can range from frozen to panicked, numb to angry, laughter to tears. Some people can appear calm and rational. Others may:

- feel hyper alert or vigilant,
- be unable to eat or sleep,
- blame themselves for the attack,
- have flashbacks to the attack,
- experience confusion or helplessness,
- feel a sense of shame or violation or degradation,
- feel a compulsion to wash,
- obsess on details of the rape or assault,
- become suicidal or self-harming.

In the longer-term, trauma may lead to effects across several categories. These can be:

- **physical**, such as self-neglect, eating disorders, digestive problems, sleep disruption, and stress-related ill health.
- **emotional**, such as over-reactions to any stimulus, a need to tightly control their environment, mood swings, anxiety, depression, substance abuse or suicidal thinking.
- **cognitive**, such as finding it difficult to handle everyday tasks, or having impaired memory or concentration that leads to them losing a job or leaving education.

They may lose the capacity to trust, feel too ashamed or self-blaming to sustain a relationship, or feel unable to be in social situations.

Ways to support survivors

A person may disclose or refer to a rape or sexual assault to a friend or family member, or during an interaction with frontline staff. The following points may be useful to keep in mind when supporting them:

- This **may be the first time** the person has disclosed or spoken about a rape or assault to anyone. It is thus very important to be sensitive and caring and to offer non-judgemental support
- Whenever appropriate, people should be referred to **Rape Crisis Centre support**, either by direct contact to one of the 16 Centres around the country (see a list at www.drcc.ie/support/find-local-supports/) or to the National 24-hour Freephone Helpline at 1800 77 8888 for signposting, further information and support.

- **Sexual assault, including rape, is a crime:** those who experience it should know that they have the right to report it to the Gardaí - more information at bit.ly/reportSV.
- If the assault is recent, they may need to be referred to a **Sexual Assault Treatment Unit (SATU)**. There are six SATUs around Ireland which provide medical care and support to victims of sexual assault including rape, as well as collecting forensic evidence for possible later court action – for more information see bit.ly/HSEsatu.
- It is important to **help the person make their own decisions**, rather decide for them, and that they feel heard and validated.
- If a person reports the rape or assault to the Gardaí, they will arrange to bring the person to SATU. However, the person can directly avail of SATU’s comprehensive medical services without going through the Gardaí or making a formal report. It must be their own decision to report the crime.
- You should **protect the person’s privacy** as far as possible.
- There may be no need for you as a support person to know all the details of an assault or rape, just enough to ensure the person is safe and their immediate health needs are met.
- As a supporter, you can **determine the person’s immediate needs**, whether it is for medical attention, food, sleep, or just company, and help make that happen.
- It is important that you yourself remain grounded and calm, handling practical issues, so that the person in crisis can feel supported and contained.
- As described above, survivors may have problems with everyday activities like eating, sleeping and concentrating on work or study. This is because they are traumatised and may express this in various ways. Don’t expect them to be ‘back to normal’ quickly – try to understand.
- It’s important that you as a supporter **focus on the feelings and reactions of the affected person**, rather than your own feelings, when supporting them. You should however note your own reactions and seek support for yourself when appropriate.

DRCC Training Programmes for frontline staff

Dublin Rape Crisis Centre offers training for staff in frontline roles designed to help them better recognise & support survivors of sexual violence, understand the causes & effects of trauma, and develop techniques for self-care & resilience. This includes tailored courses for specific roles & client needs. Courses are run either with groups in their workplace or in the DRCC offices in Dublin City Centre.

We recommend that professionals and staff dealing with clients who need extra support arising from trauma attend appropriate training, so that they can react in the best way to support their clients & themselves.

More information: www.drcc.ie | 01-661 4911 | info@rcc.ie