

# YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Information for Individuals  
Affected by Sexual Assault

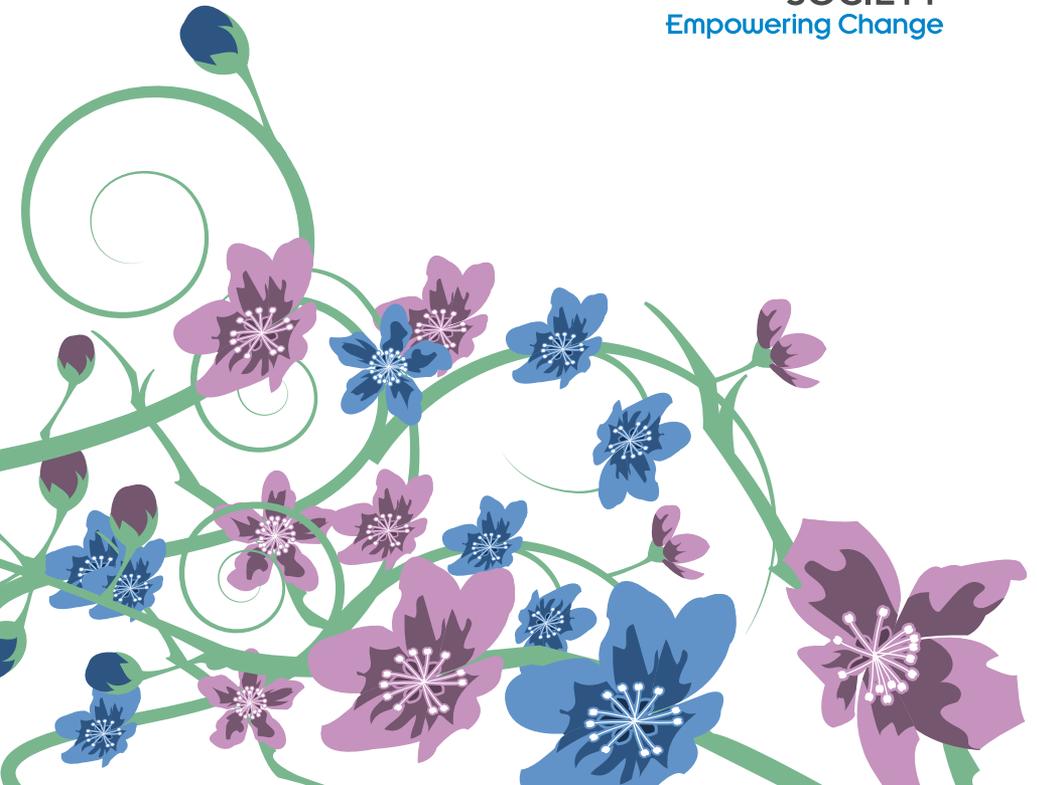
---

A GUIDE FROM

CENTRAL OKANAGAN

**ELIZABETH FRY  
SOCIETY**

Empowering Change



## 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 action 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.**

## 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.

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

Furthermore, sexual assault is the only crime in which the individual may feel or be treated as the accused. 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.



# COMMON REACTIONS TO SEXUAL ASSAULT

## **SHOCK**

Many survivors experience a state of shock. You may be unable to express yourself coherently or may feel disoriented. You may even feel numbness or a certain degree of calmness. Some individuals may joke, and laugh; this does not mean they are not affected by the assault, but rather, may be using humour as a way of ‘distancing’ themselves from the incident as a coping mechanism.

## **DISBELIEF**

Many people react with disbelief. You may even doubt you were really sexually assaulted. Another common question is: Why me? I didn’t do anything to warrant an assault.

## **EMBARRASSMENT**

You may be wondering: What will people think of me? I can’t tell anyone. I’m too ashamed. What if I do tell someone and they don’t believe me? I can’t face anyone.

## **FEAR**

Fear is also a common reaction to a sexual assault, as with other traumas. You may be thinking or expressing: I’m scared to be alone. Am I ever going to feel safe again? Will I get pregnant or get a sexually transmitted infection? I’m afraid to go out by myself. Will I ever feel normal again? Can I ever be intimate again? Will people be able to tell I’ve been assaulted? I keep having nightmares. I’m frightened to death.

## **DEPRESSION**

There is a certain level of sadness, even depression, that accompanies a sexual assault. You may be feeling: I can’t go on. I feel so tired and helpless. I don’t seem to care about anything or anyone anymore. I can’t seem to get motivated.

## **HELPLESSNESS**

Feelings of helplessness are common immediately following an assault, and like other reactions described here, may persist for some time after the assault. You may be thinking: I feel like I've lost control – will I ever regain it?

## **DISORIENTATION**

Disorientation, such as troubles concentrating, getting through the day, accident proneness, and difficulty adjusting and communicating with family, friends and colleagues, are common following a sexual assault.

## **RETRIGGERING**

Retriggering, or being reminded about the assault by certain sounds, smells, thoughts, or feelings, times of day, seasons, dates, is very common. You may be thinking: I keep seeing and hearing things, which remind me of the assault. I keep having mental images or intrusive thoughts about the assault and can't seem to stop them from reoccurring.

## **DENIAL**

Denial is a common reaction to the assault, and may occur immediately following the incident, or weeks or months following. You may deny the event occurred, or that it seriously affected you. Denial is also a coping mechanism used consciously or unconsciously by survivors of trauma. It is a normal part of the recovery process.

## **ANXIETY**

Anxiety may produce physical symptoms such as abdominal pains and discomfort, nausea, muscle tension, difficulty with breathing, digestion or sleep. You may feel 'on edge'. You may also suffer from headaches, hot and cold sweats, dizziness and nightmares.

## **ANGER**

The individual who was assaulted may experience anger, such as wanting to kill the offender. This anger may be expressed against others, or oneself.

# YOUR OPTIONS

## RECOVERY

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 end of this booklet.

## REPORTING THE INCIDENT

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.

# 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 counsellor.

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.

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

- 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.

# MYTHS ABOUT S

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 the 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 assaulted.

TRUTH

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

MYTH

Sexual assault is perpetuated by men.

TRUTH

85% of victims know their assailants.

MYTH

All victims of sexual assault are upset.

TRUTH

Someone who has experienced sexual assault may react in a variety of ways. It is not inappropriate or unusual to feel a range of emotions after sexual assault.



# SEXUAL ASSAULT

charged with sexual

one to sexually assault  
husbands, boyfriends/  
etc.

perpetrated by strangers.

the person who

sexual assault are frantic and

experienced a sexual  
assault in a variety of ways. There  
is no wrong way to react to

MYTH

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

TRUTH

Only yes means 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 ok to coerce or use a person for sex. Being intoxicated is not a crime. Using someone for sex against her will is a crime.



# SEXUAL ASSAULT TRAUMA & 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

## The three stages of recovery:

consistently describe certain indicators over and over again often referred to as post-trauma responses.

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

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.

## 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, repulsive of 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 emotional 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 survivor's 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 feelings / 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.

## FOR FAMILY & 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 centre 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.
- Take Back the Night!

# RESOURCES

## **KELOWNA GENERAL HOSPITAL**

Medical treatment for injuries, sexual assault forensic examinations.

250.862.4000

## **RCMP**

250.763.3300

## **RCMP VICTIM SERVICES:**

250.470.6242

## **CENTRAL OKANAGAN**

### **ELIZABETH FRY SOCIETY**

Mutual support, advocacy, accompaniment, information about your rights and options, help with reporting to police, & Sexual Assault Counselling Centre.

250.763.4613 (we accept collect calls)

### **KELOWNA FAMILY CENTRE**

Stopping the Violence Counselling for Women, Child & 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 & prevention counselling.

250.868.7788

## **PREGNANCY OPTIONS**

Counselling about pregnancy and abortion.

1.888.875.3163

## **OPTIONS FOR SEXUAL HEALTH**

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

1.800.739.7367

## **24HR VICTIMLINK**

Anonymous information and referral for all victims of crime.

1.800.563.0808

## 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 EFry advocate who took my call 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.

If you or someone you care about has been affected by sexual assault or abuse, call us.

We will stand beside you.

CENTRAL OKANAGAN  
**ELIZABETH FRY  
SOCIETY**  
Empowering Change

104-347 Leon Avenue,  
Kelowna BC V1Y 8C7  
(250) 763 4613

Fax: (250) 763 4272

[contact@empoweringchange.net](mailto:contact@empoweringchange.net)

