



## University Counselling

# LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF AFTER SEXUAL ASSAULT

### WHAT IS SEXUAL ASSAULT?

Sexual assault is any sexual behaviour that is unwanted and makes you feel uncomfortable, frightened, or threatened. If someone takes advantage or forces you to engage in sexual activity, it is still sexual assault even if:

- Either one of you were intoxicated at the time of the assault.
- You have consented to sex with that person in the past.
- You love the person who assaulted you.
- You have consented to some sexual acts, such as touching, but not others.
- The person who assaulted you is your partner, spouse, or someone that you know.
- You agreed due to the person being in a position of power.

It is important to know that what has happened is not your fault. The offender is always responsible for sexual assault.

### HOW MIGHT I FEEL OR REACT AFTER EXPERIENCING A SEXUAL ASSAULT OR HARASSMENT?

Everyone reacts differently. There is no right or wrong way to react. Reactions may cover a wide range of physical and emotional symptoms. Some common responses might include (but are not limited to):

- Strong feelings of fear or shame.
- Feeling powerless or hopeless.
- Difficulty sleeping and/or nightmares.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Feeling very anxious and/or concerned about your safety.

- Feeling disconnected from others.
- Irritability.
- Feeling numb or shock.
- Intense distress when remembering the assault.
- Vivid memories of the assault which may be triggered by sensations such as a noise or a smell.

Sexual assault can affect your interactions with others, your beliefs about yourself and your sense of safety. It is common for individuals to continue to experience a number of thoughts, images and feelings for some weeks following the trauma.

### WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP ME TO COPE?

It is important to take care of yourself and access the support available to you. The impact of trauma reactions change over time, as your body and mind adjust to what has happened.

#### Immediately after the event you may find it helpful to:

- Remind yourself that the event is over and you are now safe. If you are not safe (e.g. you are living with the perpetrator), then finding a safe living environment is the first priority.
- Be around people you trust rather than going home to an empty house. You could ask a friend or relative to stay with you.
- Try to avoid stimulants (such as tea, coffee, chocolate, or cigarettes) because you do not want to make your body even more agitated than it already is.
- Try to avoid alcohol or other drugs, sedatives, or sleeping pills. These can prevent you from processing your feelings and prolong the natural healing process.
- Try to eat regular meals, even if you do not feel like eating.

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- Try to get some rest. If you cannot sleep, allow yourself time to do something relaxing for brief periods throughout the day. It is common to feel exhausted after trauma.
- Talk about how you are feeling with someone you trust e.g. a friend, counsellor or family member.
- See your GP. Medical attention may be required for injuries, pregnancy options, testing for STIs or other health concerns such as sleeping difficulties.

### How to handle the next few days:

- Remind yourself that your reactions are a normal response to trauma and will gradually lessen with time.
- Continue to seek out support from people who are close to you and try not to isolate yourself.
- Take time out from your usual activities if you feel you need to, however continuing some parts of your usual daily routine can be helpful.
- Make sure that you are doing things that are relaxing and enjoyable – be kind to yourself.
- Allow yourself time to deal with the memories or flashbacks. You will need commitment and patience. There may be some aspects of the experience that will be difficult to process.
- Try to allow yourself some space to feel your feelings. You could do this by talking to a friend or a professional, or keep a diary to explore and record how you are feeling.
- If you feel overwhelmed with strong emotions or memories, you could try some grounding techniques to help come back to the present moment. For example, focusing on slow breathing to soothe your nervous system, or connecting with your senses (e.g., notice and name five things you can see, four things you can hear, three things you can touch, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste). Try to describe each one in some detail.

### There are more detailed suggestions of strategies for coping after sexual assault in the NSW Health information booklets:

- For male victim/survivors (Google: “When a man is raped”)
- For female victim/survivors (Google: “Recovering from Adult Sexual Assault”)
- LGBTIQ+ victim/survivors can contact Qlife 1800 184 527, ACON 1800 063 060 or The Gender Centre 9519 8200.



### What support is available to me?

If you are struggling to cope with your experiences or think you would benefit from additional support, please seek professional help.

### Starting points for accessing free counselling or advice include:

- Victims Services - 1800 633 063.  
[www.victimsservices.justice.nsw.gov.au/Pages/vss/vs\\_counselling/vs\\_counselling-acs-about.aspx](http://www.victimsservices.justice.nsw.gov.au/Pages/vss/vs_counselling/vs_counselling-acs-about.aspx)
- Your GP, or a GP at UON Health Service – (02) 4921 6000
- UON Campus Care – (02) 4921 8600
- UON Counselling and Student Support Advisors – (02) 4921 6622
- UON Student Living Health & Wellbeing Coordinator – (02) 4924 1003 (for students who live on campus)
- The University of Newcastle Crisis Support Line (5pm-9am weekdays, 24 hrs weekends) – 1300 653 007 or Text 0488 863 216
- NSW Rape Crisis Centre – 1800 424 017
- NSW Health Sexual Assault Centres – [www.health.nsw.gov.au/kidsfamilies/protection/Pages/health-sas-services.aspx](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/kidsfamilies/protection/Pages/health-sas-services.aspx)
- Check the UON Gender Diversity Resource List for a database of local LGBTIQ+ support and resources – [www.newcastle.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0018/422262/Gender-and-Sexual-Diversity-Resource-List.pdf](http://www.newcastle.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/422262/Gender-and-Sexual-Diversity-Resource-List.pdf)

If you require academic concessions, Student Support Services, your counsellor, or a GP will be able to provide you with a letter of support for an adverse circumstances application.