

Resource Guide: How To Get Help If You've Been a Victim of Sexual Assault

It's never too late to get help.

Sexual assault is typically something you think will never happen to you until it does and you find yourself in desperate need of help and support.

According to the Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN), [1 out of every 6 women](#) has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime, so it's a scary (but common) reality-and one that can leave you feeling anxious, fearful, sad, angry or a combination of those things.

"It's a natural human state to be overwhelmed with this kind of traumatic event," says [Jessica Klein](#), a licensed clinical social worker and adjunct faculty member at the University of Southern California. "The thinking part of your brain really can't process everything that's happened."

Thankfully, there's help for sexual assault victims. If you've been assaulted and need to know what your next steps are, here's a timeline of all the various ways to get help.



Remind yourself that healing isn't always linear.

The road to recovery in the wake of sexual assault is not always a straight line. [Kathryn Stamoulis](#), PhD, a licensed mental health counselor in New York City, notes that some people find themselves doing well emotionally for a long time, then suddenly struggling with intensely negative feelings again.

If this happens to you, she recommends being kind to yourself (making sure you are eating and sleeping well, monitoring your stress levels), as well as eliminating any identifiable triggers, like watching the news.

Know that you may need to confront your trauma again.

The healing process is a complicated one that unfolds over time, but you will likely need to address your trauma head-on at some point. That may be done through professional counseling or through reflective mediums like art or journaling. Stamoulis calls this process “post-traumatic growth” and says it’s a key component of long-term healing.

“When you’re working through the trauma, you’re not trying to get rid of the memories completely, but trying to gain a different relationship to the memories so you can think about them in different [less triggering] ways,” she says.

Try to make yourself feel as safe as possible.

Traumatic effects of an assault might include feeling anxious or depressed, having nightmares, having difficulty concentrating, or struggling in your relationships, says Stamoulis.

During this time, it’s important to prioritize your physical

and emotional needs. That might look like taking time off from work, finding babysitters or extra childcare assistance if you have children, or even replacing the locks on your doors.

All of these needs are normal, and you should feel free to ask for whatever helps you. Try not to judge yourself-there's no way to predict how your body and mind will respond to the trauma.

Don't hesitate to reach out to someone you know and trust for immediate support.

If you live alone or with a casual acquaintance, it may be helpful for you to stay with a trusted friend or family member. Being around someone familiar can be extremely comforting and reassuring. If you are a student, many schools and colleges have counseling centers or victim advocates on campus to help support you through the aftermath.

See a trained counselor who specializes in sexual assault.

Well-meaning friends and family members may not (or cannot) offer you the best advice for your particular situation, so Stamoulis strongly recommends seeking professional counseling.

A trained counselor, she says, will know the best practices for helping assault victims cope and can educate you on what to expect during your recovery. (If you're having trouble

locating a counselor in your area, RAINN's [crisis hotline](#) can refer you to someone.)

“Sexual assault is different from a lot of other traumas because our society tends to blame the victim, [which] is another way of being traumatized,” Stamoulis explains. “A therapist who specializes in treating sexual assault survivors understands the unique needs of someone who experiences a trauma that is often shrouded in shame and secrecy.”

If you didn't report your assault or receive a forensic exam, take those into consideration again.

If you didn't receive a forensic exam immediately after your assault, there may still be time; in some states, Klein says, evidence can be collected and preserved up to 96 hours later. And even if you're beyond the forensic window, reporting your assault is absolutely not a “now or never” proposition.

“Law enforcement is getting better at understanding why people don't report immediately in the aftermath and not having forensic evidence is *not* a dealbreaker,” she says. “There are other corroborating factors they look into, and you never know who filed a report against that perpetrator before you-or who might file one after you, since many perpetrators are repeat offenders.”

Know the lifelong risks associated with sexual assault.

Being a victim of sexual assault puts you at a higher risk for depression, anxiety, PTSD, eating disorders, and substance abuse problems, per [Mental Health America](#).

So if you're feeling really down, having trouble with your daily functioning, or relying on unhealthy habits to cope with overwhelming emotions, seek help from a qualified therapist ASAP.

Realize that everyone's healing process looks different.

In the long-term, it's important to be aware of your unique needs during recovery and to choose activities that help you move forward in a healthy way.

"Some people find that they want to make meaning from the experience by volunteering with other victims or fighting for social justice, while others want to put it completely behind them," says Stamoulis. "There is no right or wrong response."

If you've been a victim of sexual assault, you can [call 800-656-HOPE](#) to receive confidential crisis support from a trained specialist with the National Sexual Assault Hotline. It's free and available 24/7. You can also [chat online](#) with a support specialist.