

4 Stages of Emotions and Treatment After Sexual Trauma

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There may be many emotions to sort through after experiencing sexual trauma. These emotions are typically painful, so it is natural to want to avoid them. The problem is, these emotions don't tend to go away—they fester until you allow the time and space to work through them.

A common cycle of emotions after surviving sexual trauma is: (1) guilt and shame, (2) blame and anger, (3) grieving/mourning, and (4) fear and anxiety. This cycle by no means captures everyone's experience after a trauma but is a general outline of common reactions. Let's consider them in more depth.

1. GUILT AND SHAME

There can be a lot of secrecy surrounding sexual trauma. Victims who come forward are often made to feel like they did something wrong. Some are advised to keep their experience quiet. People often blame the victim by outlining things they "should" or "should not" have done.

Survivors of sexual trauma may internalize these messages and feel guilt and shame. They may replay in their minds the things they could have done to prevent or escape the trauma, even if they couldn't have done anything differently. They may feel guilty for having not stopped the abuse and ashamed for having been a victim of it.

Learning to challenge these messages is one of the first hurdles of trauma treatment. Treatment at this stage focuses on self-compassion, understanding, and most importantly: accepting that sexual trauma is *never* the victim's fault.

2. BLAME AND ANGER

Along with guilt and shame come blame and anger. Many times, survivors of sexual trauma will blame themselves for what happened and will direct anger at themselves. They beat themselves up with critical, hurtful, and mean thoughts and comments. Some may even engage in self-harming behaviors such as cutting as a coping strategy.

A goal at this stage of treatment is to separate responsibility from blame. Again, no matter what happened, it is never a person's intention to get abused! Treatment focuses on challenging the blame; challenging the hurtful, critical thoughts; and learning to look at things from a new perspective and generate healthier, more adaptive thoughts. The blame and anger then shift to the perpetrator, as it should.

Unfortunately, many people become stuck at this stage, fuming in anger and unable to move forward. Anger can make us feel more in control. When we are angry, people listen, do what we say, or leave us alone. There is power in anger that makes it hard to let go of. There can also be a fear that if one lets go of the anger, it means it was okay that the trauma happened (of course, it's not!).

Over time, chronic anger can lead to isolation, loneliness, and depression. Treatment focuses on validating the anger, understanding why it's there, recognizing anger as a protective warning sign, and learning to manage it before it escalates into verbal or physical aggression.

3. GRIEVING/MOURNING

Grieving can help a survivor of sexual trauma to get unstuck and begin to move forward. There may be many things to grieve: loss of innocence; loss of childhood; loss of feeling safe; grief over mistrusting others and always feeling like something is "too good to be true"; grief over loss of time (for school, relationships, jobs, or time spent self-medicating and in depression); and grief over "what could have been." Grief can make us feel helpless, powerless, vulnerable, and weak.

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It is natural to want to fast-forward through grief or, better yet, stuff it. Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts through grieving. The more you try to avoid it, the more out-of-control your emotions may feel. You may begin to fear crying or "losing it" when something triggers you. A common complaint is "overreacting" to small things. But remember, your body is not just reacting to the most recent "small thing"; it is also reacting to all the stressful events you experienced and stuffed away.

Unpacking, unstuffing, and letting it all out is part of the grieving process. It is especially important that you set up a support system and a regular schedule of self-care activities. Treatment at this stage focuses on helping you establish the space, time, support to grieve and mourn. Treatment also helps you learn how to manage intense emotions so you are the one in control, not the emotions.

4. FEAR AND ANXIETY

After working through the guilt, shame, blame, and anger, and taking time to grieve and mourn, many survivors of sexual trauma are left with a feeling of emptiness. All those emotions that were stuffed away used to take up that space. Now that they are gone, many ask, "Now what?"

This phase of treatment focuses on building a life worth living. It is important to fill that hole with new relationships, activities, goals, and emotions, as staying in that empty place can put you at risk for becoming depressed and isolated. This process may bring a new set of challenges, as people—regardless of whether they have experienced trauma—generally hesitate to step out of their comfort zones to try something new.

Trying to build a new life tends to raise many fears and anxieties. Fears that your efforts won't work, that others will reject you, that your most critical thoughts were true. Anxiety about going to new places, being out in crowds, starting relationships, and trying unfamiliar things.

Treatment at this stage attempts to help survivors of sexual trauma learn how to face their fears; to set healthy boundaries; to problem-solve and work toward specific and measurable goals; and to manage the natural anxieties that come with trying new approaches.

CONCLUSION

There is hope after sexual trauma. Recovery is possible. It takes a lot of courage to reach out for support, but it is the first step in learning to trust yourself and the recovery process.

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Whatever the nature and scope of your trauma, this is a time to remind yourself that you are not alone. Many colleges, hospitals, and groups throughout the country are holding walks, fairs, clothesline projects, rallies, and other events. Look one up in your area, discover the community you deserve, and contact a therapist if you want support.