

# SURVIVING SEXUAL ASSAULT: Your Options, Your Choices



INFORMATION FOR INDIVIDUALS  
AFFECTED BY SEXUAL ASSAULT,  
AND THEIR LOVED ONES.





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After sexual assault, it is hard to know how to react. You may be physically hurt, emotionally drained, or unsure what to do next. You may be considering working with the criminal justice system, but are unsure of where to start. Learning more about what steps you can take following sexual violence can help ground you in a difficult time.

Recovering from a sexual assault or abuse is a process, and that process looks different for everyone. It may take weeks, months, or years – there is no timetable for healing. In this booklet you'll find some resources to help you navigate the process.

## ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT

- Sexual assault is a crime of violence committed against someone's will
- People do not ask to be, want to be, or enjoy being sexually assaulted
- Sexual assault is often a crime in which the victim may feel that they are at fault or to blame
- Individuals who have experienced sexual assault are not to blame for the assault.

Sexual assault is an act of power and aggression - not sexuality.

Sexual assault is when you have not consented to sexual activity. This can include:

- Unwanted touching
- Unwanted kissing
- When you have been pressured or threatened
- When you can not consent (ie: you are drugged, sleeping, or unconscious)

This is the same if you are under 19 years old and there are also other factors that mean it is sexual assault:

- If the abuser is someone in a position of trust or power over you
- If there is an age difference between you and abuser (this depends on how old you are)

Even if you consent, if you have a disability and the abuser is in a position of trust or power over you, this may be considered sexual assault. Also, if the person is a blood relative then this may be considered sexual assault.

**The most important thing to know is that if you did not want sexual activity then it was sexual assault.**

# COMMON REACTIONS TO SEXUAL ASSAULT

During the assault you may have reacted by:

- Fighting back
- Trying to get away
- Feeling frozen - unable to move, unable to speak, or feeling mentally removed from your body

These responses are known as “fight, flight, or freeze” and each is a common response to a traumatic situation.

## AFTER A SEXUAL ASSAULT

**You may feel:**

- Anxiety, confusion, shock and disbelief
- Anger, aggression, or the urge to become violent
- Depression, self-isolation, and self-blame
- Fear, mistrust, and invasive memories
- Numb with no intense emotions
- Disorientation, incoherence, and unable to articulate what happened.

All these feelings are normal and you may experience different feelings at different times after an assault.

**You may be able to remember:**

- Only disorganized bits and pieces of the assault
- Only sensory details (ie: sounds, smells)
- All aspects of the assault clearly

During a traumatic event, the brain is focused on survival rather than encoding memory. This affects the ability to accurately remember the event afterwards.

**You may experience changes in behaviour like:**

- Nightmares and/or sleep disturbances
- Changes in appetite, self-control, or sex drive
- Attempts to numb emotions or regain a sense of control with drugs, alcohol, or self-harm

To cope with the assault, a survivor may drastically change their behaviours in day-to-day life.



VS



Once a person is turned on or aroused, it is too late to say no.

**A person can say no anytime the sexual activity becomes unwanted.**

A spouse cannot be charged with sexual assault.

**It is a crime for anyone to sexually assault another person, including spouses, boyfriends/girlfriends, partners, etc.**

Sexual assault is perpetrated by strangers.

**85% of victims know the person who assaulted them.**

All victims of sexual assault are hysterical and upset.

**Someone who has experienced a sexual assault may react in a variety of ways. There is no inappropriate or wrong way to react to sexual assault.**

If a person doesn't fight back, then it isn't really a sexual assault.

**Only "yes" means yes. If a person does not fight, it does not mean they consent to sexual activity.**

If a person is drunk or using drugs the sexual assault is their fault.

**A person cannot consent to sexual activity if they are incapacitated due to alcohol or substance use.**

# YOUR OPTIONS

## MEDICAL CARE

There are several options for medical care and you can choose what is right for you:

- 1. Consultation only:** you consult with a healthcare provider for your options.
- 2. Physical exam:** you have a physical medical exam by a doctor or nurse practitioner. This could include treatment for any injuries, prescription of emergency contraceptives and proactive treatments for possible sexually transmitted infections.
- 3. Sexual assault exam:** this is an exam done by a trained Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner or physician to collect any DNA evidence of the assault and document any injuries. If you choose to have a sexual assault exam the hospital can collect the evidence and store it for up to a year in case you want to provide it to police. You do not have to make a police report in order to have a sexual assault exam.

*If you want to know more about these options or support in accessing medical care please call Community-based Victim Services at 250-542-3322 (after hours: 250-542-1122).*

## REPORTING TO POLICE

As an adult you have the right to decide whether you report to police, or not. There is no time limit to report to police, it can be done at any point in your lifetime.

Options for reporting to police:

- 1. No report:** you do not have to involve the police; this is a right that you have if you are an adult victim. You know what is best for you at this time and only you can make this important decision.
- 2. Information only report:** you provide information about the assault to the police. The police will take the information but will not conduct an investigation unless there is a risk to public safety.
- 3. Full report:** you provide a full report to police and participate in the investigation. This may or may not lead to charges against the offender.
- 4. Third Party Report** – see below.

*To find out more about your reporting options or to access support please call Community-based Victim Services at 250-542-3322 (after hours: 250-542-1122).*

## THIRD PARTY REPORTING

Third Party Reporting of sexual assault is an anonymous report made through the Community-based Victim Services program.

A victim service worker assists you to complete a written report and it is forwarded to police without your personal information included. This is a way of providing the information about your assault to police while remaining anonymous.

Third party reporting is meant for victims over 19 years old but it may apply for younger survivors depending on the situation.

A Third Party Report cannot be made if the abuser was or is your intimate partner.

There are other conditions for third-party reporting that victim services can explain to you.

*To find out more about your reporting options or to access support please call Community-based Victim Services at 250-542-3322 (after hours: 250-542-1122).*

## HEALING

With support from the right people, you may begin to restore your sense of safety and security.

Research has demonstrated that group and individual therapy are equally beneficial in working toward recovery from assault trauma.

Some people also find physical activity, self-help resources, and relaxation techniques helpful.

Some people use drugs, alcohol, or cutting to try to numb out, relieve dissociation, or stay calm. Seek support if this is a problem for you.

When you are ready, you may choose to contact Archway Society to discuss your options. A list of community resources with phone numbers has been provided near the end of this booklet.

# TRAUMA AND POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS RESPONSES

Survivors of sexual assault can experience a range of physical and emotional trauma during the assault, immediately following the assault, and for an extended period of time after the assault. Survivors consistently describe certain signs often referred to as post-trauma responses.

Sexual assault trauma includes both an immediate phase and a long-term reorganization process that occurs as a consequence of sexual assault or an attempted sexual assault. **The severity of the trauma is different for each survivor.**

The responses to trauma can be divided into three fairly distinct phases of recovery.

Individuals may not go through these three phases one at a time; they may move from phase to phase, go back to old phases, and this is perfectly normal.



## 1. THE INITIAL RESPONSE PHASE

This occurs immediately after the assault and may last for several weeks, and may result in a disruption of the survivor's life. There may be a wide range of emotional reactions following the assault. The range will vary from individual to individual, and within an individual over time. The reactions typically come out in two ways:

**Expressed Emotions:** survivor demonstrates *overt* feelings i.e. by sobbing, crying, shaking, restlessness and tension.

**Controlled Emotions:** survivor appears calm, subdued and feelings are masked or numbed out. There is often very little expression in their voice, facial or body language. This controlled response may be misinterpreted as a sign that the assault did not really affect the survivor.

**Fear** is often a primary emotion. There may be fear of being assaulted again, fear of seeing the assaulter, fear of other people's reactions (i.e. being judged or blamed) or fear of the inability to return to normal life.

**Guilt** is also a very common reaction for survivors, such as feeling that they are somehow responsible for the assault and could have prevented it.

Other common reactions are: humiliation, shock, dismay, disbelief, desire for revenge, feeling dirty, feeling repulsed by sex, distrust, feeling everyone 'knows'. The victim may feel threatened with death and grateful to be alive.

## **2. ADJUSTMENT & TRANSITION PHASE**

In this phase, there may be a decrease in anxiety level and resumption in daily functioning. The survivor may try to forget about the assault for a while, and defense mechanisms such as denial, repression and rationalization are often used.

Friends and family who know about the assault may be confused by the change in the survivor's behavior, such as not wanting to talk about the event. Friends and family need to know that this is very common among survivors of sexual assault, and that in time, the survivor may wish to talk about it.

## **3. RESOLUTION PHASE**

This phase is where the person who experienced the assault works to resolve trauma responses. This is typically done in counselling, support groups, etc.

In this phase the survivor acknowledges the impact of the assault, integrates feelings / thoughts / body sensations and works through the grief and losses they experienced. Individuals do not "forget" the trauma they experienced, but through resolution, can continue on with their lives as healthy, happy persons.

# **WEB RESOURCES**

**SAY SOMETHING BC**  
**SAYSOMETHINGBC.CA**

**HELP GUIDE**  
**HELPGUIDE.ORG**

**HEALTH LINK BC**  
**HEALTHLINKBC.CA**

## GROUNDING EXERCISES

People who have experienced sexual assault or childhood sexual abuse will sometimes experience flashbacks or intense memories of what happened, to the point that they feel they are reliving the abuse all over again.

Grounding exercises are things you can do to bring yourself back to the present moment. Different strategies work for different people, and there is no “wrong” way to ground yourself. The goal is to keep your mind and body connected and working together.

### Try these exercises:

- Remind yourself of who you are now. Say your name. Say your age now. Say where you are now. Say what you have done today. Say what you will do next.
- Take ten slow breaths. Focus your attention fully on each breath, on the way in and on the way out. Say the number of the breath to yourself as you exhale.
- Feel the clothes on your body, whether your arms and legs are covered or not, and the sensation of your clothes as you move in them. Notice how your feet feel to be encased in shoes or socks. If you are sitting, feel the chair under you and the weight of your body and legs pressing down onto it. Notice the pressure of the chair, or floor, or table against your body and limbs.
- If you are lying down, feel the contact between your head, your body and your legs, as they touch the surface you are lying on. Starting from your head, notice how each part of your body feels, all the way down to your feet, on the soft or hard surface.
- Hold a mug of tea in both hands and feel its warmth. Don't rush drinking it; take small sips, and take your time tasting each mouthful.
- Splash some water on your face. Notice how it feels. Notice how the towel feels as you dry.
- Stamp your feet, and notice the sensation and sound as you connect with the ground.
- Clap and rub your hands together. Hear the noise and feel the sensation in your hands and arms.
- If you are with other people, and you feel comfortable with them, concentrate closely on what they are saying and doing, and remind yourself why you are with them.
- If you wake during the night, remind yourself who you are, and where you are. Tell yourself who you are and where you are. What year is it, what age are you now? Look around the room and notice familiar objects and

name them. Feel the bed you are lying on, the warmth or coolness of the air, and notice any sounds you hear.

Grounding exercises are helpful for many situations where you find yourself becoming overwhelmed or distracted by distressing memories, thoughts or feelings. If you find yourself getting caught up in strong emotions like anxiety or anger, or if you catch yourself engaging in stressful circling thoughts, or if you experience a strong painful memory or a flashback, or if you wake up from a nightmare with a pounding heart, grounding exercises can help bring you back down to earth.

*\*Information taken from [www.LivingWell.org](http://www.LivingWell.org)*

## A Note on Counselling

**When seeking professionals to work with, look for someone with a ‘trauma-informed’ approach.**

**Someone who displays or invites:**

- **Acknowledgment of Trauma**
  - **Safety**
  - **Trust**
  - **Choice and Control**
- **Compassion / Strength-Based**
  - **Collaboration**

## YOUR SUPPORT PEOPLE

Having supportive people in your life is an important part of the healing journey. Reach out and surround yourself with friends, family or professionals who will support you as you recover.

It may feel like some people are not supporting you. Some of the reasons why family and friends may act unsupportive are:

- They may have been brought up to believe many of the myths about sexual assault.
- They may blame themselves - for example because they did not offer to drive you someplace or they let you go out alone.
- They may have feelings of shock, disbelief or denial.
- They may feel anger and may direct this anger at you.

- They may feel that by not talking about the situation it will go away.
- They may feel helpless and not know how to support you.
- They may be affected by the sexual assault in some way and need support for themselves.

## FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS

### The importance of the supporter's response:

If a survivor chooses to share with you what happened to them, it means they trust you to support them through this very traumatic and personal experience. What you say and do makes a big difference in how they feel and respond to the trauma of being sexually assaulted. Sexual assault violates a survivor's sense of self, their sense of safety, and the way they see the world around them.

It is normal for a survivor to experience a range of emotions after a sexual assault. It is helpful to validate these feelings. Remember, survivors are never at fault. It is essential for you, the supporter, to recognize these are all normal reactions to a sexual assault and healing from this trauma is a different process for each individual.

When a survivor shares with you that they have been sexually assaulted believe what they tell you. Do not blame them in any way for what happened. Sexual assault is a crime committed against the survivor and is an act of aggression and violence. Understand that whatever the survivor did during the assault was the safest choice they could make for themselves at the time.

Some supporters may be interested in the details of the assault or in the sexual aspects of the crime. Never ask a survivor probing questions. The survivor may not feel comfortable speaking in depth about the assault. Sexual assault is not sex...it is violence. Let them know you care about them and you will be there for them.

It is common for the supporter to feel the need to protect the survivor. Try to not be overprotective. Remember, a survivor needs to regain control of their life, meaning they need to make their own decisions and ask for help as and when they need it.

Be supportive, empathetic and understanding. Remember that the assault is only one part of the person's life.

- Ask how you can be of most support to the survivor.
- Encourage the survivor to talk about the assault without prying. "Tell me

as much as you are comfortable with”.

- Support the survivor to make decisions, i.e. who to tell, whether to report to the police, where to stay, etc. Do not take over for them.

People who have been sexually assaulted often want to be around family and friends for safety and to keep busy. However, they will likely not want to be the centre of attention or really sociable.

Be aware that pornography could be distressing or destructive to a survivor’s sense of self.

Understand that people who have been sexually assaulted often can’t take out their anger and frustration on the attacker and may instead vent these feelings on family and friends. Ensure the survivor has your support to feel safe and express all their emotions.

### **Taking care of yourself as the supporter:**

Those close to a survivor may also experience confusing emotions. Feelings may include disbelief, depression, anger or guilt. You may feel anger at what happened and towards the person who committed the crime. It is normal to be overwhelmed by the situation and feel helpless. Seek the support you need from someone other than the survivor, perhaps a friend or a sexual assault counsellor. Talk to people you trust and be respectful of the survivor’s confidentiality and right to privacy. You can contact VictimLinkBC at 1-800-563-0808 to find out about resources in your community

If you as a support person feel overwhelmed or distressed, try referring to the grounding exercises in this booklet.

The ways in which family and friends react to a sexual assault will have a significant impact on the survivor’s recovery.

# WHAT I NEED FROM YOU

## from a survivor

### *Start by believing.*

**Listen** and encourage me to tell you only what I am comfortable talking about. Focus on my feelings and reactions rather than on the “story” of what happened.

**Restore my power.** The abuser didn’t give me a choice. From now on, I need you to assist me to make decisions by giving me options and respecting my choices.

I need your **support**, but if you try to “rescue” me, give me advice, or take over, you are taking away my power.

**Understand** that I might feel shock, fear, disbelief, numb, anger, and/or shame and these are all normal and valid reactions to the violence.

Assist me to understand that **it wasn’t my fault**. What I did or didn’t do isn’t the problem. The abuser’s behavior and actions were wrong.

**Respect my dignity.** Please don’t tell others about my experience without my permission.

**Take care of yourself** and understand that your reactions to what happened to me may differ from mine.

**Give me the time I need to recover at my own pace.**

# RESOURCES

## HEALTH

### VERNON JUBILEE HOSPITAL

Medical treatment for injuries, sexually transmitted infections, emergency contraception, sexual assault forensic examinations. 250-545-2211.

### OPTIONS FOR SEXUAL HEALTH VERNON

Sexual and reproductive health services for all ages, genders and orientations. Confidential, non-judgmental, youth-friendly, pro-choice and sex-positive services. 250-241-3154

### VERNON URGENT AND PRIMARY CARE CENTRE

Available to community members who have a non-life-threatening condition and need to see a health-care provider within 12 to 24 hours and cannot access a walk-in clinic. 250-541-1097

### VERNON MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE, INTERIOR HEALTH

Free drug and alcohol treatment and prevention counselling. 250-549-5737

### HEALTHLINK BC

Consultation with a nurse.  
\*811

### TRANS CARE BC

Supports the delivery of equitable and accessible care, surgical planning, and peer and community support for trans people across the province.

Transcarebc.ca  
1-866-999-1514

### PHARMACIES

Pharmacies will provide emergency contraceptives directly to the person who requires the medication.

## REPORTING

### RCMP NORTH OKANAGAN/ VERNON

In an emergency call 911  
Vernon: 250-545-7171  
Armstrong: 250-546-3028  
Enderby: 250-838-6818  
Falkland: 250-379-2311  
Lumby: 250-547-2151

## SUPPORT

### COMMUNITY-BASED VICTIM SERVICES, ARCHWAY SOCIETY FOR DOMESTIC PEACE

Support, advocacy, court accompaniment, information about your rights and options, support to report to police including anonymous reporting for adults. 250-542-3322 for adults  
778-475-2920 for youth

**POLICE-BASED VICTIM SERVICES, NORTH OKANAGAN/ VERNON RCMP DETACHMENT**  
Support and court accompaniment for victims of crime.  
250-260-7171

**FAMILY RESOURCE CENTRE**  
Historical sexual abuse counselling for adults, sexual assault intervention program (for children & youth), support groups and family counselling.  
250-545-3390

**VICTIMLINK BC**  
A confidential, multilingual telephone service available 24/7. hours a day, It provides information and referral to local victim service programs to all victims of crime and immediate crisis support to victims of family and sexual violence.  
1-800-563-0808 or email  
VictimLinkBC@bc211.ca

## **SHELTER**

**VERNON WOMEN'S TRANSITION HOUSE, ARCHWAY SOCIETY FOR DOMESTIC PEACE**  
Shelter and support for women and children who are experiencing violence.  
250-542-1122

**OUR PLACE SHELTER, TURNING POINTS COLLABORATIVE SOCIETY**  
Low barrier shelter in Vernon for men and women.  
250-542-4041









**Archway  
Society**  
FOR DOMESTIC PEACE

**Community-based Victim Services:  
250-542-3322**

**Transition House & 24/7 Support Line:  
250-542-1122**

**Administration Office:  
250-558-3850**

**[www.archwaysociety.ca](http://www.archwaysociety.ca)**

**IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW HAS  
BEEN AFFECTED BY SEXUAL ASSAULT,  
CALL US.**

**WE WILL STAND  
BESIDE YOU.**

Thank you to Central Okanagan Elizabeth Fry Society for sharing the information in their booklet: "You Are Not Alone".

DESIGN SPONSOR:  
Jen Boucher | [callthebouch.com](http://callthebouch.com)