Recovering from Sexual Assault

Sexual assault can be terrifying and traumatic. After an assault, it’s not uncommon to feel fearful, confused, guilty, ashamed, or isolated. You do not have to deal with these feelings alone. There are many concerned people at Cabrillo and in the community to help you recover and heal. Whether you were assaulted recently or at some time in the past, you may find yourself experiencing:

- Difficulty relating with those close to you
- Changes in your normal sleeping pattern
- Changes in your appetite
- Headaches, stomachaches or other physical symptoms of stress
- Feelings that may be uncomfortable and/or frightening, including feeling generally “down” or angry at yourself or others (including the rapist)
- Mood swings, including crying more easily
- Difficulty with sexuality
- Difficulty in handling your classes
- Difficulty in concentrating

These and other responses can occur after an assault and may be signals that it is time to reach out for help. There are many resources available to you to help you through this time.

Immediately After an Assault: A sexual assault, whether by a stranger or an acquaintance, can be very frightening and disorienting. Survivors of sexual assault are often confused about what they should do next, and many question whether what happened was really rape at all, especially if the assailant was someone they knew or with whom they’ve had a relationship. Survivors of sexual assault are also often frightened to call or tell someone else because they worry that they will not be believed or because they are ashamed or feel responsible. If you have been sexually assaulted or raped it is important to remember that it is not your fault and that you have the right to receive assistance from people who will believe you and help you in your recovery.

If you have recently been assaulted it is important to seek medical care. Frequently, victims of an assault are so upset and disoriented that they are not aware of other physical injuries. Our local hospitals provide evidence collection, and long-term counseling to help you recover and are only a few miles from campus. Evidence collection is helpful if you decide to talk to the police about the assault. Although
the police will be called when you go to the hospital, you are not required to talk to them unless you want to. If you choose not to talk to the police then, the evidence that is collected will be kept on file if you decide later to press charges against the assailant. If you would like to have a counselor accompany you during the medical exam and during the police interview, Defensa de Mujeres-Women’s Crisis Support will provide one for you. The counselor’s sole purpose is to help you cope with the hospital and the police, to answer any questions you might have, to help you decide whom you want to talk to about the assault and to help you deal with the aftermath of the sexual assault. You also have the right to have a friend or family member accompany you during the exam or police interview. If you are a Cabrillo student, staff or faculty member and are not ready or do not want to go to the hospital, please come in to the Student Health Center and speak with a staff member.

The First Few Days or Weeks

In the first few days or weeks after an assault, many survivors want to put it behind them, to forget it, and “get on with their lives.” This may be strengthened by feelings of guilt, shame or responsibility which tell the survivor that if only they had dressed or acted differently, walked a different route, not walked alone, not gone up to his room or apartment, yelled louder, fought harder...there are many ways which survivors of sexual assault blame themselves. Unfortunately, these self-blaming attitudes are often reinforced by victim-blaming attitudes in society, or the misunderstanding of friends or family. Survivors may then try to deny that the assault has had any effect on them, or deny that it happened at all by not talking to people around them. Denial is part of the recovery process and very common, but ultimately you must cope with your reactions to the assault and the feelings you have about it.

This is also a time when survivors of sexual assault are likely to feel depressed, scared, or angry. You may find yourself being more concerned about being attacked again, and focus on locking doors and not being alone. You may also feel depressed and have difficulty with school, work, and other day-to-day activities. These reactions are all very normal and typical of survivors of sexual assault. Sexual assault counseling can be very helpful at this point in providing you with a supportive person to talk to, who understands what you’ve been through. It may be difficult to talk to family and friends, or they may not be supportive; having someone separate from your normal social network, who will keep everything confidential, can make it easier to
talk about the assault. If you were physically injured during the assault, this time may be one of physical recovery as well. This is a time to take it easy and allow yourself space in which to recover. Remember, rape is not your fault, and you deserve time to heal.

**Long-Term Recovery**

Survivors often fear that they will never be the same after a sexual assault. A goal of long-term recovery is to integrate the assault into your life so that it is not a driving force affecting your behaviors, feelings, thoughts, or relationships. Although the memory will always be unpleasant, and the assault itself was traumatic, it is possible to be less affected by it as time goes by. Most survivors take some time to recover, but almost all DO eventually recover and are able to move on with their lives, feeling happy, safe, and fulfilled once again. It is normal, however, to experience some depression following the assault, and many people find themselves getting upset or frightened when something reminds them of the assault (e.g., TV shows, movies, yelling or arguments, a sexual experience, even if it is consensual, seeing someone who looks like the perpetrator). Ongoing therapy, support groups, and help from friends and family can all assist you in dealing with these feelings. Some survivors also find it healing to get involved in programs such as the training to be an advocate at a sexual assault counseling program such as the Santa Cruz City Commission For the Prevention of Violence Against Women. Working to prevent rape and help other victims become survivors can be very healing and help with your own recovery. It is important to remember, however that there is no one right way to heal from a sexual assault and that different people recover in different ways.

**What can I do?**

If you have been raped or sexually assaulted, or if think you have been, but are not sure, it’s important to talk to someone. Counselors are available to Cabrillo students, staff and faculty at the Student Health Center and Student Psychological Services on campus, as well as at many non-campus resources. These resources can help you recover from the assault and can assist you in finding legal services and pressing charges if you choose to do so. If you don’t feel comfortable talking to someone face-to-face there are a number of anonymous hotlines available. Remember, these resources are not just available for women, or people of certain groups; no matter whom you are, you have the right to talk to someone.