

We're listening. We believe.

end violence
wise
share hope ♦ change lives

Surviving Sexual Violence

Information, Tips and Resources

Getting started

You have the right to control what happens to your body. Being touched or interacted with sexually in a way that you did not want is a violation of your rights over your body. If this happened to you, no matter what the circumstances, it was not your fault and it was not okay.

Everyone has their own thoughts, feelings and responses to sexual violence. This booklet offers information that may be helpful to you in trying to understand the dynamics and impact of sexual violence - whether it has happened to you or someone you care about.

It is important that every person gets to control the process of making a life after sexual violence. Each person is the expert in their own life. With information and support, everyone can make the best decisions for what comes next.

You are not alone . . .

- **1 in 4** girls and **1 in 20** boys will be sexually abused or assaulted before they turn 17 (Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, Hamby, 2014).
- **1 in 4** college women report surviving rape or attempted rape at some point in their lifetime (Fisher, Cullen & Turner, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). This rate has remained the same since studies in the 1980s (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987).
- Nearly **1 in 5** women and **1 in 71** men in the US have been raped at some time in their lives (CDC, SV Facts at a Glance, 2012).
- **91.9%** of female victims of rape were a partner or acquaintance of the perpetrator (CDC, NIPSVS 2011).
- For male victims, **52.4%** are raped by an acquaintance and **15.1%** by a stranger (CDC, NIPSVS, 2010).
- For female rape survivors, **98.1%** of the time a male was the perpetrator. For male rape survivors, **93%** of the time, a male was the perpetrator (Black, Basile, Breiding, Smith, Walters, & Merrick, 2011).
- Sexual assault is one of the most under reported crimes, with **60%** left unreported (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008-2012).

What is sexual violence?

You should be touched sexually only in the ways you want to be. ***Any sexual behavior or contact that occurs without your consent is sexual violence. It is a violation of your rights.*** The following are common terms that are used to describe sexual violence. If they do not feel right to you, use whatever language makes sense. It is your life to define as you choose.

An act that involves any non-consensual physical, sexual contact is called **sexual assault**. The term **rape** is used when the sexual assault includes penetration of the mouth, anus or vagina, no matter how slight. The penetration can be with a body part or foreign object.

Voyeurism is when someone (or people) watches you in a sexual situation and you did not agree or know they were there.

Sexual harassment is when sexual words, pictures or gestures are used which create a hostile environment.

Laws on sexual violence vary. Even if something is not illegal, sexual violence has an impact and is not okay.

The majority of sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone the victim knows—an acquaintance, friend, family member or partner, for example. Whether or not the victim knows the perpetrator does not lessen the impact that the assault might have.

Research also shows that most people who perpetrate sexual assault are men and many have perpetrated multiple times. This is not the same thing as saying all men are rapists, most are not. Women can also perpetrate sexual assault, although it is much less common.

In this booklet we refer to people who use violence as “perpetrators” or “rapists.” We use “he” for the perpetrator and “she” for the victim/survivor to reflect the most common gender dynamic. Sexual violence is a type of **gender-based violence**. No matter who the perpetrators or victims are, the violence reflects our history of men being expected to have power over others. Sexual violence is one tool to maintain this power imbalance.

Consent

Consent is a way to make sure every person involved is happy to participate in what is happening. It is everyone's responsibility when engaging in sexual activities. Getting consent means that everyone is autonomous, has different experiences, and feels comfortable with what is happening.

For consent to be valid, every person must be able to freely choose - without force, manipulation or coercion. If there is any vagueness or confusion about whether or not someone wants to participate, sexual activity should not happen. Words, body language, and participation should all communicate that a person wants to be sexual. If any of these are missing or are unclear, the sexual activity should stop immediately.

Rapists often make it seem like consent is confusing - as if there is a miscommunication or misunderstanding. They intentionally ignore a victim's words and body language. Rapists may use alcohol, drugs, pressure, past sexual activity, isolation, or any other tool they can think of to take away a

victim's agency and credibility.

If you are incapacitated by drugs or alcohol that you drink or someone gives you, you cannot consent. If you are afraid of consequences for saying no, you cannot consent. Even if you consented before, it does not mean you consent to other times. If you are under the age of consent, you cannot consent.

Every state has laws about the age at which someone can legally consent to sexual activity. The age of consent laws exist to protect young people who may be manipulated by someone older and with more power or authority.

Consent is not confusing. Consent means that it is clear that everyone wants to participate in the activity. If a situation is confusing, it is not consensual.

If you were not able to make a genuine decision about a sexual activity, then you were not given the opportunity to consent.

It was not your fault.

Alcohol & other drugs at the time of the assault

If you were assaulted after using alcohol or other drugs, or if you were given a substance without your knowledge, it was a drug-facilitated sexual assault. Some victims are given alcohol or other drugs without their knowledge to cloud their judgment, incapacitate them, or make it impossible to remember what happened. Sometimes it is not clear if you were given drugs, especially if you were drinking alcohol. If you felt different from how you have felt before, or you have no memory of the situation and this is not something that usually happens to you, you may have been drugged. You know your body best and know when something is not right.

If you were using alcohol or other drugs recreationally before being assaulted, the perpetrator(s) may have known and targeted you, but it does not make the assault your fault. Perpetrators sometimes use drug use or drinking as a way to discredit victims and/or as an excuse for their behavior. Being drunk or on drugs does not cause rape. Rape is not a consequence of drinking or drug use. The only reason rape happens is because of rapists.

You survived.

This is your life.

You and only you can make the
choices that are right for you.

Responses to sexual assault

When we are in danger, our bodies get ready to protect ourselves by turning on our response system. Our survival response system triggers us to run away, fight back, freeze or submit. Many victims say they thought they were going to be killed when they were being assaulted. Some were so shocked they could not process what was happening. When we feel this kind of threat, the most common way we react is to freeze or submit. This is a normal and instinctive reaction. It is what humans do to survive in the moment.

This freezing reaction means you cannot fight or scream even if you think you want to or should. This reaction might happen subconsciously or is a decision you make to survive. Freezing might be the safest option. If this was your experience, it might feel as though you did not defend yourself. Sometimes this response can make it more difficult to talk to others about the assault(s). You might be worried that they will not understand that you could not fight back. You did what you had to do to survive and it worked. We know this to be true because you are reading this booklet.

Dissociation

Dissociation is common, instinctive and important for surviving traumatic events. It helps us get through situations that we otherwise may not be able to endure. It is a way to protect ourselves from something we should not have to experience.

You may feel as though you left your body, or were unable to affect what was happening to you. It may feel like you did not do everything that you could to protect yourself, but this is not the case. You did what you had to do to get through it.

After an assault, your body may identify sights, sounds, smells or touches that trigger your fear response, even if you are not currently in danger. This can be an ongoing attempt by your body to keep you safe. You may find that concentrating is more difficult now, and that dissociating is keeping you from being present. There are lots of ways that you can work with your body to keep you present. A **WISE** advocate can talk with you about these strategies.

Memories

During traumatic experiences our bodies' survival instincts cause our brains to store information differently. Your memories of being hurt are probably different than other memories you have.

Often the memories will not be in chronological order, will come back in pieces, or the information will be more sensory. You might remember colors, smells, feelings or flashes of an event. Memories can also come back in nightmares making sleep difficult and falling asleep scary. Some memories may come back as if you are watching a movie of the assault. Other memories can make you feel like you are experiencing the assault again. These are all ways that our brains remember dangerous situations.

Sometimes a memory comes back after being triggered by a reminder of some sort. Triggers can be sensory—a sound or smell, for example. Sometimes they are metaphorical, or ideas that are connected in your mind to the violence.

Memories can be frightening and can make you feel out of control. Sometimes we try to change our lives to avoid the terrifying memories. While it makes sense to avoid painful flashbacks, this can limit our lives. You may find yourself not doing the things you need and want to do, to live a happy and full life. If this is happening to you, you do not have to figure it out alone. A **WISE** advocate, counselor, and/or a loved one can help you. There are ways to start to feel more comfortable and joyful in the world.

It can be hard to explain frightening situations because the language part of our brain can work differently when we recall this kind of experience. You may find it helpful to write about the violence instead of or before talking about it.

Remember that these are normal responses and part of your survival instincts. People like **WISE** advocates, who understand the impact of sexual violence, will understand.

You are not alone.

The impact

How you are affected by sexual violence may take you by surprise. Every person and situation is unique, so everyone is affected differently. The period after violence or when you are grappling with sexual violence from another time in your life can be challenging. It is important to pay attention and take care of yourself in ways that are good for YOU.

Sometimes survivors see their lives as “before” and “after” violence. You may not feel like the same person. Feeling as though you do not recognize yourself can be difficult. You may feel as though your world has turned upside down. The way we think about the world and whether we can feel safe or not, can change.

Most women have some experience of sexual violation. Some experience many assaults throughout their lives. Each one may have a different impact. In general, people try to make sense of things that happen. It may not be possible to make sense of sexual violence. There is no good reason that anyone would hurt you in this way.

If you knew and trusted the person who hurt you, it may feel unsafe to be with anyone. It might even make you doubt your own judgment. If the person who hurt you was a stranger, it can seem as though anyone unfamiliar can be dangerous.

Whatever the situation, it is common to feel scared and/or anxious for a long time after an assault(s), or for a long time after remembering a past assault(s). There can be a frightening realization that the world is not as safe as we once thought. This is not only true for the survivor, but can be for friends and family as well.

Our bodies call up a lot of energy to protect ourselves during and after an assault(s). It can feel exhausting just getting through each day. You are not being lazy, there is nothing wrong with you, your energy is being used to process what has happened. It is okay to be gentle with yourself, take your time, and do things that feel good to you.

You may experience bursts of energy or anxiety connected to reminders of an assault. Sometimes the feelings may not appear to have any connection. This energy is part of your body's survival instinct, but can create an undercurrent of nervousness that can be hard to understand and handle.

It is also common to feel out of control and afraid, sometimes feeling one way one minute and the opposite the next minute. Powerlessness, anger, sadness, pain, nausea, jumpiness, being on guard, wanting to withdraw, loss of trust in others, and eating and appetite changes are other common responses. These are all normal reactions. It can help to talk to someone, like a [WISE](#) advocate who knows about sexual violence, to process these reactions and work through them.

Despite all of this, many survivors come to understand all of the ways that they are strong and capable. It is a struggle to come to terms with being violated and what that means in your life. You are a whole person, and more than the violence that has been done to you.

Alcohol & other drugs after the assault

Alcohol and other drugs can seem like they offer an escape from reality. It is easy to turn to substances as a way to avoid thoughts or feelings. It can be a dangerous way to cope long term, as perpetrators may take advantage of the additional vulnerability of being under the influence. It is also possible to develop a physical dependence on alcohol and drugs. Substance use often feels good at first, but the aftermath can feel bad physically and emotionally. Often people feel guilty or are blamed for using substances, but struggle to stop. This can be further isolating and drive people to continue using to cope.

There are ways to cope that are safer. You can talk to a **WISE** advocate, your doctor, or counselor about what you need. Advocates will not judge you for using substances and can help think of other ways to reduce anxiety and dependence. Some find support with groups, medications, relaxation and other body-mind techniques such as Somatic Experiencing, Sensorimotor Therapy or yoga. You can take back your life.

Attempts at “mastery”

Sometimes people try to “reenact” a time that they were powerless in order to prove to themselves that they can change the outcome, or to create a sense of control over the situation. This is called mastery.

Some survivors will unconsciously seek out situations that are similar to their assault(s) in hopes of having a different outcome, thus “mastering” what happened. If you were assaulted after going to a certain place, you might go back there to try to prove to yourself that you can be safe under similar circumstances.

It can be hard to understand why people continue to talk to their perpetrators or return to the place where they were assaulted. Instincts to try to normalize or regain control over a dangerous situation are strong and do not mean that the violence did not happen. Perpetrators may use this impulse to discredit or further target victims. If you think this might be happening, it could be helpful to talk to someone about it.

Anniversaries

For many people anniversaries can be difficult. Even if you are not aware of the connection, you may experience physical or emotional reactions on anniversaries related to violence. Taking extra care to notice how you are feeling and getting support around these dates might be helpful. Indulging in soothing activities can be a good place to start, and you deserve to feel good. You are the expert in your own process and can decide what you need.

Police and court

What someone did to you may be against the law. Deciding whether or not you want to report it to law enforcement is up to you. For some people it can be empowering to involve the criminal legal system, for others it can be re-victimizing. You can talk to an advocate about what to expect and decide what makes sense for you.

To involve the criminal legal system, start by contacting the police. A [WISE](#) advocate can help you do this.

Crimes are investigated in the towns/cities in which they occur. If you live in another area you can start with your local police. Providing a statement to the police may start an investigation. It can be difficult to answer all of the specific questions the police ask about what happened. They are trying to anticipate what defense lawyers may argue in a trial. A **WISE** advocate can be with you when you give your statement.

Even though we hear people talk about someone “pressing charges” or “getting someone arrested,” in fact, only the police can arrest and only the state can “take someone to court” for a criminal offense.

Working with the legal system is often a long process and the crimes that are being charged may seem confusing or different from what you experienced. A **WISE** advocate can be with you the whole time and help you navigate your case. You may also be able to access a Victim’s Advocate from the state to help you understand the process. A Victim’s Advocate is part of the investigation so information you share will not be confidential.

Lawyers

An attorney can be helpful if you are considering reporting to the criminal legal system or if you want to know about your rights after an assault. Attorneys work with survivors regarding civil legal needs, to protect your privacy, or address complications with work, school or housing. Your rights may have been violated by a business or institution in addition to the perpetrator. You may also be able to access money to pay for damages or harm. [WISE](#) can recommend attorneys who may be able to work for a reduced fee.

Evidence collection and healthcare

Your health is important and you deserve care. If you go to the hospital after being sexually assaulted, you can be seen by specially trained providers called Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANE). They are trained to provide medical care after sexual violence and collect forensic evidence from the assault. You may have heard this called a “rape kit.” You can have evidence collected even if you are not sure you want to involve the police. It can be collected and stored

anonymously until you decide what you want to do.

Evidence collection can only happen within a certain amount of time after an assault, and the time varies by state. The sooner evidence is collected, the better. NH and VT will pay for an adult's exam if it is within 5 days of an assault. In the Upper Valley, Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center is the hospital most likely to have a SANE available. A [WISE](#) advocate can talk to you about what might happen at the hospital, meet you there, and be with you during any exam.

Even if you do not want to have evidence collected, it is worthwhile to see to a healthcare provider in case of injuries, sexually transmitted infections (STI), or pregnancy. There are medications which reduce the chance of getting a STI or becoming pregnant if the assault was recent.

Some medications are available at a pharmacy (emergency contraception or "Plan B") or at Planned Parenthood without an exam. A primary care provider can be a good place to start if it is more than 5 days after the assault.

If you are under 18 years old, and you tell a provider that you were assaulted, the medical provider will have to report the assault to the police or child protective services.

You have choices.

What helps

When someone violates us, it can feel like we have lost control over our own bodies and lives. Getting back your own control and power is important. This includes being able to make your own decisions about how you want to move forward in your life. Some things to consider:

Give yourself permission to have as much time as you need to process. Remember, you survived the assault.

Recognize your inner resources, your strength, and the steps you have taken to get you this far and celebrate them. There is no timeline, it is not something to just “get over.”

Find a sense of safety. You deserve to feel safe. Take time to sense when you are comfortable in your life and honor that feeling. You can gently and carefully explore the edges of discomfort but do not force it. If you start to feel like you cannot feel safe doing anything, it could be a sign that you need more support.

Take a break. Your life is more than the assault(s). You likely have a lot going on in addition to trying to deal with the aftermath of violence and it is easy to feel overwhelmed. If possible, try not to ignore what happened. It is okay to prioritize yourself like finding time for a cup of tea, a healthy meal, a walk, time with a pet or outside with nature, visiting a special place, being creative, or whatever you find soothing.

Move your body. Movement can help reduce anxiety. Yoga, tai chi and other mind-body practices can be particularly helpful, especially if the teacher has some knowledge of sexual assault or trauma.

Get it out. People can feel a sense of relief when they share their “story” or experience(s) of violence. Writing or

creating art can validate you, release some emotions and give you a way to express your experience to other people.

Find and talk to people who support you. Telling someone can be an important part of your process, as long as the person supports you in ways that are helpful. Being listened to and believed by others can make a huge difference. You may not want to tell anyone because you do not know what the reaction will be. You can start with one person who you are pretty sure will be understanding. See what that is like and build out from there. Friends and family can also talk to a [WISE](#) advocate to better understand the impact of sexual violence, and how to be supportive.

If you can, try to tell your person what you want and need. People are often unsure about what would be helpful. Sometimes they get so worried about making a mistake that they do not do anything or they avoid the topic. While it is not your job to take care of them, if you know there are certain things they can do or say that would help, see if you can tell them or write it to them. A [WISE](#) advocate may be able to help you with this.

Connect with other survivors. This might be in a support group, an online community, or just in your regular life. Sexual violence is so common that you probably know others that are survivors too. Many survivors find strength in being together, helping others, volunteering and working to end sexual violence. Organizations like [WISE](#) have opportunities to do this.

Help from professionals

There are many people who can support survivors, but their training, approaches and understandings of sexual violence vary. Finding people who work for you is important.

[WISE](#) advocates understand the dynamics of sexual violence, and work together with survivors to figure out how to get whatever it is that the survivor needs. Advocates have information about resources, systems, victims' rights and community partners that may be helpful in making decisions about what to do next. Any communication with advocates is privileged which means that, if you are over 18 years old, they cannot share information about you without

written permission. One-on-one support and opportunities to connect with other survivors are available. All **WISE** support is free and confidential.

Other specialists may not have any training in working specifically with victims of sexual violence. Most will provide one-on-one or group confidential counseling sessions. Many work on a sliding fee scale, which may or may not be covered by insurance. You can ask what the provider knows about sexual assault and trauma. **WISE** can recommend providers with whom other survivors have had good experiences.

We live in a world where sexual violence is common. You are not alone. How you understand and process what happened is unique to you. Experiencing trauma after an assault is a normal reaction, there is nothing wrong with you. You deserve to have professionals who understand both the social and individual impacts of sexual violence.

Remember

It is not your fault. No matter what you were doing, or what the circumstances were, sexual violence is something that was done to you.

You survived. You are here, reading this booklet. You have so many possibilities for your life.

It is normal to have times that are hard. You experienced something that no one should ever have to, give yourself credit for doing the best you can.

You are not alone. Moving forward can seem overwhelming, but there are lots of people who want to support and help you. Identify one person who is safe and reach out to that person. It can be hard to ask, but you deserve help and support from people you trust.

Join with others to end the violence. We are stronger together.

Be patient with yourself. We all have our own process and we each need to work at our own pace. Trying to rush does not help.

Be good to yourself. You may find comfort in walking, eating well, taking baths, cuddling a pet, being creative, visiting a special place, being outside, having alone time or having time with friends. You deserve to have joy in your life. The more positive things you have in your life, the more you can process the difficult parts.

Breathe. Just remembering to breathe is good. Taking slow, deep breaths is great.

This is your life. You are worth it.

Supporting survivors of sexual violence

It is hard to know what to do when someone we love has been hurt. Often, we want to help but are not sure of what to do or are afraid to do the wrong thing. If someone has shared their experience of sexual violence with you, they are telling you that they trust you. You can start by letting them know that you believe them, care about them, and want to support them in whatever way they need.

People may respond to sexual violence in lots of ways. They may behave differently and your relationship may feel like it has changed. Try to keep in mind that they are grappling with something very frightening right now, but are still whole - the assault does not define who they are. Expecting someone to behave a certain way or act the same as before is not realistic or helpful.

Supporting survivors is very important. The most important thing you can do is ask how you can be helpful to them. Here are some general suggestions:

Listen. Let them talk without feeling judged. Many feel a sense of relief when they share their “story” or experience(s) of violence. Try to balance talking about it and not talking about it. Let them bring it up when they want to. Avoiding the subject can feel isolating, but it does not have to be the only thing you talk about.

Believe. You may really not want to believe that something has happened to someone that you care about, or was done by someone that you care about. It might be really tempting to try to come up with other explanations that seem less terrible. Research has proven that people do not make up sexual violence. If someone says they were assaulted, they most likely were.

Put blame where it belongs. Perpetrators use excuses about what people were doing, drinking, wearing, or where they were to try to undermine their victims. These factors did not cause the assault. The perpetrator is the only person responsible for causing sexual violence.

Stay connected. When someone is violated, they may feel powerless and out of control. When supported and encouraged to make decisions that are right for them, survivors can regain that power. Tell them how proud you are that they survived, that you know it can be a struggle and that you respect their process.

Give them time. You want the person that you care about to “get better” or to be happy again. Rushing someone may make it feel like they need to pretend to be fine around you, or feel badly that they are struggling. It is really important for everyone to have the time they need to process what happened to them, and how they want to move on. It is not linear, there will be good days and bad days. Be patient.

Encourage survivors to do what makes them feel good. Walks, eating well, taking baths, yoga or spending time with friends can be healing activities. We all want and need different things. Help identify what would be comforting. Let them know that they are worth it, maybe offer to do activities with them. Do not assume that you know what they need or what will help. Ask them what they want.

Let go of expectations. Just like other major life events, people integrate their experiences of sexual violence into their lives in their own ways. Some people are never the same, others go about their lives as if nothing happened. Both of those outcomes and everything in between are okay. There is no timeline or expectation for how people process and understand the violence they experienced.

Support yourself. One of the best things you can do for your loved one is get support for yourself. Knowing about the violation may make you angry, but expressing your anger to the survivor may not be helpful. Supporting someone else is hard work. Only focusing on your loved one's needs can be draining and it is important not to forget your own needs.

*Compassion is to share the pain
without sharing the suffering.*
- Shinzen Young

Rape culture

While individual perpetrators choose to commit the crimes of sexual violence, it is not a coincidence that the huge majority are committed by men and that the victims are so often women and children. There are many ways that cultures create and support this kind of violence. Women and girls are portrayed more as objects than as people. They are judged by how they look instead of who they are. Men and boys are encouraged to have power over others to prove themselves. Men are expected to be sexually active while women are considered “sluts” if they act the same way.

This kind of inequality is called oppression and allows the people who are “supposed to be in power” to commit acts of violence against other groups to maintain power. This is why when we talk about preventing sexual assault, we have to start at changing the culture that supports it.

You can join with [WISE](#) to end gender-based violence.

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