



Self-Care Packet

Table of Contents

Common Reactions to Sexual Assault	2
The Decision to Heal: Easing the emergency state	3-4
Dealing with Panic: Calming Down	5
After you've Calmed Down: Assessing the Causes	6
Self-Care after Trauma	7-9

Some ideas for self-care:

Call a friend who can listen to you without trying to “fix” anything; talk to a therapist; go for a run; punch a pillow when you get home; journal at a cafe; play with your pet; visit the ocean at high tide and yell along the waves; make cookies or buttered popcorn; prepare a whole meal that tastes good and feeds you well; rest; put on your favorite music while walking or driving home and sing along at the top of your voice; go dancing; take a hot bath; write in your journal; snuggle with stuffed animals; spend an hour in the sun with a good book; walk in nature; garden or smell the roses; watch the birds; go for a bike ride; bake bread; make a cup of tea or coffee; binge watch a ridiculous show; find an old movie that is sure to make you cry and then one that makes you laugh...

Common Reactions

Each survivor of sexual assault responds uniquely to the assault, and the recovery process is different for each individual. These reactions may be experienced days, months, or years after



Self-Care Packet

an assault. Survivors suffer a great deal of physical and emotional trauma as a result of a sexual assault. Responses to a sexual assault can be immediate or delayed. Because people react in different ways to stress, it is not possible to predict exactly how you will feel. It may be helpful, however, for you to know some of the common responses other sexual assault survivors have experienced. There are common patterns to trauma recovery that are normative and natural.

Survivors can expect to experience some or many of the following physical, emotional, cognitive, or social symptoms:

PHYSICAL EFFECTS

- | | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| •changes in eating patterns | •HIV/AIDS | •sexually transmitted diseases |
| •changes in sleeping patterns | •muscular tension | •substance abuse |
| •eating disorders | •nightmares | •soreness |
| •fatigue | •physical injuries | •stress related depression |
| •gastrointestinal irritability | •pregnancy | •immune system response |
| •headaches | | |

EMOTIONAL EFFECTS

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| •anger | •helplessness | •sense of disbelief |
| •anxiety | •hopelessness | •sense of unreality |
| •denial | •muscular tension | •shame, guilt, self-blame |
| •depression, sadness | •mood swings | •vulnerability |
| •embarrassment, feeling exposed, humiliated | •numbness | •shock |
| •fear | •obsessions/compulsions | |
| | •phobias | |

COGNITIVE EFFECTS

- | | | |
|--|---|----------------------------|
| •am I damaged goods? | •confusion | •what if I hadn't done...? |
| •am I dirty? | •difficulty concentrating | •what will people think? |
| •bad things happen to bad people, good things happen to good people; therefore I must be bad | •flashbacks | •why me? |
| | •I deserved it because... | •will others reject me? |
| | •if I forget about it, it will go away... | •will they blame me? |

SOCIAL EFFECTS

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| •changes in lifestyle | similar attributes to the perpetrator | •fear/nervousness in crowds |
| •difficulty getting things accomplished | •discomfort around other people | •hypersensitivity when relating to others |
| •difficulty with intimacy | •disruption in sexual relations | •loss of trust in self and others |
| •difficulty/apprehension around men or apprehension around persons having | •fear of being alone | •withdrawal from people, relationships, activities |
| | •fear of leaving house (especially alone) | |

The Decision to Heal: Easing the Intensity of the Emergency Stage

The decision to heal from sexual abuse/assault is a powerful, life-affirming choice. It's a commitment that every survivor deserves to make. For every survivor, it's a commitment that arises from different life circumstances. Yet many survivors believe that they are the exception.



Self-Care Packet

You may sincerely believe that others can heal but don't think it's possible for you. Or you may think that you don't deserve it. Everyone deserves to heal, and healing is possible for everyone.

And while it's worthwhile, healing is never easy. You may wonder if it's worth it to take the risk. Often the decision to heal wreaks havoc with friendships, marriages, and family relationships. It can be hard to function, to go to work, to study, to think, to smile. It can even be hard to sleep, to eat, or simply to stop crying. Deciding to heal means opening up not only to past hurt but also to hope. For many survivors, hope has brought only disappointment.

There is something about facing the thing that you most fear that is strangely relieving. There is comfort in knowing that you don't have to pretend anymore, that you are going to do everything within your power to heal. One survivor remarked:

If I had known that anything could hurt this much or could be this sad, I never would have decided to heal. For a long time, I felt like a victim of the process. The memories were like one of those plastic raincoats that come in a two-inch package. Once I opened them up, I could never fold them neatly back inside. Though sometimes I want to crawl into a dark place and hide from reality, and other times I want to give up completely, I go on. I don't know where this "healing" will lead me. I live on other people's faith that life will get better. I continue to wonder whether it is worth it, but I go on. This, then, is healing.

Many people go through a period when the assault or abuse is literally all they can think about. You may find yourself talking about it obsessively with anyone who will listen, having uncontrollable flashbacks, crying all day long, or unable to go to work or school. Your life may be full of overwhelming crisis. You may dream about the abuser/perpetrator or be afraid to sleep.

People often describe the early stages of healing as a variety of natural disasters: "It was like being lifted up in a twister...like being caught in an avalanche...it was like a volcano erupting." The emergency stage is not something you choose, yet it must be ridden through to the other side. It cannot be ignored or pushed away through a force of will. As one survivor aptly stated, "It's like learning a new word. Within days, you start seeing it in everything you read and you never saw it before in your life."

If the start of your healing feels turbulent and overwhelming, the important thing to remember is that the emergency stage is a natural part of the healing process, and it will get better. The nature of crisis is that it consumes you; while you are in it, it may be all you can see. But there will be a time when you will not think, eat, and dream sexual trauma twenty four hours a day.

If you are in the emergency stage, that time will not come a moment too soon.

Although entering into the process of healing from sexual assault/abuse means facing painful realities, there are ways to ease the impact of this challenging time. It's both helpful and wise to do all you can to take good care of yourself.

The work of healing should not be retraumatizing. If you find that the intensity of your feelings is unmanageable, try to pace the process. Full speed ahead is not always the most effective way to proceed.

When things are particularly rough, here are some things that can help:



Self-Care Packet

- **Know that you're not going crazy.** What you're going through is a recognized part of the healing process.
- **Find people you can talk to.** Don't try to bear it alone.
- **Get support from other survivors.** It's unlikely that anyone other than another survivor can listen as much as you'll need to talk.
- **Seek out skilled professional support.**
- **Create a safe place in your home.** You need at least one place where you can feel safe.
- **Accept where you are right now.** Don't make things worse by criticizing yourself for not being farther along on the journey.
- **Sit tight and ride out the storm.** Your decision making capability is limited right now. The emergency stage is usually not a good time for making major life changes.
- **Get out of abusive situations.** If you're currently in an abusive relationship, take steps to get out of it.
- **Drop what isn't essential in your life.** Release the pressure any way you can. This isn't the time to take on difficult challenges, extra work, or more responsibilities. But if there are pleasurable activities that you enjoy and that nourish you, keep them up.
- **Watch your intake of drugs and alcohol.** Repeatedly numbing your feelings will only prolong the crisis.
- **Look for financial and material aid if you need it.** There may be government assistance you're eligible for, counseling offered through community groups, or just help from your friends (meals, a spare room, an old car, or a bike that isn't being used). Don't be ashamed if you need extra help right now.
- **Don't hurt or try to kill yourself.** You deserve to live. If you start feeling suicidal or self-destructive, reach out.
- **Remind yourself that you're brave.** This is a challenging, scary, difficult period. You don't have to do anything but live through it.
- **Remember to breathe.** Stay as connected to your body as you can.
- **Spirituality can give you inspiration and strength.** Stay connected to spiritual beliefs that bring you comfort.
- **Consult with a doctor about medication, if necessary.** If you're doing everything you can to help yourself and you're still severely anxious, depressed or unable to sleep, talk to a professional about the advisability of medication to help you through this crisis.
- **This too shall pass.** Your experience tomorrow or next week or next year will not be the same as it is right now.

Dealing with Panic: Calming Down

The most effective way to deal with panic is to catch it early. Once panic spirals out of control, it's more difficult to manage, but at least you can keep yourself focused in a positive direction so that you don't hurt yourself or others. The important thing in calming down is to do whatever works for you, as long as it is safe, even if it seems silly or embarrassing. Through trial and error, you can develop a list of things that help. Try including activities that engage as many of the senses as possible: Feeling, hearing, sight, taste, smell. And it's important to reach out to others, even if it's the last thing you want to do.



Self-Care Packet

Because you don't think as clearly or creatively when you're in a panic, make a list in a calm moment and keep it handy (i.e. on your phone, in your purse or backpack, etc). If it's all written out ahead of time, you only have to pick up your list, start at the top, and work your way down.

A sample list might look like this:

Things to do when I'm desperate:

1. Breathe
2. Look around at my environment. Acknowledge where I am and what is actually happening.
3. Put on a relaxing tape
4. Get in my rocking chair.
5. Call Natalie: 555-9887
6. Call Jill if Natalie's not home: 555-6632. Keep calling down my list of support people [Put their names and numbers here.]
7. Pet my cat/dog.
8. Take a hot bath.
9. Meditate.
10. Do a simple physical task such as tidying up your room/closet, sweeping the floor, washing dishes, cleaning the bathtub, or scrubbing the stove.
11. Run around the block three times.
12. Listen to soothing music.
13. Pray.
14. Write in my journal.
15. Draw, paint, work in clay, or make a collage.
16. Breathe.
17. Leave the house and do something safe that I enjoy.
18. Yell into my pillow.
19. Watch an old movie on TV/computer or read a mystery novel.
20. Eat something healthy and comforting [Name the food here and keep it on hand]
21. Start again at the top.

Your list will be different and will probably change over time. If you get all the way to the bottom of your list and still don't feel better, you can start again at the top.

Change Your Environment

Consciously changing your environment can sometimes bring you out of panic. This can be as simple as leaving your bedroom and walking into the kitchen to make tea. Or you can leave your house and take a walk down the block. You can go for a swim—or take a bath or shower. Water can be very soothing. If you're out in nature, looking up at the stars or trees can give you a sense of perspective.

Sometimes the things that upset you are sensory reminders of the abuse/assault. The smell of a certain cologne or the tone of someone's voice can really trigger anxiety. By becoming aware of your own triggers, you will be better equipped to respond when you encounter them.

Some things to Avoid

Almost anything that works is fair game in dealing with panic, but there are a few things you should avoid whenever possible:

- Don't enter stressful or dangerous situations.



Self-Care Packet

- Stay off the road.
- Don't abuse drugs or alcohol.
- Avoid making important decisions unless they are essential for your safety.
- Don't hurt yourself or anyone else.
- Avoid people who aren't safe or trustworthy.

After you've calmed down: Assessing the causes

When you're on the other side of a panic attack, relax and rest a bit. Such emotional intensity is exhausting, and you need to replenish your energy. When you feel balanced again, try to determine what triggered the panic. The following questions might help:

- What was the last thing you remembered before you felt overwhelmed?
- Where were you? Who were you with?
- Was there anything disturbing that happened to you in the last day or two? (An upset at work? With a friend? Family? A partner? Did you get a disturbing phone call, letter, or e-mail?)
- Was there a glimmer of any other feeling before you lost touch with yourself? Is this something you've felt before?
- Are you under any unusual stresses? Time pressures? Deadlines? Money pressures?
- Were there thoughts that you quickly pushed away because they were uncomfortable? Were they old, familiar ones?
- Do any of these things remind you of your abuse in any way?

Sometimes questions like these can help you identify what led to a panic attack. It may take a series of episodes with similar dynamics before you can pinpoint the source, but it's worth the work. Once you discover the circumstances that trigger feelings of panic, self-hate, despair, then you can anticipate them and deal with them more effectively.

The importance of self-care:

Learning to nurture yourself is critical- not only in times of crisis. Self-care is at the core of healing. Like many survivors, you may believe that you deserve to take care of yourself only when your life is absolutely falling apart. But this isn't so. With intention and practice, tending to your emotional needs can become a regular daily habit, like brushing your teeth.

See next pages for Self-Care after Trauma

Self-Care after Trauma

Originally published by RAINN.org

Good self-care is a challenge for many people and it can be especially challenging for survivors of rape, sexual assault, and sexual abuse. It can also be an important part of the healing process.

Physical self-care is an area that people often overlook.

Food

- Food is a type of self-care that people often overlook. People are often so busy that they don't have time to eat regularly or that they substitute fast food for regular meals.
- It's not always reasonable to expect people to get 3 square meals a day (plus snacks!) but everyone should make sure they get adequate nutrition.



Self-Care Packet

Exercise

- Exercise is one of the most overlooked types of self-care. The CDC recommends at least 30 minutes of exercise 5 times a week.
- Exercise, even if it's just a quick walk at lunchtime, can help combat feelings of sadness or depression and prevent chronic health problems.

Sleep

- Although everyone has different needs, a reasonable guideline is that most people need between 7-10 hours of sleep per night.
- See this Medline Plus article for more information about getting a good night's sleep.

Medical care

- Getting medical attention when you need it is an important form of physical self-care.
- Some survivors put off getting medical care until problems that might have been relatively easy to take care of have become more complicated.

Emotional self-care will mean different things for different people. It might mean...

Counseling

- This could mean seeing a psychologist, a clinical social worker, or therapist.
- Local rape crisis centers often provide counseling or can connect you with a provider. Call (800) 656-HOPE or go to <http://centers.rainn.org/> to find a center near you.

Keeping a journal.

- Some survivors find that recording their thoughts and feelings in a journal or diary helps them manage their emotions after an assault.

Meditation or relaxation exercises

- Relaxation techniques or meditation help many survivors with their emotional self-care. For example: Sit or stand comfortably, with your feet flat on the floor and your back straight. Place one hand over your belly button. Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose and let your stomach expand as you inhale. Hold your breath for a few seconds, then exhale slowly through your mouth, sighing as you breathe out. Concentrate on relaxing your stomach muscles as you breathe in. When you are doing this exercise correctly, you will feel your stomach rise and fall about an inch as you breathe in and out. Try to keep the rest of your body relaxed—your shoulders should not rise and fall as you breathe! Slowly count

to 4 as you inhale and to 4 again as you exhale. At the end of the exhalation, take another deep breath. After 3-4 cycles of breathing you should begin to feel the calming effects.

Emotional self-care can also involve the people around you. It's important to make sure that the people in your life are supportive.

Nurture relationships with people that make you feel good about yourself! Make spending time with friends and family a priority.

- If you have trouble finding people who can support your experience as a survivor, consider joining a support group for survivors.

Be wary of...

- Friends or family who only call when they need something
- People who always leave you feeling tired or depressed when you see them
- Friends who never have the time to listen to you
- Anyone who dismisses or belittles your experience as a survivor



Self-Care Packet

You can deal with these people by setting limits.

- You don't have to cut them out of your life (especially with family, that may not even be an option!) but choose the time you will spend with them carefully.
- Make sure that your time with these people has a clear end.
- Cut back on the time you spend with people who don't make you feel good, or spend time with them in a group rather than one-on-one.
- Screen your calls!! There's no rule that says you have to answer your phone every time it rings. If you don't feel like talking on the phone, call people back at a time that's more convenient for you.

You can deal with these people by letting some go.

- If there are people in your life who consistently make you feel bad about yourself, consider letting those friendships or relationships go. This can be a difficult decision. Remember that you deserve to have people around you who genuinely care about you and who support you.

Another challenge can be in finding time for fun leisure activities. Many survivors have full time jobs, go to school, volunteer and have families. Finding time to do activities that you enjoy is an important aspect of self-care.

- **Get involved in a sport or hobby** that you love!! Find other people who are doing the same thing! Knowing that people are counting on you to show up can help motivate you.
- **Make a date night**, if you have a spouse or partner, and stick with it – turn off your cell phones!
- **Treat leisure appointments as seriously as business appointments.** If you have plans to do something for fun, mark it on your calendar!

Self-Care Wheel

Your self-care and life balance is vital for your health, productivity and happiness. Whether your focus right now is on your basic needs, deep desires or both - remember that investing in your wellness is fundamental to becoming fulfilled and whole.



Self-Care Packet



This Self-Care Wheel was inspired by and adapted from "Self-Care Assessment Worksheet" from *Transforming the Pain: A Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization* by Saakvitne, Pearlman & Staff of TSI/CAAP (Norton, 1996). Created by Olina Phoenix Project: Healing for Social Change (2012)

This Self-Care Wheel was adapted from UCLA CARE's Yoga As Healing (YAH) Program