

Rape Trauma Syndrome (RTS)

Rape Trauma Syndrome (RTS) is a form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that often affects sexual assault survivors.

Not all abuse survivors will experience RTS. Different people respond to the trauma of rape in different ways. Some will experience severe RTS, while others have few symptoms or none at all. ALL sexual assault survivors need to be believed, taken seriously and supported, regardless of whether they experience RTS or not.

Experiencing some or all of the symptoms of RTS does not mean you're crazy. The symptoms of RTS can be very powerful and distressing. As a survivor, it may feel as if you're going crazy, but that is a normal reaction. If you are supporting a friend or family member who has been abused, you may find the survivor's behaviors puzzling or upsetting. HOWEVER, the symptoms of RTS are a NORMAL reaction to a traumatic experience, and they will fade over time with proper care and support.

A survivor's individual response to sexual assault, and the degree of RTS they experience depends on many factors:

- § If the victim knew and trusted the rapist or abuser
- § If family and friends are supportive and patient, or blaming and unhelpful
- § Treatment by the police and justice system, should the victim choose to report the crime
- § Age and previous life experiences
- § Cultural and religious background
- § The degree of violence used by the perpetrator
- § Injuries, illnesses or disabilities resulting from the rape or abuse
- § Whether the rape or abuse brings up memories of past traumas
- § The victim's emotional state prior to the sexual assault
- § The victim's practical and material resources

Remember: Every situation is unique and it is very important to treat each survivor as an individual.

It is next to impossible to completely forget about a sexual assault. Many survivors lose or suppress memories of all or part of the rape or abuse, but it is not forgotten; however, the memories will almost certainly resurface later, and the survivor will need to face them.

If the survivor is very young, or their experiences were especially traumatic for them, they may block the memory of the abuse even as it is occurring. They may not consciously recognize that they has been raped or may not experience any symptoms until months or years later, usually when another life event, such as a first sexual relationship or another trauma, triggers the memories. If the memories return, the survivor will never forget what happened, but can learn to live with the trauma. Recovery takes time. Survivors may need to allow themselves to remember the frightening experience and feel whatever feelings it will bring, even though this is often very difficult and painful. They need to work through the events, and integrate those experiences into their lives so they can move on.