

Practical Advice for Addicted Survivors of Sexual Assault

The dynamics of sexual assault and chemical dependency are frequently the same – power and control. In the case of sexual assault, the perpetrator may exert power and control over the victim's body, forcing the victim to do things with their bodies that they do not want to do. In the case of chemical dependency, it is the drug exerting power and control over the victim's body – forcing the victim to do things they may not want to do. Sometimes these elements overlap, and the perpetrator forces and controls the victim's substance use.

The focus of and responsibility for chemical dependency recovery is on you and the part you play or played in the addiction. On the other hand, in the case of sexual assault, the blame is always on the perpetrator. In no way is the victim responsible for an act of violence committed against them.

These two points of view are at odds. This often creates more stress and anxiety for you as you listen to two different viewpoints from professionals who are working to help you. It is this kind of confusion and stress that might cause you to throw your hands up in the air and return to your life without getting the help you deserve. It is possible to recover from sexual assault and substance abuse at the same time. This can lessen your vulnerabilities and the possibilities of a relapse. You did everything necessary in order to survive the sexual assault. This speaks to your courage, hope, strength and willingness to move forward.

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First Aid for the Brain

Because of the violence committed against you, combined with the substance use, your memory may be fragmented and discontinuous. You may not be able to recall events in sequential order. Your brain has stored the information in a location that doesn't respond easily. Don't push your brain to provide what it cannot: sequence, context and peripheral detail. What your brain can provide is raw data: sensory experience like sights, smells, sounds and tactile perceptions. Another way to retrieve the event is to start the event from different starting points.

More first aid for the brain:

- ▶ **Exercise** – moderate to strenuous exercise with a doctor's permission within the first 48 hours after the trauma to sweat out the toxins.
- ▶ **Fluids** – to flush out excessive chemicals in the body: water, juice. No alcohol and no caffeine. Fruits and vegetables are also a good option.
- ▶ **Verbalization** – when you tell your story, you open a door that helps you access your underlying feelings, which may trigger additional memory.
- ▶ **Writing** – keeping a journal with a narrative of the incident will further assist accessing underlying feelings.

Resources

Rape Abuse and Incest National Network

www.rainn.org • 1-800-656-HOPE (4673)

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator

<http://dasis3.samhsa.gov>

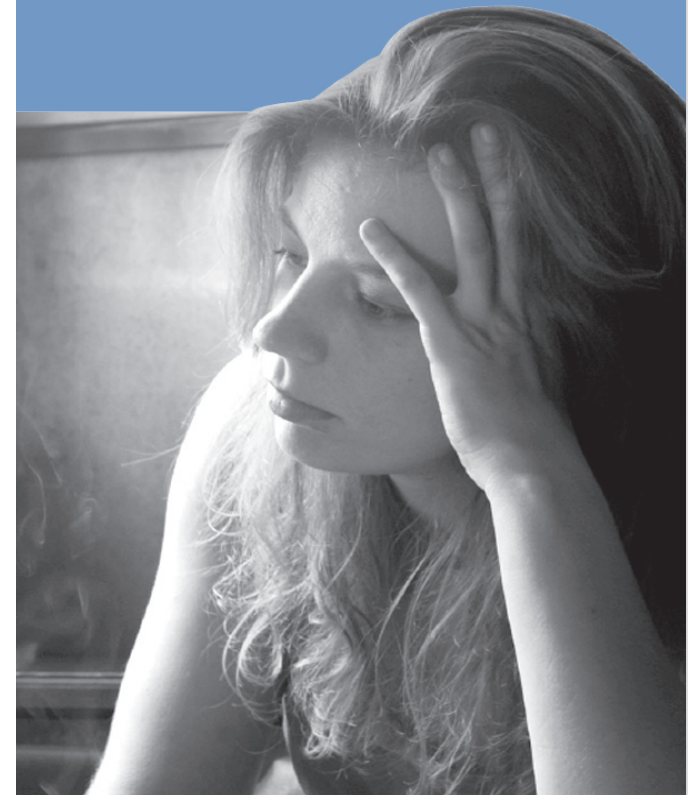
Alcoholics Anonymous

www.alcoholics-anonymous.org

National Sexual Assault Hotline
Free. Confidential. 24/7.

1-800-656-HOPE

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taasa
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Can You Clearly Convey How You Feel?

Many people find that listening to their internal voice, at this time, is helpful. If your internal voice is giving you good, affirming messages, those may have the ability to soothe you. If your internal voice is negative, you may continue to beat yourself up about both your victimization and your substance abuse. When you're working to recover, internal negative messages are not your friend.

Recovery is about hope and the power of knowing yourself and being able to clearly articulate who you are and what you stand for. Before you can commit to the hard work of recovery, you have to believe that there is a way out of shame and confusion. The only expectation recovery comes with is for you to be honest with yourself. The goal is to get to "I AM."

A note about 12-Step programs: Popular 12-Step programs focus on "we." Because of this, the 12-Steps may not be the best way for you to seek recovery. If you wish to follow a 12-Step program, it may help to define the principles behind the Steps, and then re-work the Steps using "I" instead of "we."

Your Next Steps

Whether or not to make a police report is a choice you will have to make. Don't be fooled by popular misconceptions. Most people are raped by someone they know, and even when drugs are involved, you have no fault in the rape.

As you consider the options available to you, there will be several "systems" in your life: social services agencies (victim advocates, counselors, Department of Protective Services), substance abuse recovery agencies (counselors, maybe a sponsor), criminal justice system (the district or county attorney), law enforcement (detectives, forensic investigators), and medical system (forensic nurse, personal physician). Most or all of these individuals and their agency will require that you conform to their rules and regulations, which can be overwhelming. Your sexual assault advocate can help you navigate these systems. Recovery from sexual assault and substance abuse is a process of empowerment and choices. The sexual assault advocate is a good resource and ally.

Additional Considerations

- ▶ **Personality:** How successfully have you coped with stress and trauma in the past? How can you use those skills now, or are other skills needed?
- ▶ **Support System:** Do you have a strong network of friends and family that can give you emotional support? Do you truly feel you can go to them for support? Will they treat you with empathy? Do you want to attend a survivor's support group?
- ▶ **Existing Life Problems:** Are you experiencing a divorce or another type of break-up? Were you clean and sober before the sexual assault? The trauma of the assault may aggravate all of life's problems. How are you going to cope with them?
- ▶ **Prior Sexual Victimization:** If you were previously assaulted, recovery may be much more difficult. You may want to seek outside help for your concerns.
- ▶ **Sexual Concerns:** Because sex was used as a weapon to humiliate, punish and/or control you, it may take some time for you to disassociate the sexual assault from consensual sex. You always have the right to say no. If after the assault you experience physical pain during sex, have difficulty relaxing, are generally indifferent to sex, or desire sex all the time, talking to a professional you trust is a good first step.
- ▶ **Psychological Concerns:** The traumatic memory will resurface at unexpected times and in unexpected places. Depression, guilt and a general loss of self-esteem are all common reactions. You may experience fearful reactions to situations that never scared you before. A way to diminish the traumatic memory is to connect it with something positive: remind yourself that you are safe; think about your favorite memory; or sing your favorite song.
- ▶ **Social Concerns:** You may feel an increased distrust toward others in general, especially if the rapist and dealer have characteristics, such as gender, in common. You may have a shorter temper, be afraid of authority figures, or easily break into tears.
- ▶ **Physical Concerns:** Continuing gynecological or genital problems, physical discomfort, or concerns about sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy are valid. It is not uncommon for an addict to have 'using dreams' and wake up craving their drug of choice. These concerns can make you exhausted, impatient, argumentative, depressed, frustrated and self-pitying. Making and keeping doctors appointments is a way to take care of yourself and address your concerns.

Reconciling Your Feelings

- ▶ Shame is an overwhelming feeling that who I am is not OK.
- ▶ Guilt, authentic, legitimate guilt, is a feeling that what I have done is not OK.
- ▶ If you have done something wrong, you can take action to fix it. If someone else has done something wrong, it is not your responsibility to fix it, and you should not feel shame or guilt for what they have done.
- ▶ Remember to attend to yourself, to listen to yourself, don't judge yourself, seek safe shelter, get comfort from appropriate people and talk about your future with people you trust.