



# Self Care

COMMON EMOTIONS AND REACTIONS

## The Dignity Project

INCREASING CLARITY.

# GROUNDING

## *senses count down*

Start with you sitting comfortably, close your eyes and taking a couple of deep breathes. In through your nose (count to 3), out through your mouth (to the count of 3).

Open your eyes and look around you.

Name:

- 5 – things you can see
- 4 – things you can feel
- 3 – things you can hear
- 2 – things you can smell
- 1 – thing you can taste

## *box breathes*

Sit with your back supported in a comfortable chair and your feet on the floor.

1. Close your eyes. Breathe in through your nose while counting to four slowly. Feel the air enter your lungs. Imagine drawing one side of a box with your breathe.
2. Hold your breath inside while counting slowly to four. Imagine drawing another side of a box with your breathe.
3. Begin to slowly exhale for 4 seconds. Imagine drawing the third side of a box.
4. Hold your breath inside while counting slowly to four. Imagine completing the box.
5. Repeat steps 1 to 4 until calm.

## *senses to ground*

Use the senses to ground self in your current environment:

Name what you see, feel, hear, smell etc.

Rub hands together  
Touch, feel the chair that is supporting you

Wiggle your toes  
Find three things in the room that are your favorite color

Name the date, month, year, season

Count backwards from 100

Use an object as a grounding tool

# COMMON EMOTIONS

## *Depression*

Many survivors suffer periods of depression. It may take the form of inertia, fear, anxiety or self-catered, numbness, or include other physical indications of stress. Often associated with depression is a sense of meaninglessness. A survivors previous assumptions about themselves, their rights and expectation lose their meaning leaving them feeling undermined. Loneliness, loss of appetite, disturbed sleep, or other physical indications of stress.

Many survivors experience feelings of hostility towards the gender of their offender. For example, women may experience feelings of hostility toward and a fear of men. These feelings may be directed against a specific person or generalized group. Feelings of hostility may also include a friend or family member whom the survivor feels should have protected them or given them more support. It must be recognized that given their experiences survivors feelings are often justified and represent the beginning of a natural positive relationship rather than a negative one. It indicates that the survivor is not placing the entire blame on themselves but is recognizing that the offender is responsible.

## *hostility*

## *anxiety*

Survivors of sexual assault often experience serve anxiety which may manifest in physical symptoms such as difficulties in breathing, muscle tension, nausea, stomach cramps or headaches. These symptoms can be eased as they gradually deal with emotions underlying the stress, and employ relevant stress management strategies.

# COMMON EMOTIONS

## *low self esteem*

Given that sexual assault may disempower, humiliate and degrade a survivor, survivors may often experience low-self-esteem.

## *sleeplessness*

Survivors of sexual assault often experience sleeplessness nights and/or nightmare. The nightmare may involve reliving the assault/s which indicates that they may be struggling to resolve feelings pertaining to the assault. As the healing process continues, the nightmares or sleepless nights will become less frequent.

Many survivors experience periods of emotional numbness, a shock response. This response is often misinterpreted by others. For example, it may be taken as an indication that they are in control of the situation, are calm and relatively unharmed, or been that they are fabricating their experience of the assault. However, emotional numbness is not an uncommon reaction to severe trauma. It should be interpreted as a survivor's "front line" defense against the overwhelming reality.

## *numbness*

## *denial*

Following the initial shock of the assault or even months later, a survivor may deny to others or themselves that they have been assaulted. They may do so to try to suppress the memory of what has happened to regain the previous stability of their lives. Denial plays a part in the ranking of types of sexual assault. For instance, some survivors may feel that if the offender didn't penetrate them, they were not sexually assaulted, or alternatively, if the offender did not ejaculate, it wasn't that bad. It must be remembered that sexual assault exists on a continuum and that all forms can have devastating consequences for a survivor.

# COMMON EMOTIONS

## *anger*

Anger can be a difficult emotion for most people. Culturally, we are discouraged from expressing anger and it is most frequently displaced than directed at the appropriate target. The survivor's anger towards their offender is more than justified. They may also be angry at the response they receive from others when they chose to share their story.

## *feeling dirty*

Memories of the assault may return without warning. Sometimes these flashbacks will be so vivid that the survivor may feel as if they have relived the experience of the assault. This is not the result of irreversible psychological damage or an indicator of insanity. They represent a trauma response which, like nightmares, will decrease as resolution grow and the healing process progresses.

## *flashbacks*

Survivors often feel dirty and, in some way, "marked for life". This reaction may prevent them from speaking out about the assault. Cultural background factors can intensify such feelings. Underpinning these reactions is the internalization of myths pertaining to sexual assault.

## *mood swings*

Survivor's emotions may swing from intense emotional pain to collate numbness. They may feel depressed, restless, or deflated, confused or stridently angry. Feeling at the whim of emotions over which they have no control may make them believe they are psychotically unstable or crazy. These mood changes are normal and understandable response to trauma.

# COMMON EMOTIONS

## *vulnerability*

The experience may expose the survivor to the stark reality that they cannot always protect themselves no matter how hard they try. The assault is not only an invasion of the survivor's physical self but also the intellectual, social, and emotional self. The experience of assault may raise vulnerability issues and can devastate self-confidence and destroy assumptions about the world and your place within it.

Survivors may feel that they could have avoided the assault by acting differently.

These reactions are linked to myths about sexual assault that prevail in the community which blame the survivor rather than the offender. The behavior and reactions of friends, family, police, and lawyers may reinforce those feelings that they asked for it. They may feel guilty that they brought shame to their family and them self by talking about it or reporting it to the police or that they could have resisted more forcefully. The offender is always at fault, never the survivor. Nothing the survivor does is 'asking for it'. Equally, the survivor's strategies for surviving the assault are deserve affirmation not condemnation.

## *fear*

During an assault many survivors fear for their lives. Often this fear is a direct result of the offender's threats. After the assault, a survivor may be fearful of the dark, being alone or going out by themselves. They may experience fear generated from the possibility of pregnancy or STD's or live-in fear of running into the offender again or facing them in court. All of these fears are real concerns.

## *shame and guilt*

# REACTIONS

There are three types of responses that you will commonly hear referenced in connection with reactions during a sexual assault. Dissociation may happen during any of the following or at a later time in the coping process

*fight*

Crying, Hands in fists, desire to punch or rip, Flexed/tight jaw grinding teeth snarl, Fight in eyes glaring fight in voice, Desire to stomp, kick, smash with legs or feet, Feelings of anger/rage, Homicidal/suicidal feelings, Knotted stomach/nausea burning stomach, Metaphors like bombs, volcanoes erupting

*flight*

Restless legs, feet /numbness in legs, Anxiety/shallow breathing, Big/darting eyes, Leg/foot movement, Reported or observed fidgety-ness, restlessness, feeling trapped, tense, Sense of running in life- one activity-next, Excessive exercise

*freeze*

Feeling stuck in some part of body, Feeling cold/frozen, numb, pale skin, Sense of stiffness, heaviness, Holding breath/restricted breathing, Sense of dread, heart pounding, Decreased heart rate (can sometimes increase), Orientation to threat

*dissociation*

Dissociation is an adaptive response to threat and is a form of “freezing”. It is a strategy that is often used when the option of fighting or running (fleeing) is not an option. We shut down to draw less attention to ourselves, or in extreme cases, play dead by leaving our body and mentally and emotionally shutting down. It is important to know that dissociation is a normal response in the face of trauma.

*you are resilient and strong.*

