

Sexual Intimacy after Sexual Violence

Many people who have experienced sexual assault or sexual abuse experience difficulties with intimacy and sex. This is completely normal following a sexual trauma. For some people, the difficulties start immediately after the abuse or assault, while others may start to experience difficulties weeks, months or years later- perhaps when they enter a relationship, or have children.

Given time, most people are able to work through the difficulties and find pleasure in sex, touch and intimacy.

Common Sexual Difficulties

Some of the most common difficulties are:

- Avoiding or being afraid of sex
- Approaching sex as an obligation
- Experiencing negative feelings such as anger, disgust, or guilt with touch
- Having difficulty becoming aroused or feeling sensation
- Feeling emotionally distant or not present during sex
- Experiencing intrusive or disturbing sexual thoughts and images
- Engaging in compulsive or inappropriate sexual behaviours
- Experiencing difficulty establishing or maintaining an intimate relationship
- Experiencing vaginal pain or orgasmic difficulties
- Experiencing erectile or ejaculatory difficulties



Image by Rosevita; morgueFile

People who have been sexually abused or sexually assaulted often experience difficulties with touch. For some, touch can 'trigger' an automatic reaction such as freezing, flashbacks, zoning out (dissociation), feeling sick or panic attacks. These reactions can overwhelm the body. When this happens, it is important to stop what you are doing and calm the body. Take deep, slow breaths and focus on your surroundings so that you are aware of the present. Remind yourself that you are safe now and that the abuse/assault happened in the past. It can be helpful to try and identify what caused or 'triggered' the reaction. Becoming aroused during sex can be a trigger for some people. It is helpful to talk with your partner about your reaction and try to identify what would make you feel safer during sex and intimacy.

If you are finding sex and intimate touch distressing, it may be helpful to agree with your partner on a no-sex period of time to allow you to work through the difficulties you are having as a result of the trauma. This can take the pressure and feelings of expectations off you and allow you to focus on healing first.

Reasons for Difficulties

Many factors other than sexual violence can cause difficulties with sex including: stress, alcohol, sleep difficulties, medication, body image, erectile dysfunction and other physical factors, low testosterone, depression, relationship difficulties and the impact of parenting.

Sometimes the difficulties experienced with sex are as a result of beliefs and attitudes that are formed about sex following a sexual assault or sexual abuse. It is important to examine the beliefs you have formed to see if they are accurate. Sexual abuse and sexual assault involves abusive sex, not healthy sex. Not all sex is abusive.

Below are some different beliefs/attitudes about abusive sex and healthy sex. Holding abusive beliefs about sex can lead to difficulties in sex and intimacy. Remember- healthy sex can bring enjoyment and pleasure

Abusive Sex

- Sex is unsafe
- Sex is about satisfying 1 person
- Sex is addictive
- Sex is uncontrollable
- Sex is essential to be loved

Healthy Sex

- Sex is a choice
- Sex is respectful
- Sex is about sharing
- Sex is private
- Sex is intimate

Healthy sex and sexual violence are not the same thing

Healthy Sex

A healthy, satisfying sexual relationship requires work for all couples. It's not necessary to have a partner to work through sexual healing, but if you do, try to involve them in the process. It can be a challenging time for them too.

Here are some tips for sexual healing.

- Slowly become comfortable with your body.
- Talk to your partner about how you are feeling and what you each need. Work out what is sensual, playful, sensitive, joyful and fulfilling for both of you. Tell your partner what you like, what you don't like, what you would like to be able to do.
- It may be helpful to try some touching exercises to develop intimacy and trust.
- Remember to make sex playful and fun. Laugh with your partner. And include the small things like cuddling, kissing and holding hands.
- Be really clear about your own and your partner's boundaries and limits. Make sure everyone feels safe. Everyone has the right to say 'no' to things that don't feel comfortable or safe. Agree to respect each other's boundaries always. Agree in advance on what you will both do if you are triggered during sex. Have a word or signal to pause what is happening if you feel anxious.
- Consider using other avenues to assist with healing. These might include a sex therapist, books, and online forums and information. Remember that your partner is also impacted and may benefit from accessing information. Avoid using pornography because this usually depicts sex that is not equal and respectful for everyone.
- Everyone heals from sexual trauma at different rates. Try not to push yourself too fast or be too harsh on yourself. Many people find that if they work through other areas of healing, their difficulties with sex and intimacy start to lessen.
- Be gentle, kind and patient with yourself. Some days will be good and others not so good. When difficulties arise, reassure yourself that it isn't because you are unattractive or flawed. Persist, and over time, things should become easier and better.

Remember

Difficulties with intimacy and sex after sexual violence is very common.

Healthy sex and sexual violence are very different.

Healthy sex involves respect, control and safety for everyone.

Healthy sex is pleasurable, enjoyable and satisfying.

Take your time, be patient and kind to yourself.

Communicate with and involve your partner.

There are people, books and websites that can assist.

You **can** achieve a positive sex life over time.

Further reading

The Sexual Healing Journey by Wendy Maltz

The Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC)

SARC offers support services for both recent and past sexual assault and sexual abuse.

The SARC 24-hour Emergency Telephone Line provides access to an experienced counsellor and doctor for people who have been sexually assaulted during the past 14 days.

Free counselling is available for past sexual assault and sexual abuse
(08) 6458 1828 or 1800 199 888 (freecall from a landline)



Government of Western Australia
North Metropolitan Health Service



Tel: (08) 6458 1828
Or Freecall 1800 199 888