

About Sexualized Violence: Information for Adult Survivors



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Table of Contents

About Sexualized Violence.....	1
What is Consent.....	2
If You Have Been Sexually Assaulted.....	4
For Recent Survivors: After a Sexual Assault.....	4
Getting Medical Help.....	4
At the Specialized Clinic or Hospital.....	5
How you may be feeling.....	8
What is Trauma?.....	9
What is a Trigger?.....	10
Deep Breathing.....	10
Abdominal Breathing Exercise.....	10
Grounding.....	11
Getting Support.....	12
Counselling.....	12
Call a Sexual Assault Centre.....	13
Approaches to Healing.....	13
Legal Issues.....	15
Reporting to the Police.....	15
Why People Do Not Report To Police.....	15
The Law.....	16
Consent and the Law.....	17
Drugs and Alcohol and Consent.....	17
Age of Protection (formerly known as Age of Consent).....	17
Financial Compensation.....	18
How You Can Help a Survivor of Sexual Assault.....	19

About Sexualized Violence

Sexualized violence is anything that disrespects your sexual being. It is an abuse of power and an act of control that is expressed in a sexualized way. Sexualized violence is never justifiable; it is always the responsibility of the person who committed the violence, and it is never the fault of the survivor.

Sexualized violence demeans, hurts and damages your sense of self. It can lead to a full range of emotional and physical effects, including shame, embarrassment, anger, rage, depression, isolation and traumatic stress.

Most people assume sexualized violence is only rape or sexual assault, but it includes many other forms of violence and encompasses all forms of unwanted sexual contact. Sexualized violence is an overarching term used to describe any violence – physical, verbal or psychological – carried out through sexualized means or by targeting sexuality and/or gender identity.

Sexualized violence includes:

- Rape
- Sexual assault
- Acquaintance sexual assault or date rape
- Drug facilitated sexual assault
- Manipulation and coercion
- Bribes, lies, threats, guilt trips, and head games
- Sexual harassment (including street harassment)
- Rumours and gossip
- Cyber violence
- Labelling
- Sexual exploitation of youth for money or survival needs
- Human Trafficking
- Child sexual abuse

Although sexualized violence can happen to anyone, it affects all women and Trans, Gender Non-Conforming and Two-Spirit individuals whether or not they have been victimized because of social expectations of gender. Fear of sexualized violence is a crucial factor in the development and behaviour of all women, girls, and Trans, Gender Non-Conforming and Two-Spirit people.

Sexualized violence is disproportionately committed against women, children, Trans, Gender Non-Conforming and Two-Spirit people because our dominant society has created, and maintains, power imbalances and socialization processes that devalue and victimize these groups of people. People (particularly women, Trans, Gender Non-Conforming and Two-Spirit people) who experience multiple or intersecting inequities (e.g. racism, classism, Transphobia, Transmisogyny, homophobia, ableism etc.) are often targeted to a greater extent for sexualized violence. This is because society devalues and dehumanizes people who do not fit into dominant norms (white, man-identified, middle class, heterosexual, abled, etc.).

Many people are taking action against sexualized violence.

We all have a right to sexuality without violence

More Information About the Different Forms of Sexualized Violence

Sexual assault is any form of unwanted sexual contact. Sexual assault can be committed by anyone including a partner, trusted friend, close relative, acquaintance, someone you just met or a complete stranger. There is no such thing as a “typical” sexual assault.

Even though sexual assault is a form of violence, it isn’t always overtly physically violent. Many sexual assaults happen because the person uses manipulation or coercion to “convince” their partner to say yes or go along with it. Head games, lies, guilt, threats and bribes are ways that a person may be forced to do something without being physically forced.

Drug facilitated sexual assault is when drugs or alcohol are used to lower a person’s inhibitions or make them unconscious (i.e. pass out). Alcohol is the most commonly used “date rape drug”. Just because someone voluntarily uses drugs or alcohol, does not mean they are asking to be sexually assaulted. Being sexual with someone when they are too intoxicated to give consent is sexual assault.

Sexual harassment is any unwanted sexualized comments or behaviours that cause humiliation, hurt or intimidation. Sexual harassment is about getting power or maintaining power. It is a form of discrimination that can escalate to sexual assault. It can be one incident or many over time. Examples of sexual harassment include: street harassment, “catcalling”, spreading rumours, gossip, “pic pressure”, and stalking. Sexual harassment is perpetuated through sexism, racism, homophobia, Transphobia, Transmisogyny, classism and ableism, etc. and can exist within institutional power hierarchies such as: employer/employee, supervisor/staff, professor/student. Individuals who are being sexually harassed may be intimidated into “going along with it” and not telling anyone, out of fear of repercussion or escalation.

If the sexual harassment includes touching or stroking, this becomes a sexual assault even if it is occurring at work.

Sexual exploitation is when a child, youth or adult is manipulated or forced to exchange sexual acts for money, food, shelter, other necessities, gifts or drugs.

Child sexual abuse is when a person in a position of trust or authority sexually assaults a child (18 years and under). It can be a one-time sexual assault or happen many times over years. Childhood sexual abuse can have a lasting impact on someone’s life. A survivor of childhood sexual abuse can seek support no matter the length of time after experiencing the abuse.

What is Consent

Consent is a mutual agreement, meaning people verbally*, emotionally, psychologically, and physically understand and agree to what will happen.

Consent is not continuous. Someone can choose to stop at any time, someone can change their mind, and just because someone said yes to one thing doesn’t mean they have consented to anything else. When a person wants to stop, they may not necessarily say “stop”. It is always the initiator’s responsibility to check. Examples of a person possibly resisting further engagement may be: pulling away, crying, turning their face away, or “freezing”, i.e. going numb or seeming to be “on automatic”.

It is the initiator's responsibility to check that the consent is still ongoing. Consent is a whole body experience – it is not just a verbal “yes” or “no” – it involves being present to your partner's physical and emotional cues.

Consent cannot happen if there is coercion (manipulation, threats, or head games). Consent cannot happen if someone is incapacitated in some way (i.e. heavily intoxicated due to alcohol or drugs, or feels scared or forced). Consent for sexual contact cannot be given in circumstances in which the initiator knows someone is unconscious or unaware or otherwise incapable of understanding or resisting the offense (e.g. if the person is asleep).

Consent should be enthusiastic. Everyone has the right to sexuality without violence and positive sexuality begins with enthusiastic consent. This means being as excited and into someone else's enjoyment as we are about our own. Consent and open communication are key to positive sexual experiences for everyone involved.

For more information about consent, please check out Project Respect at www.yesmeansyes.com/consent.

For more information about the laws around consent, please check out the section on laws in this booklet.

*For people who are not verbal consent can be asked and given through other means of communication, such signing or writing.



If You Have Been Sexually Assaulted

Remember, regardless of the circumstances, the sexual assault was not your fault. How you cope will vary according to the circumstances in your life prior to the sexual assault, your support system, the reactions of people you come in contact with after the sexual assault, and the nature of the sexual assault itself. Your emotional response will depend upon how you usually experience and express your feelings, and how you deal with shock, confusion, fear, and pain in other situations. Your reactions to the sexual assault may be similar to those associated with other major trauma, such as: a car accident; a serious illness; or the loss of someone close.

For example: you may need to cry, laugh, show fear or anger, or you may be very calm and controlled. There is no right or wrong way to respond, and no prescribed time period for recovery. Your way of dealing with this experience is the right way for you.

You may be physically exhausted and want to forget the sexual assault completely, but you might also have many questions on your mind:

- Should I tell anyone?
- How do I tell my family?
- Will the offender return?
- Should I call the police?
- Should I go to the hospital?
- How will I cope with everything?

In order to cope, many survivors try to “carry on as normal”, by trying to forget what happened and not telling anyone, and sometimes for a long time after the sexual assault has happened. Whatever your time-frame, you do not have to cope with this on your own.

It is always helpful to have support, comfort, and understanding. Your natural inclination may be to seek this from family and friends. However, sometimes they may have trouble helping you due to their own feelings and reactions about sexual assault or about what has happened to you. Sometimes they too, are in shock and may blame themselves (or even you) for what has happened. You may tell others about your experience only to find that you must cope with their feelings of anger and helplessness in addition to your own. Thus, you may not receive the help you so vitally hoped for and deserve. Remember, finding out about your options for support and services can be done confidentially with counsellors and Victim Support Workers at your nearest Sexual Assault Centre, your doctor, or at a walk-in clinic.

If you are in the Greater Victoria area, you can find out more about the services of the Victoria Sexual Assault Centre at www.vsac.ca or call our 24hr crisis and information line at 250-383-3232.

For Recent Survivors: After a Sexual Assault

After the sexual assault when you are probably feeling exhausted and stressed, and have a lot of questions running through your head and feel unsure of decisions to make. You may be asking yourself: Am I physically hurt? Do I need medical attention? Who do I tell? Who can support me? What about sexually transmitted infections? Or pregnancy? Do I call the police? Am I safe? It can help to talk through your options with your local sexual assault centre.

Getting Medical Help

SART = Sexual Assault Response Team

FNE = Forensic Nurse Examiner

After a sexual assault, you are strongly encouraged to receive some kind of medical attention, even if you don't seem to be injured. Deciding which medical service is best is an individual decision that can only be made by you. You are in control of the process.

In some areas, specialized teams are available to support you and provide a range of services. Sexual Assault Response Teams (SART) have specialized support or victim service workers, and specialized forensic nurse examiners (FNE) or medical practitioners (doctors or nurses) to: inform you of your options, provide support and medical treatment including treatment for injuries, tests for sexually transmitted infections, and for some survivors, treatment for possible pregnancy.

If you have been sexually assaulted in the last three days, you also have the option of having a forensic medical examination to gather evidence that may be used in a police investigation. In some provinces or areas, you may have the choice of having evidence collected and stored rather than released directly to police. This gives you time to make a decision that is right for you about talking to police. With your consent, this examination can be done at the same time as your general medical examination.

Please note: If you are considering reporting to police, it is helpful not to:

- shower, bathe, douche,
- change or destroy clothes, or
- straighten up the location where the sexual assault occurred
- 'Compare notes' with others who might have information that could help the police investigation.
- Post information about the sexual assault on social media

This could remove or destroy evidence used in a police investigation or blur your own recollection of what happened. **It's completely normal to do some of these things** and evidence may still be available if you choose to report.

If the sexual assault happened in the past and have any medical concerns, see your doctor or medical clinic if you have any medical concerns.

At the Specialized Clinic or Hospital

At the specialized clinic or hospital, you will be asked for personal information such as your name, address, birth date, and medical insurance number. If you don't have medical insurance, contact a sexual assault centre near you for options.

If you go to a hospital, emergency rooms can be busy and waiting rooms can be crowded. Sometimes it can feel that everyone in the waiting room is looking at you. It helps to have a support person with you at this time. Call your local sexual assault centre or a friend to support you while you wait.

Medical Exam

Any medical examination starts by making sure you are medically okay (i.e. whether there is anything urgent that needs to be treated), and taking a medical history or background of your general health. The forensic nurse examiner (or doctor) will then ask you for more detailed information about the sexual assault. This information helps direct them where to look for injuries and also captures some of what you have experienced.

You are in control of any medical examination. If you don't want a particular test or area of your body to be looked at or touched, let the FNE (or doctor) know. If at any time you do not understand a procedure or have questions, it is your right to ask for clarification.

You can stop the process or leave at any time.

The FNE (or doctor) may also take swabs, blood samples, or urine to test for the presence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Preventative treatment (antibiotics) of some STIs may be offered to you. Some infections can take several weeks or months to develop symptoms; therefore, follow-up testing is recommended at intervals up to six months. If you don't have a doctor or medical practitioner, ask your local sexual assault centre where to access health care. Check with your doctor or medical practitioner if any unusual discharge, odor, irritation, or itching occurs.

If there is a possibility of pregnancy, there are treatment options available with your consent. Emergency contraception (e.g. Plan B, the morning after pill) can be taken within a few days of the sexual assault to stop pregnancy. Your FNE (or doctor) may also recommend placement of an IUD (intra-uterine device), if relevant. Another option is to wait and have a pregnancy test a few weeks after the sexual assault. If you become pregnant, you can receive practical and emotional support from a birth control clinic, sexual health clinic or a public health clinic. Ask a sexual assault service near you or friends for recommendations for these services.

Medical-Legal (Forensic) Exam / Sexual Assault 'Kit'

If you consent to have a forensic exam, it can be quite long and detailed. The questions asked about the sexual assault are much more detailed than the medical exam. Some of the questions asked may seem weird, or you may not know the answer – the FNE (or doctor) is following a legal form and some questions won't fit with your situation. It's okay to ask why they are asking something and/or for terms to be explained.

The FNE (or doctor) will exam all areas of your body to check for bruises, cuts or scrapes. These will be measured and written down. With your consent, sometimes photos will be taken of injuries. The FNE (or doctor) will check all areas of your body for evidence including internal examination of the parts of the body involved in the sexual assault (e.g. genitals, mouth, or anus). They may also use an alternate light source with the lights turned out to check for evidence. Blood may be drawn for medical testing, drug testing or to get a sample of your DNA to be used when the evidence is tested.

Evidence Stored or Given to Police

In some provinces or areas, you may have the choice of having evidence collected and stored securely rather than releasing it directly to police. If you're not sure you want to talk to police, this gives you time to make a decision that is the right one for you without losing any options.

The sexual assault kit can only be released with your consent.

If you are reporting to police, the evidence can be handed directly to the police with your consent.

You may never see the results from the sexual assault kit although any medical tests results will be forwarded to your doctor or medical practitioner. If you choose to have the evidence stored by the FNE (or doctor), the kit will never be analyzed. If you release the kit to police, some evidence will be sent to police labs for testing, but the results may be held for court proceedings and not given to you.

If you have any questions about these options, please connect with your local sexual assault centre.

How you may be feeling

In order to understand your own responses to the sexual assault, it may be helpful to know what other individuals have reported experiencing. Everyone reacts in different ways to different events.

There is no right or wrong way to react

You might feel:		
Fear	Self-blame	Depression
Anger	Embarrassment	Confusion
Denial	Sadness	Numbness
Alone	Grief	A sense of loss
You may experience some, none, or all of these emotions.		

It is common for sexual assault to affect your lifestyle, disrupt your routine, and affect your relationships, school and career.

You might experience:	
Change in sleep patterns	Change in alcohol or drug use
Feeling like a zombie	Mood swings
Trouble eating	Can't concentrate
Can't trust	Flashbacks
Isolating yourself	Nightmares
Don't want to be touched	Fear that everyone knows
Challenges in focusing on tasks	Fatigue, or trouble sleeping
Headaches and muscle tension	Feeling unclean, feeling ashamed
Constantly thinking about the sexual assault, and events before and after	Wanting to disconnect and distance from day-to-day reality
Heightened sense of vigilance, feeling "paranoid"	Difficulty trusting your own instincts
Fear of being alone	Memories of past stressful events coming up; flashbacks
A shaken sense of self-confidence	Challenges in sexual intimacy

Please remember: any and all of the above reactions are common, normal and absolutely understandable responses to a traumatic and unusual event.

Your sense of control and safety in the world may have been seriously altered as a result of someone else's actions. Re-building a sense of trust and safety in the world, and in your relationships, may be one of the more difficult challenges you will face in recovering from the sexual assault. A sexual assault center can offer counselling, even if you just want to "check in" with someone about how you are doing. Regardless of whether you want to report the sexual assault or not, support from a sexual assault centre or a local counsellor is always an option for you.

You may also experience what is referred to as “secondary victimization.” This can happen after a sexual assault when people around you (family, friends, employers, etc.) treat you disrespectfully, or in a way that makes you feel unsafe. We recommend that you contact a sexual assault centre, where a counsellor can provide emotional support and/or a victim services worker can help you understand your legal rights and options.

Try to stay aware of your needs and look after them. Take time out for yourself, and be patient and gentle with yourself. Try to go to places you enjoy, visit supportive friends, or do whatever feels right to take care of you. Sometimes it can increase your sense of safety to have supportive friends stay with you for a while, change your locks, or to move (if that is an option for you).

What is Trauma?

Trauma is defined as “a deeply distressing or disturbing experience.” Experiencing sexualized violence is a trauma. The brain’s response to trauma is complex and can cause responses in your body and mind that you may not understand or be completely in control of.

We have a natural capacity to deal with novel or potentially threatening situations. This capacity is built into specific brain circuits and is influenced by our experiences starting very early on in life. Each person’s internal and external resources are different, so trauma can affect each person differently.

Your brain responds to trauma with the following process:

- The brain takes in information through the senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell)
- Sensory information from the outside world goes directly to a part of the brain called the thalamus which is located in the limbic system where the hippocampus sorts the information and the amygdala adds an emotional flavour. This experience is then ‘filed’ in the neo-cortex (our conscious part of the brain).
- If the limbic system perceives something as a threat to survival (i.e. a trauma like a sexual assault) the amygdala will generate an alarm and a survival reflex of either fight or flight.
- If fight or flight is not viable the reptilian brain will generate the freeze response with an immobility reflex. (Freeze is one of the most common responses to experiencing a sexual assault. It is what your brain chooses at a subconscious level is the best way to survive the present situation.)
- Because of the abnormality of a threatening experience (like a sexual assault), the neo-cortex (our conscious part of the brain) does not have a ‘file’ to hold the distressing information, so some or all of the experience may be held in the limbic system (a subconscious part of our brain). In the future, when the limbic system recognizes similar sensory information coming in from the outside world it will activate or “trigger” the same response that ensured survival in the past.

Notice that all of this can occur at a reflexive, unconscious level. The neo-cortex is not involved. Later the neo-cortex may apply judgements like “why didn’t you run?” It’s important to be gentle with yourself and recognize that the way you reacted at the time of the sexual assault may have come from that ‘survival’ part of your brain, and your memory of the sexual assault may not be stored in a way that is easy to access.

What is a Trigger?

An automatic reaction is a response that happens in the present but is really about the past. Something in the present acts as a reminder or a “**trigger**” of a past event. When triggered, the past unresolved event(s) can come up in many ways – you might experience emotions, body sensations, images, or other memories. Flashbacks are automatic reactions. Old memories, emotions, etc. sometimes come up as an attempt to heal or work through the experience.

Even though they are automatic, there are ways to deal with them. Here are a couple of strategies you can use if you are feeling triggered.

Deep Breathing

(Adapted from The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook, 2005. E. Bourne)

When we are tense we breathe shallowly and rapidly. When relaxed we breathe more fully and more deeply, from the abdomen. By using deep abdominal breathing we stimulate the relaxation response of our bodies, promoting calmness.

Additionally, attending to our breath helps us connect our minds to our bodies. The following exercises can help you change your breathing pattern, especially if practiced regularly. Just 3 minutes of deep breathing practice will usually induce a state of relaxation.

Practice for 3-5 minutes every day for at least two weeks. If possible, find a regular time each day to do this so that your breathing exercise becomes a habit. With practice you can learn in a short period of time to “damp down” the physiological reactions underlying anxiety and panic.

Once you feel you’ve gained some mastery apply it when you feel stressed, anxious, or when you experience the onset of panic symptoms. By extending your practice of either breathing exercise to a month or longer; you will begin to retrain yourself to breathe from your abdomen. The more you can shift the center of your breathing from your chest to your abdomen, the more consistently you will feel relaxed on an ongoing basis.

Abdominal Breathing Exercise

1. Note the level of tension you’re feeling. Place one hand on your abdomen right beneath your rib cage.
2. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose into the “bottom” of your lungs – in other words, send the air as low down as you can. If you’re breathing from your abdomen, your hand should actually rise. Your chest should move only slightly while your abdomen expands.
3. When you’ve taken in a full breath, pause for a moment, then exhale slowly through your nose or mouth depending on your preference. Be sure to exhale fully. As you exhale, allow your whole body to just let go. (You might visualize your arms and legs going loose and limp like a rag doll.)
4. Do ten slow, full, abdominal breaths. Try to keep your breathing smooth and regular, without gulping in a big breath or letting your breath out all at once. It will help to slow down your breathing if you very slowly count to four on the inhale (1-2-3-4) and then very slowly count to four on the exhale. Remember to pause briefly at the end of each inhalation. Count from ten down to one, counting backwards one number with each exhalation.

5. The process should go like this:

Slow inhale...Pause...Slow exhale...Count “ten”

Slow inhale...Pause...Slow exhale...Count “nine”

Slow inhale...Pause...Slow exhale...Count “eight”

and so on down to one.

If you start to feel light-headed while practicing abdominal breathing, stop for 15-20 seconds, then start again.

6. Extend the exercise if you wish by doing two or three sets of abdominal breaths, remembering to count backwards from ten to one for each set.

7. Five full minutes of abdominal breathing will have a pronounced effect in reducing anxiety or early symptoms of panic. Some people prefer to count from one to ten instead. Feel free to do this if it suits you.

Grounding

Grounding strategies help you to be more grounded. If you have overwhelming emotional pain (e.g. anger, sadness, cravings, self-harm impulses), grounding puts healthy distance between you and these feelings. If you are feeling numb and shut down grounding can help you connect to your body and emotions safely. Grounding strategies focus on the external here and now, rather than the past or future.

Guidelines

- Use grounding when you are faced with a trigger, emotional reaction or situation that feels unmanageable.
- Grounding can be done any time, any place, anywhere, without other's awareness.
- Focus on the present, not the past or future.
- Keep your eyes open, scan the room, and turn the light on to stay in touch with the present.
- Stay neutral – avoid judgments of ‘good’ and ‘bad’. For example, instead of “The walls are blue; I don't like blue because it reminds me of depression”, simply use descriptive words like, “The walls are blue, the walls are smooth, etc.”
- Note that grounding is not the same as relaxation, distancing or distracting. Grounding is focused on active strategies to remain in the here and now or help you to connect with your body in a safe way.
- Remember that pain is a feeling; it is not who you are.

Ways of Grounding

Following are two ways of grounding– mental and physical. ‘Mental’ means focusing your mind; ‘physical’ means focusing your senses (touch, hearing, sight, smell, taste). You may find that one type works better for you, or both may be helpful.

Mental Grounding

- Describe your environment in detail, using all your senses – “The walls are white; there are five pink chairs; there is a wooden bookshelf against the wall...” Describe objects, sounds, textures, colors, smells, shapes, numbers, and temperature.
- Count vertical lines in your environment – door jambs, books on a shelf, windows.
- Count groups in the room (number of books, or number of red items etc.).
- Describe in great detail, an everyday activity you are currently doing. For example, describe a meal you are cooking (“I am peeling the potatoes and cutting them into quarters; I am filling the pot with water and turning on the stove etc.”).
- Use self-talk: Say a safety statement. “My name is _____; I am safe right now. Say kind statements to yourself – for example, “You are a good person going through a hard time. You’ll get through this.” Say a coping statement: “I can handle this,” “This feeling will pass.”

Physical Grounding

- Run cool or warm water over your hands. Place an ice pack on your temple.
- Touch various objects around you: a pen, keys, your clothes, a table. Notice textures, colours, materials, weight, temperature. Compare objects: Is one colder? Lighter?
- Carry a grounding object in your pocket (a small rock, clay, a ring, a piece of cloth or yarn, a photograph) that you can touch or look at whenever you feel triggered.
- Dig your heels into the floor – literally ‘grounding’ them! Notice the tension centered in your heels as you do this.
- Notice your body: The weight of your body in the chair; wiggling your toes; the feel of your back against the chair. Stretch. Lower your shoulders, roll your head. Grab tightly onto your chair as hard as you can. Clench and release your fists.
- Eat something, describing the flavours in detail (not just eating mindlessly).
- Focus on your breathing, noticing each inhale and exhale.

The Victoria Sexual Assault Centre created an audio CD that guides listeners to develop skills for healing, such as deep breathing, guided visualization, containment, progressive muscle relaxation and grounding. Check it out here: <https://vsac.ca/resources-for-healing/>

Getting Support

Counselling

Expressions such as “It’s over and done with” and “leave the past behind” point out social expectations that we should put aside our feelings and quickly “get over” painful and traumatic experiences. Because of this pressure, you may attempt to silence yourself and ignore your own physical and emotional responses.

Being able to talk to someone safe (like a counsellor) about the impacts of being sexually assaulted is extremely helpful. Talking about your feelings and asking questions (rather than simply trying to forget, or “be okay” with what happened) will help on many levels – emotionally and physically. For example, working through feelings now will decrease the likelihood of stressful memories coming

back at a future time. Accessing counselling is also a way of acknowledging and asserting your self-worth. You deserve the support of a skilled counsellor who can help you take the time required to heal from this experience.

Call a Sexual Assault Centre

Contact the sexual assault centre closest to you to get the specialized help, information and support you deserve. Some sexual assault centres offer a crisis line which you can call at any time. In other areas, regional or provincial crisis lines are available to listen, give information, and offer emotional support. Some sexual assault centres have specialized teams to respond to recent sexual assaults.

Specialized counselling and victim services are available in most areas.

Services offered at sexual assault centres and who they serve vary from centre to centre. If it is important to you to find out more information about your local sexual assault centre before you call, search online for their website and see if it feels like a good fit for you. You can also email your local sexual assault centre to ask any questions you have before you make the decision to call.



Approaches to Healing

Healing from the effects of sexual trauma is possible. There are many paths to healing; any action that leads you toward greater health, expanded self-awareness, and increased self-respect is beneficial in beginning or in sustaining the healing process. There are many ways to heal from sexualized violence. Healing is not a tidy, step-by-step process. There is no right way. **Only you can decide what works best for you.** Seeking the help of a specially trained counsellor is one of many ways to heal from the effects of sexual assault or childhood sexual abuse. Some other ways you may want to explore include (but are not limited to):

- Learning and practicing good self-care (exercising, eating well, getting enough sleep, and doing things that are fun or pleasurable)
- Reading books about sexual abuse and healing
- Listening to audio or video tapes that are designed to increase your self-esteem or belief in your own potential or worth
- Being creative. Painting and sculpting can be ways of working through and expressing emotions and of gaining insight and self-awareness
- Seeking the support of caring friends or family members
- Doing the self-awareness and skill development exercises in any of the various work books and

self-help publications written for survivors

- Writing in a journal (this can be a great outlet for emotions and can increase self-awareness and understanding)
- Learning or developing life skills in areas that may have been impacted (i.e., communication, assertiveness, effective parenting)
- Attending short workshops on topics that interest you (Boundaries, Understanding Feelings)
- Give yourself permission to do nothing- there may be times when the healthiest thing you can do is nothing- put the healing on hold and lay low. Time outs can be just as legitimate as active steps
- Developing and following a regular spiritual practice (Yoga, meditation, daily prayer, whatever fits your beliefs)
- In times of emotional crisis or up
- set, ask for help. Call your local sexual assault centre or crisis and information line.

You are encouraged to do what works best for you. Remember you are in charge of your own healing process.

Legal Issues

Reporting to the Police

It's your decision whether or not you report the sexual assault to police. Sometimes policies or procedures in different organizations or institutions require that they contact police (for example... some secondary school districts or international schools will contact police). Contact a sexual assault centre or victim service agency near you to explore your options and help you make a report if you want to talk to police.

In Canada, there is no time-limit on when you can report sexual assault to police. If you decide not to report immediately, you may want to write down what you remember about the sexual assault in as much detail as possible. This written account will help you if you decide to make a report at some time in the future.

Making a police report does not always mean that you have to go to court. Most times you can make the report and decide at that time to go no further. In some cases, this choice may not be available to you due to the circumstances of the crime.

In some areas (like British Columbia) you have the option of making a report to police through anonymous or third-party report. The report is not investigated but it does inform the police that a sexual assault has occurred and details that may be relevant to another investigation. This type of report can be a difficult process for someone as they need to provide detailed information about their experience and there is generally no further outcome from the report (i.e. everything seems to stop). If you have questions about this option, please connect with a victim services worker.

Why People Do Not Report To Police

In Canada, only about 6% to 10% of people report a sexual assault to police. In most cases, the person who sexually assaulted the survivor is someone they know, which for some people can make the decision of whether or not to report more difficult and complex.

For some survivors, reporting sexualized violence can make a difference in their lives. However, many survivors of sexual assault do not report for a wide variety of reasons. Common reasons why survivors choose not to report include (but are not limited to):

- Some feel that by ignoring it, it will go away.
- Some believe it won't be taken seriously.
- Some fear they will not be believed.
- Some fear that they will be blamed for what happened.
- Some don't trust police or the courts.
- Some do not feel safe talking to the police.
- Some don't want to invest time or energy into the police or court systems.
- Some fear retaliation.
- Some may be embarrassed and don't want to talk about it.
- Some feel others will say they are overreacting.
- Some don't want to believe it happened.
- Some think others will question how it happened or what the person did to allow it to happen.

Healing is possible regardless of whether or not you decide to engage with the criminal legal system. It is your process, your choice. Whenever or if ever you are ready, you can connect with your local sexual assault centre or specialized victim services to receive support during this process.

The Law

Canadian sexual assault laws, like physical assault laws, are defined according to the degree of personal injury or threat to the survivor. They acknowledge the sense of personal violation experienced by the survivor, regardless of the nature of specific sexual acts. The most commonly used laws include Sexual Assault Criminal Code of Canada (CCC) 271, Sexual Assault with a Weapon CCC 272 and occasionally Aggravated Sexual Assault CCC 273.

A working definition of sexual assault in Canada is when someone forces any form of sexualized activity on someone else without that person's explicit consent. This ranges from unwanted sexual touch (kissing, pinching, stroking) to unconsented anal, oral or vaginal intercourse.

If the police investigate your report, they will turn their reports over to the Crown Attorney (i.e. a lawyer who represents Canada at the trial). The Crown Attorney is not your lawyer; however, you are considered a key witness for the Crown in this process. The Crown Attorney will schedule meetings to inform you of courtroom procedure and the questions you may be asked. Information, knowledge and support about the court process can help you navigate the process in the best way possible for you. The police and/or your local sexual assault centre can provide you with a Victim Services Worker, who will accompany you to meetings, to the trial, and who will help prepare you for your role as witness.

Depending on what happened, the offender may be charged with several crimes. For instance, if you were forced into a car and taken to someone's residence where you were sexually assaulted, the attacker could be charged with both kidnapping and sexual assault.

The legal process can be lengthy, confusing and frustrating for some survivors. Some individuals find this process validating, while others find their lives are "on hold" during the long waiting period which occurs from the time of the sexual assault until the trial is over.

Remember: counsellors at a sexual assault centre are available to support you, and victim services workers are available to answer your questions, regardless of whether you choose to report or not. A counsellor or victim services worker can also support you through all possible outcomes of reporting and the court process.

We want to remind you that regardless of what happens with the criminal justice system, for example, if there is a not guilty verdict or acquittal, it does not mean the accused is innocent or that the sexual assault did not occur, it only means there was not proof beyond reasonable doubt to convict.

Consent and the Law

For more general information about consent, please see the consent section earlier in this booklet.

Drugs and Alcohol and Consent

Sometimes a person is too intoxicated to truly be able to give consent. When someone is under the influence of drugs or alcohol, their ability to consent is compromised. Some survivors have experience drug-facilitated sexual assault (DFSA) where the sexual assault occurred while they were incapacitated from drugs or alcohol. Some of these cases involve someone else spiking or putting something in their drink, but the vast majority of DFSA involves intoxication from alcohol.

Age of Protection (formerly known as Age of Consent)

If a sexual assault has occurred, the age of consent doesn't matter.

Children under 12 are never considered able to consent to sexual activity.

For youth under 18, consent to sexual activity is not valid if the person is in a position of trust or authority over them.

Children 12 or older, but under the age of 16, are unable to consent to sexual acts unless it is a specific situation with their peers. The Criminal Code provides "close in age" or "peer group" exceptions.

For example, a 14 or 15 year old can consent to sexual activity with a partner as long as the partner is less than five years older and there is no relationship of trust, authority or dependency or any other exploitation of the young person. This means that if the partner is 5 years or more older than the 14 or 15 year old, any sexual activity will be considered a criminal offence. There is a narrow exception for couples who were married before 2015, and one of the spouses was under the age of 16 at the time of the marriage.

There is also a "close in age" exception for 12 and 13 year olds: a 12 or 13 year old can consent to sexual activity with another young person who is less than two years older and with whom there is no relationship of trust, authority or dependency, or other exploitation of the young person.

Remember: If you are under 16 and have engaged in sexual activity with an adult, you have not broken the law, but the adult has.

For more information on consent and the law, see also:
<http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/other-autre/clp/faq.html>

Financial Compensation

Whether or not the offender is charged and prosecuted in the criminal justice system, you may have an opportunity for financial compensation. In most provinces and territories, you can apply through the Workers' Compensation Board for Criminal Injuries Compensation or Crime Victim Assistance, for physical, emotional and financial injuries caused by the sexual assault. Most jurisdictions require a police report of the crime to be made but some allow applications without a police report. Many jurisdictions cover medical costs, lost or destroyed possessions, lost wages and counselling.

In British Columbia, applications are made through the Crime Victim Assistance Program (CVAP). You can apply on-line, but we recommend you connect with a victim services worker who can answer your questions about the application before you apply.

In British Columbia, there is also the ability to apply for restitution through the court. If the offender is found or pleads guilty, the judge may order the offender to pay some or all of the restitution requested by you. This does not prevent you from applying for Crime Victim Assistance or pursuing a civil lawsuit.

How You Can Help a Survivor of Sexual Assault

It can be tremendously inspiring to witness someone's healing process close at hand. At the same time, hearing a disclosure of sexual assault from someone you love can be a painful, challenging and a lengthy process of coming to terms with the knowledge. You may feel confused about some of their behaviours as well as your own. You may feel guilty, angry or inadequate that you can't change what has happened or you may experience shock or even denial. These are all common and normal reactions. The survivor may withdraw, or alternately try to be the caretaker for you with concern about the pain you may be experiencing. Here are some suggestions that may help you through the process.

- **Listen to feelings.** Avoid suggesting how they should feel, such as “you should feel angry”, or “you should be feeling better by now”. Encourage them to express the wide range of feelings they may be experiencing. At the same time, allow them to decide for themselves when and how they will do this. Expect their feelings will not necessarily be consistent with your own but it is right for them.
- **Believe the story.** A common fear for survivors of sexualized violence is they will not be believed. They may even have difficulty believing the sexual assault happened. Believe what they tell you – by denying, distrusting, or minimizing their experience, you will only strengthen their fears and push them back into silence. They need a calm, accepting, encouraging response that allows them to express themselves as they choose and are able to. Do not press for details and do not focus on sexual details.
- **Share your own feelings appropriately.** It's okay to share to your feelings of anger, sadness, and grief with them. In fact it may be helpful for them to hear that you feel outrage or pain about the sexual assault. On the other hand, it's very important that your feelings are not so strong or out of control that they feel they have to take care of you. They may feel guilty about upsetting you and may stop expressing their own feelings in order to protect you. Your feelings are important too, but it may not be appropriate to let your feelings overshadow theirs. Recognize your feelings as separate. Be aware that angry and retaliatory behaviour can hurt them by making them feel anxious, out of control, and powerless. If this starts to happen, you may want to seek support elsewhere particularly if you have a history of sexualized violence yourself.
- **The sexual assault is the offender's fault – not the survivor's.** Reassure them that whatever they did or did not do was the right thing to do at the time to survive the sexual assault. Help to reverse feelings of guilt, self-blame, and denial by always placing the responsibility for the sexual assault on the offender. It is always the responsibility of the person who chose to commit this crime. Remind them of this if they start to blame themselves. No matter what the circumstances, they were not to blame. Letting a survivor know that it is not their fault is one of the most important things you can say as a supporter.
- **Effects of the sexual assault.** As part of healing, it is important that they begin to link past events with current problems and make sense of these connections in their own way. Even though the connections made sometimes seem illogical to you, accept what is said as valid. No one else knows better than they do how the sexual assault has affected them; no one else can do this “sorting out” process for them. Do not try to make more or less of the experience – follow their lead.

- **Let them make their own decisions.** In order for the survivor to regain or feel in control of their life, it is important that they are not overprotected. This means encouraging them to trust their own instincts, ideas and opinions. Recognize that changes or decisions they make may affect relationships including close ones. Help gather the information they need to make decisions. Support them in any future disclosures or confrontations they may or may not choose to do, including whether to report to police or not.
- **Ask permission before offering physical support.** Unless you have a firmly established custom of expressing affection in your relationship already, do not rush in with physical contact without asking permission first. Some survivors experience uninvited physical contact as an intrusion. It may remind them too much of the unwanted contact they experienced when they were being sexually assaulted. Other survivors may find touching, holding, or hugging to be comforting. The important thing is for them to decide what they need or want.
- **Recognize and respect your own limits.** Try to keep tabs on your own emotional resources and don't give beyond what you are capable of giving. If you do, you may end up resenting or withdrawing from them. Remember that no one person can give a survivor everything they need, nor can anyone make up for what happened. Encourage them to find support with other people, not just with you. Let them know gently and clearly that you need time to yourself, but do this before you are completely drained. Spend time taking care of yourself. Hearing about their experience may stir up your own unresolved issues and strong feelings. It may be important for you to have outside support for yourself such as professionals, friends or family. Make sure you get the survivor's permission before you talk about the sexual assault to others. Disclosing your own feelings, rather than the details of their story, will probably be more helpful to you in the long run.
- **Accept that you can't fix it.** As much as you want to, you cannot take away their pain or struggles. Some people think they have to do something in order to help a person get over pain, but often there is not a lot you can actually do. Some emotional pain is inevitable and it is the survivor's work to transform their feelings – this may take a long time and they may judge themselves for not getting through as quickly as hoped. Your place is not to try and make it better – your place is to be loving and supportive through hard times and reassure “it takes as long as it takes”.
- **Reinforce the fact they survived.** Whatever they did or did not do was the “right thing” in order to survive the sexual violation. Remind yourself they have survived and though healing can be difficult and painful, they will get through it just as they survived the sexual assault. It is likely that if they are sharing this information with you, they trust you will do the right thing. **Respect them as a competent and capable person who knows what is best for them.**



Victoria Sexual
Assault Centre

healing, education & prevention

