

A Guide for Loved Ones of Sexual Assault Victims



Victims of sexual assault have so much to process and cope with after the violence ends that they can struggle for years to heal and approach life in a confident, positive way. The trauma of sexual assault takes a great deal of time to overcome because of the mental, physical, and spiritual [effects](#) on the victim. Sadly, sexual assault is closely linked to [suicide](#): approximately 33% of rape victims have suicidal thoughts and 13% of rape victims attempt suicide. Loved ones of sexual assault victims need to be aware of the warning signs of psychological and emotional effects and substance abuse that can lead to suicide and of the best practices for supporting victims so they can help them heal, cope, and live in healthy ways.

Psychological and Emotional Effects of Sexual Assault and Rape

Sexual violence has [psychological and emotional](#) effects on survivors. These effects often include depression, flashbacks, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

- Depression – A mood disorder that occurs when feelings of sadness and hopelessness continue for extended periods of time, [depression](#) affects a person's behavior and relationships with others. While it is normal for sexual assault survivors to feel sad and hopeless, it is not normal for those feelings to persist for long periods of time. Depression is a serious disorder, and if you suspect that your loved one is suffering from depression, you should encourage her to get help from a professional.

Signs and symptoms of depression include prolonged sadness and unexplained crying episodes, significant weight changes or changes in appetite, loss of energy, persistent fatigue, drastic changes in sleep patterns, loss of interest in activities, social withdrawal, feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness, and unexplained physical aches and pains. To help the sexual assault survivor, you could look into getting a [service dog](#) that is specially trained to help with anxiety and depression.

- Flashbacks – Flashbacks occur when memories of a previous trauma feel as though they are taking place in the present. For survivors, it can feel like the sexual violence is happening again and again, and they feel as though their assailant is physically present. While flashbacks are a typical response to trauma, there are [steps](#) a survivor can take to manage them:
 - Remind the sexual assault survivor that the feeling is not real and it will pass.
 - Remind the survivor she is strong and survived the first time and will survive the flashbacks.
 - Help the survivor breathe in and out slowly and deliberately. She should concentrate on taking deep breaths.
 - Help the survivor establish where she really is by using her senses to bring her back to reality. Help her use her senses to come back to the present.
 - Move the survivor to a place that makes her feel secure and comfortable.

- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – Post-traumatic stress disorder ([PTSD](#)) can occur in anyone as a result of a traumatic event. Survivors of sexual violence experience unusual stress, fear, anxiety, and nervousness, but when they become extreme and make it difficult to function day to day, the survivor most likely is suffering from PTSD. One study found that nearly 33% of rape victims develop PTSD at some point. Symptoms of PTSD include repeated thoughts of the assault, memories, nightmares, avoiding situations relating to the assault, negative changes in thoughts and feelings, irritability, difficulty sleeping and concentrating, and jumpiness.

Substance Abuse and Sexual Assault

[Substance abuse](#) is a concern for victims of sexual assault. Women often report using substances to control symptoms that arise as a result of the assault. In fact, sexual assault victims turn to drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism: one study found that rape victims are three to four times more likely to use marijuana, six times more likely to use cocaine, and ten times more likely to use other drugs as non-victims.

There are [warning signs](#) of drug abuse that loved ones should be aware of if they are concerned that a sexual assault victim is abusing drugs or alcohol. Be vigilant if she is irritable, has sudden mood swings, is forgetful or clumsy, skips work or other regular activities, lies or avoids eye contact, loses interest in personal appearance or activities she once loved, has a major appetite changes, has extreme or sudden change in friends, suddenly asks to borrow money, or becomes angry and abusive.

Emotional and psychological effects of sexual assault and substance abuse are manageable for a sexual assault victim, especially if she has loving and supportive family and friends. By being aware of the warning signs and knowing how to offer support to a sexual assault victim, you can help her avoid suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

Steve Johnson co-created PublicHealthLibrary.org as part of a school project. He and a fellow pre-med student enjoyed working on the site so much that they decided to keep it going. Their goal is to make PublicHealthLibrary.org one of the go-to sources for health and medical information on the web.

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