

WHAT INFLUENCES HOW YOU REACT TO RAPE?

A survivor's individual response to rape, including whether and how long she experiences RTS depend on many factors, including:

Whether she knew or trusted the rapist

Whether her friends and family are supportive and patient or blaming and unhelpful

How the police and justice system will treat her, should she choose to report the rape

Her age and previous life experiences

Her cultural and religious background

The degree of violence used by the rapist

Whether any injuries, illness or disabilities result from the rape

Whether the rape brings up memories of the past trauma she has experienced

Her emotional state prior to the rape

Her practical and material resources

"Every rape situation is unique and it is important to treat each rape survivor individually"

IS IT POSSIBLE TO FORGET ABOUT RAPE?

Many rape survivors may lose or suppress their memory of part or all the rape experience. Some women find that they can remember before and after, but not the rape itself. The memories will almost always resurface later and the survivor will need to face them. If the rape survivor is very young or experiences the rape as especially traumatic, she may block the memory of the rape even as it is occurring.

Recovery from rape takes time. The survivor must allow herself to remember the rape and feel whatever feelings it brings up, even though this is very difficult. She needs to work through the experience and integrate it into her life so that she can move on.

She may not consciously recognize that she has been raped or experience any symptoms until 9 months or a year later. Usually when another event in her life such as a new sexual relationship or another trauma occurs, it triggers the memories. Once she has the memories, the survivor will never forget what has happened, but she can learn how to live with it.

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS OF RTS

Shock: usually, a more immediate response may include numbness, chill, faintness, confusion, disorientation, trembling, nausea, and sometimes vomiting.

Sleeping problem: unable to sleep, sleeping more than usual or other changes in sleeping pattern.

Eating problems: no appetite and subsequent weight loss, compulsive eating and subsequent weight gain.

Physical illness: the stress may weaken her immune system and make her more vulnerable to sickness, she may have caught sickness from the rapist, or she may simply feel sick.

Pain in the body: this may be as a result of injuries inflicted by the rapist or a physical reaction to her emotional pain

Cardiovascular pain: heart palpitations, breathlessness, tightness or pain in the chest, high blood pressure

Gastrointestinal problems: loss of appetite, nausea, diarrhea, constipation, dryness in the mouth, butterflies in the stomach, feeling of emptiness in the stomach. Etc

Exaggerated startle response: over-reacting to sudden noise or movement.

Oversensitivity to noise

COGNITIVE SYMPTOMS OF RTS

As if "**feelings or flashback**" re-experiencing sensations that she felt during the rape or actually reliving part of the experience in her head

Intrusive thoughts: sudden or forceful "intrusive" memories of aspects of rapes

Thinking about the rape all the time

Memory loss: the survivor may be unable to remember the rape or part of it, this is usually temporarily, although it can last for many years.

Poor concentration

Increase alertness

Speech problems, stammering or other difficulties in talking

Indecisiveness

Difficulties in solving problems

Nightmare

Violent fantasies

Revenge fantasies

Crying

BEHAVIORAL SYMPTOMS OF RTS

Avoiding reminders of the rape

Pretending that it never happened

Neglecting herself or other people

Increased washing or bathing

Self-blame

Fear of being alone

Not socializing or socializing more than before the rape

Relationship problems: the survivor may be irritable, argumentative or easily upset, she may withdraw from people that she felt close to before the rape or form new sudden connections, she may grow over dependent on others or too independent

Sexual problems: the survivor may not want sex or be able to enjoy it. This may become worse if alternatively, she might become more sexually active than before

Lifestyle changes: the survivor may make drastic changes in her home , work, school or relationship, this can be an important part of helping her feel safe and in control again

EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS OF RTS

- ⇒ Denial
- ⇒ Numbness
- ⇒ Rapid, inexplicable mood changes
- ⇒ Shame
- ⇒ Guilt
- ⇒ Feeling dirty
- ⇒ Anger or desire for revenge
- ⇒ Fear
- ⇒ Nervousness and worries
- ⇒ Being easily upset
- ⇒ Powerless and loss of control
- ⇒ Grief and loss
- ⇒ Feeling different from other people
- ⇒ Loss of self-esteem
- ⇒ Loosing interest in life
- ⇒ Depression
- ⇒ Suicidal feelings

DOES RTS CHANGE OVER TIME ?

Yes, within the first days after the rape, the survivor usually experiences shock. She may be visibly upset, or may appear calm and reluctant to talk. Once the shock has passed, she may behave as if nothing has happened. This is called denial or apparent adjustment and this helps the survivor block painful memories and feelings that she may not yet be strong enough to deal with, especially if she has not yet seen a counselor to talk to for assistance

This phase can last for weeks , months or even years, though it is often followed by a long phase of active healing during which the survivor will probably experience other rape trauma symptoms. With care, attention and time, the symptoms will gradually decrease and finally disappear completely.

DOES EXPERIENCING RTS MEANS YOU HAVE TO SEE A COUNSELLOR ?

It is extremely advisable to see a counselor , psychologist or a person trained in working with rape survivors to help the survivor deal with the strongest symptoms, or to work through memory loss. Other survivor may find that rape brings up other underlying problems and in this, more help may be needed. If you will like to find a capable counselor, contact **POWA** or other civil society organizations offering counseling to survivors of violence against women.



FOR MORE INFORMATION OR ASSISTANCE,
CONTACT US ON

Web address : www.powa.co.za
Email address : info@powa.co.za
legal@powa.co.za
Telephone (011) 642 4345/6
Fax (011) 484 3195

GBV National Helpline : 0800150150
GBV Command Centre : 0800 428428

RAPE TRAUMA SYNDROME

WHAT IS RAPE TRAUMA SYNDROMES?

Rape Trauma Syndromes (RTS) is a form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that often affects rape survivors.

DO ALL RAPE SURVIVOR EXPERIENCE RTS ?

Not necessarily. Different survivors respond to trauma of rape in different ways. Some will experience severe symptoms, while others will have few or none at all.

All rape survivors need to be believed, taken seriously and supported, regardless of whether they experience RTS or not.

DOES HAVING RTS MAKE YOU CRAZY ?

NO! The symptoms of RTS can be seriously distressing. If you are a survivor, you may fear that you are going to be mad. If you are supporting a friend or a family member who has been raped, you may find the survivor 's behavior puzzling or upsetting.

HOWEVER, the fact is that the symptoms of RTS are normal reaction to traumatic experience and they will fade overtime with care and support.