

# YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Information for individuals affected by sexual assault and  
their loved ones

a guide from



central okanagan

**elizabeth fry**  
society



# WHAT I NEED FROM YOU

from a survivor

**Start by believing.**

**Listen** and encourage me to tell you only what I am comfortable with 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 help me 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 these are all normal and valid reactions to the violence.

Help me 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 to 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

## **KELOWNA GENERAL HOSPITAL**

Medical treatment for injuries, sexual assault forensic examinations. 250.862.4000

## **RCMP**

250.763.3300

## **CENTRAL OKANAGAN ELIZABETH FRY SOCIETY**

Support, advocacy, court accompaniment, information about your rights and options, help with reporting to police, & Sexual Assault Counselling Centre. 250.763.4613 (we accept collect calls)

## **RCMP VICTIM SERVICES:**

250.470.6242

## **KELOWNA FAMILY CENTRE**

Stopping the Violence  
Counselling for women, child, and family counselling. 250.860.3181

## **KELOWNA WOMEN'S SHELTER**

Shelter and support for women and children who are experiencing abuse.  
250.763.1040

## **NOW CANADA**

Housing, low barrier shelter, and recovery for women exiting the sex trade.  
250.763.3876  
Low Barrier Shelter: 250.763.2262

## **KELOWNA ALCOHOL AND DRUG SERVICES**

Free drug and alcohol treatment and prevention counselling.  
250.868.7788

## **OPTIONS FOR SEXUAL HEALTH**

Non-judgmental free pregnancy testing, STI testing, pregnancy and contraception counselling.  
1.800.739.7367

Emergency contraception is readily available at your local pharmacy without prescription. There is no age requirement. The options for sexual health clinics can provide more information and options for emergency contraception.

## **24HR VICTIMLINK**

Anonymous information and referral for all victims of crime.  
1.800.563.0808

# ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT

Sexual assault is a crime of violence committed against someone's will. People do not ask, want or enjoy being sexually assaulted. Individuals who have experienced sexual assault, regardless of any risks they may have taken are not to blame for the assault. Furthermore, sexual assault is the only crime in which the victim may feel that they are at fault or to blame. Therefore, it is important to examine some of the feelings and emotions experienced by individuals who have been sexually assaulted to allow us to better understand, support and assist in their recovery.

Sexual Assault is an act of power and aggression - not sexuality



# YOUR OPTIONS

## SEXUAL ASSAULT EVIDENCE KIT

You may choose to have a sexual assault forensic exam, sometimes known as a “rape kit,” to preserve possible DNA evidence and receive important medical care. You don’t have to report the crime to have an exam, but the process gives you the chance to safely store evidence for up to one year should you decide to report at a later time. Not only does DNA evidence carry weight in court, but it may prevent future sexual assaults from occurring. Even if the perpetrator is not prosecuted, their DNA may be added to the national database, making it easier to connect the perpetrator to a future crime. (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network)

## REPORTING THE INCIDENT

There is no time limit for you to go to the police and report a sexual assault. As an adult, you have the right to decide whether or not to report to the police. To find out more about your reporting options, you may choose to contact the Elizabeth Fry Society. Our services are private and confidential; you will not be required to make a police report in order to access counselling or advocacy from the Elizabeth Fry Society. If you choose to report the incident to the police, a police officer will take a detailed report about the sexual assault. If the case proceeds to court, you will be called as a witness to describe your experience of the sexual assault. Going to court is a very individual experience. A Victim Service Worker from the Central Okanagan Elizabeth Fry Society can assist and support you during this process. You will likely feel better about the court process if you are supported and informed throughout it. (Victoria Sexual Assault Centre, Toronto Police Services)

## THIRD PARTY REPORTING

In British Columbia, Third Party Reporting (TPR) of sexual assault is a process which allows adult victims (19 and over) to report details of a sexual offence/assault to police anonymously, through a Community Based Victim Services Program (CBVS). TPR for survivors under 19 is possible, but the process needs to be worked out at the local level between Community-Based Victim Services (CBVS) and police on a case-by-case discretionary basis. TPR connects victims to specialized supports, gives victims needed time to decide if and when they are ready to engage the criminal justice system, and provides police with critical information about sex crime patterns within and across police jurisdictions. (Victoria Sexual Assault Centre)

## NO POLICE INVOLVEMENT

Not involving the police is a right that you have as a victim. There are many reasons why not involving the police may be the right decision for you. Parents, partners and friends may not understand your decision due to their own feelings and thoughts. Remember, you know what is best for you at this time and only you can make this important decision.

## HEALING

With help and 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 as well as counselling. Some people use drugs, alcohol, or cutting to try to numb out, relieve dissociation, or stay calm—this can be destructive and can lead to addictions. Seek help if this is a problem for you. When you are ready, you may choose to contact the Elizabeth Fry Society to discuss your options. A list of community resources with phone numbers has been provided at the front of this booklet.

# SEXUAL ASSAULT TRAUMA AND POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS RESPONSES

Survivors of sexual assault suffer a significant degree 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 indicators over and over again 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. Some of the elements that affect the severity of the reaction include the amount of force used, the extent of physical or emotional injury, the survivor's prior relationship with the offender, the response of other people to the assault, whether the survivor was about to fight against the attacker, and the survivor's life history prior to the assault (i.e. emotional and physical health, and prior assaults/abuse or other traumas).

The responses to trauma can be divided into three fairly distinct stages of recovery: the acute phase (disorganization), the outward adjustment phase (transition/pseudo-resolution phase) and the long-term process (reorganization).

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

## The Three Stages of Recovery:

1. Initial Response Phase
2. Adjustment and Transition Phase
3. Resolution Phase

### 1. THE INITIAL RESPONSE PHASE

This occurs immediately after the assault and lasts for several weeks, and may result in a complete disruption of the survivor's life. There are 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 her or his 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 her or his voice, facial or body language. This controlled response is often misinterpreted as evidence 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 assailant, fear of other people's reactions (i.e. being judged/blamed) or fear of the inability to return to normal life.

Guilt is also a very common reaction, such as feeling that she or he is somehow responsible for the assault and could have prevented it.

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



## 2. ADJUSTMENT & TRANSITION PHASE

In this phase, realistic problems and consequences replace the emotion turmoil created by the assault. There may be a decrease in anxiety level, 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.

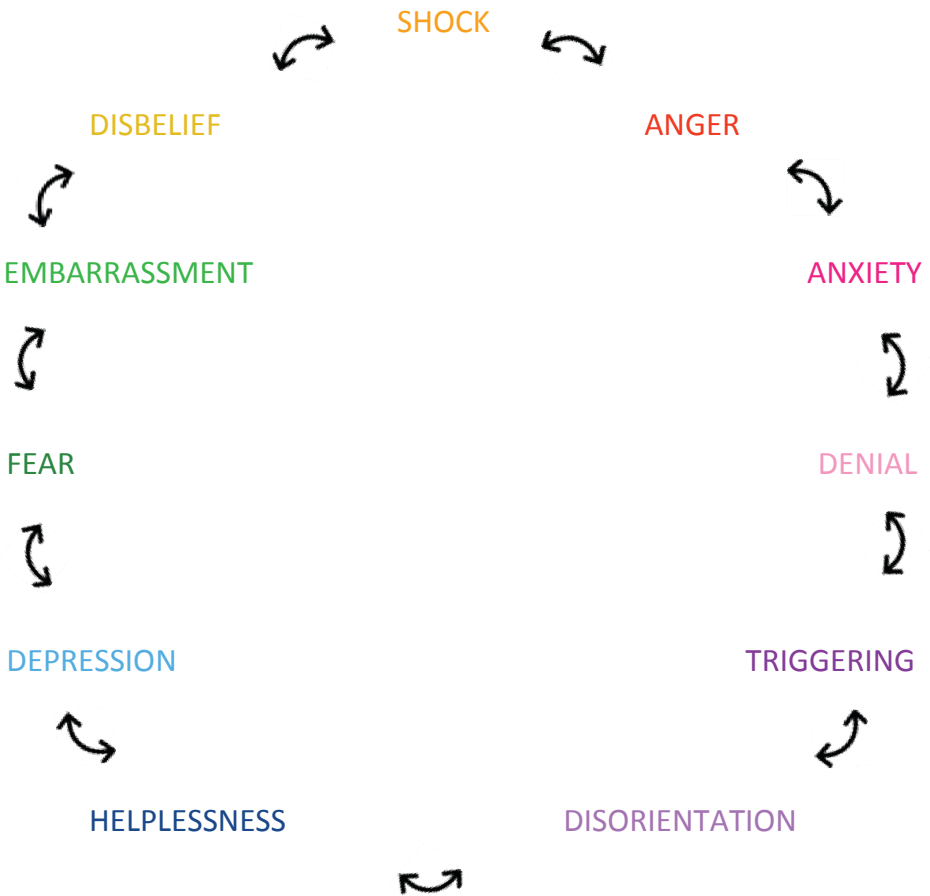
Friends and family who know about the assault may be confused by the survivors behavior ( i.e. seemingly ‘over’ the assault) or frustrated that she or he doesn’t want to share her or his feelings, etc. as she or he may have wanted to in the first phase. Friends and family need to know that this is very common among survivors of sexual assault, and that in time, the survivor may wish to talk about it.

## 3. RESOLUTION PHASE

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

In this stage the survivor acknowledges the impact of the assault, integrates feeling/thoughts/body sensations, works through the grief and losses she or he experienced, etc. Individuals do not “forget” the trauma they experienced, but through resolution, can continue on with their lives as healthy, happy persons.

# COMMON REACTIONS TO SEXUAL ASSAULT



# AFTER A SEXUAL ASSAULT...

A survivor may explain **feeling**:

- Anxiety, confusion, shock and disbelief.
- Anger, aggression, or 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.

A survivor may appear anywhere on a continuum from calm and collected to frantic and distraught. **All are ways of coping.**

A survivor may explain **reacting** by:

- Fighting back
- Trying to get away
- Feeling frozen — unable to move, unable to speak, or feeling mentally removed from their bodies.

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

A survivor may be able to **remember**:

- Only disorganized bits and pieces of the assault
- Only sensory details (e.g., 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 recall the event afterwards.

A survivor may explain **changes in behavior** 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 behaviors in day-to-day life.

# GROUNDING EXERCISES

People who have experienced childhood sexual abuse or adult sexual assault can sometimes be confronted by flashbacks or intense memories of what was done, to the point that they feel as if they are back there, re-living the abuse all over again.

Grounding exercises are things you can do to bring yourself into contact with the present moment—the here and now. Different strategies work for different people, and there is no “wrong” way to ground yourself. The main aim is to keep your mind and body connected and working together.

- 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, the sensation of your clothes as you move 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 laying 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.
- Stomp your feet, and notice the sensation and sound as you connect to 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, and 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.

# MYTHS ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT

MYTH

Sexual assaults occur in cities at night in dark alleys.

TRUTH

Sexual assault can happen anywhere, anytime.

MYTH

It could never happen to me.

TRUTH

There is a possibility of anyone being sexually assaulted - men, women and children

MYTH

Once a guy is turned on, it is too late to say no.

TRUTH

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

MYTH

A husband cannot be charged with sexual assault.

TRUTH

It is a crime for anyone to sexually assault another, including husbands, boyfriend/girlfriends, partners, etc.

MYTH

Sexual assaults is perpetrated by strangers.

TRUTH

85% of victims know the person who assaulted them.

MYTH

All victims of sexual assault are frantic and upset.

TRUTH

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

MYTH

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

TRUTH

Only yes mean yes. People react to violence in many different ways. If a person does not fight, it does not mean they consent.

MYTH

There is a high rate of false reports of sexual assaults.

TRUTH

The rate of false reporting is 4% - the same rate for all other crimes.

MYTH

If a person has been drinking or using drugs it's her fault for not protecting herself.

TRUTH

It is never okay to coerce or use a person for sex. Being intoxicated is not a crime. Using someone for sex against her will is a crime.

# INFORMATION FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS

The way in which family and friends react to a sexual assault will have a significant impact on the survivor's recovery. Some family and friends will react in a positive and supportive manner and therefore help to lessen the emotional impact of the crime upon the survivor.

Others may unknowingly add to the person's stress.

If the survivor feels that family or friends will react in an unhelpful way, she or he may choose not to talk about the assault with them. The survivor may choose to only discuss the situation with a social worker, doctor, professional, clergy or counselor. By looking at some of the reasons why family and friends may act in unhelpful ways, we may be able to learn, better understand and help reduce the intensity of the emotional reactions of the survivor.

- Family and friends may have been brought up to believe many of the myths about sexual assault. They may view it as a crime of passion, not as a crime of violence.
- They may blame the person for “asking for it”.
- They may need support and therefore are unable to be supportive of the person; the assault may have been traumatic for them too.
- They may blame themselves because they did not offer to drive the survivor someplace or they let the survivor go out alone.
- They may have feelings of shock, embarrassment, disbelief or denial.
- They may feel anger and direct this anger at the survivor.
- They may feel that by not talking about the situation it will go away.
- They may feel helpless and not know how to help the person who's been assaulted.



# FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS WHO WANT TO HELP

- Be supportive, empathetic and understanding. One of the biggest problems for survivors is the reaction of those around them. Remember that the assault is only one part of the person's life.
- Ask how you can be of most help to the survivor.
- Encourage the survivor to talk about the assault without prying. "Tell me as much as you are comfortable with".
- Help 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 center of attention or really sociable.
- Be aware that pornography, which shows women being victimized or foolish, is destructive to the person'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. Old problems seem greater.
- Find out more about sexual assault and ways in which you can help. Getting involved with the Central Okanagan Elizabeth Fry Society is a great place to start.
- If you feel overwhelmed or distressed, try referring to the grounding exercises on pages 12 and 13 of this booklet.

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

# NICOLE'S STORY

After a gathering of friends & family to celebrate my birthday I was sexually assaulted by an acquaintance who used a drug to incapacitate me. Paralyzed, but awake, all I could do was stare out of the window during the entire assault. After the attack I contacted the Specialized Victim Assistance Program at the Elizabeth Fry Society. To my relief, the E Fry advocate who took my call and agreed to accompany me to the hospital. At the hospital, she provided me with much needed support, told me what to expect, and helped me to understand my options. I drew great courage from the respect and support that I received from those around me. I decided to report the incident to the police and it has taken five long years to bring my attacker to justice. The Elizabeth Fry Society provided a safe place where I can speak with trusted and knowledgeable people, learn about my rights as a victim of sexual assault, and gain a voice in the justice system.



Nicole's advocate at the Elizabeth Fry Society has been beside her through the whole court process, encouraging her to advocate for her rights, and stick with the process — however slow it was, no matter how hopeless it seemed.

# NOTES

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If you or someone you know has been affected by sexual assault, call us. We will stand beside you.



central okanagan

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Kelowna, BC V1Y 9S3  
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**United Way**

Central & South  
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