Survivor's Guide
You are not to blame!
Support, information and resources that will encourage resilience, empowerment, and healing following sexual assault
Survivor’s Guide

This Survivor’s Guide is intended to help offer support, information, and provide resources that will encourage resilience, empowerment, and healing following sexual assault. The information in the Survivor’s Guide will cover many of the most common issues and feelings post-assault, but the information is not necessarily exhaustive.

**Sexual assault** is any sexual act a person is coerced or forced into without consent. Sexual assault is a broad term referring to acts of violence that involve a sexual component. Perpetrators of sexual assault use sexual contact to inflict humiliation or exert power and control over a victim. Sexual assault includes several different types of acts, many of which are crimes. Most often these acts are perpetrated by someone the victim already knows, such as a friend, relative or intimate partner.

**You are not to blame!**
Even if you knew the attacker. Even if you have been sexually intimate with the attacker in the past. Even if you have been sexually active in general. Even if you were drinking or using drugs. Even if you were unable to physically defend yourself or were unable to say “no” at the time. Even if you said “yes” initially but later said “no” and were ignored. Even if your attacker is a friend, parent, acquaintance, date, an intimate partner, a professor, or an employer... You are not to blame! You did nothing wrong! It is not your fault. *Sexual assault and sexual violence can happen to anyone.* Regardless of one’s gender, race, age, etc., sexual assault can happen. Approximately 1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men are sexually assaulted in their lifetimes.

**No one deserves to be sexually assaulted.** Experiencing sexual assault does not mean you somehow chose to be sexually assaulted or that you are a bad person. It is important to remind yourself often that it was not your fault. It is common for survivors of sexual assault to feel a sense of guilt and self-blame, but these are merely efforts to feel some level of control over the situation. It is, of course, not your fault. No one deserves to be sexually assaulted.

Some survivors of sexual assault try to dismiss the assault as if “it wasn’t a big deal.” The extent to which the assault is affecting you may not be clear to you
immediately. Therefore, it is crucial not to ignore the assault or pretend that it didn’t happen. Acknowledging the situation, even though it may be painful, confusing, and awful, will be very useful in the healing process.

Talking about the sexual assault will ultimately help you feel better. It may be very difficult to open up about the assault, and it is common for survivors to avoid conversations and/or situations that remind them of the assault. Even if you have a strong desire to avoid the topic or you simply want to “let the past be the past,” you will eventually need to process your feelings and fears in order to regain your sense of control over your life and heal. Wanting to avoid all reminders of the assault is completely normal, and you may feel this way for weeks or even months. However, talking with someone who can listen to you and offer support is a critical part of the healing process.
Recovering after sexual assault

Don’t be afraid to ask for help

Most survivors of sexual assault experience a range of acute reactions immediately following the assault. There may also be a more extended period of psychological difficulty following a sexual assault. However, there are a wide variety of individual-difference variables that help to determine one’s recovery from sexual assault, the severity of one’s post-assault experiences, and the longevity of the impacts (e.g., an individual’s coping responses, one’s social-support systems, etc.). There are many things that can be done to ensure you move through your recovery process. One part of this journey is identifying the many resources and sources of support available to you. These resources are there to help and are more than happy to assist you, so don’t be afraid to ask for help. You are not alone.

When will I feel better?
Will I ever be okay again?
When will this all be over?

These thoughts and feelings are normal responses to traumatic experiences. The feelings you are experiencing will diminish over time.

Following an assault, survivors may feel totally preoccupied or overwhelmed with thoughts about the assault. It may seem difficult or almost impossible to concentrate on daily activities, attend class, or focus on your school work. It can definitely be upsetting as you try to heal from sexual assault to encounter reminders of the assault or to experience difficulties sleeping or with general anxiety or depression. It is normal to experience small setbacks as you move forward through the healing process, but do not let these perceived setbacks discourage you or allow yourself to question if life will ever be the same.

It is often very difficult to understand why someone would sexually assault another person. It may be even more difficult to comprehend and process the pain and discomfort that often follows sexual assault. However, you must remember
that you have the tools and ability to overcome this event—you are resilient and strong. There is no one-size-fits-all blueprint for the post-assault healing process. It will take place on your own personal schedule and in a way that is unique and appropriate for you.

**What you’re feeling is normal**

Traumatic events can be very scary, and it is normal to feel ill-equipped when it comes to healing from trauma. There is no simple equation to the healing process. We are often not taught how to heal ourselves. However, when you take the first steps to talk about your experience to someone, the healing process is happening. It is common to feel as though no one understands what you are going through. Many resources are available where trained professionals can assist you. Even if you feel as though there is no one who understands the uniqueness of your personal situation, many will want to help and support you during this time. You may be surprised by the insight and support others will be able to offer.

Researchers have consistently identified patterns in the ways that post-assault survivors have reacted and ultimately recover from sexual assault. In other words, the emotional reactions and responses of survivors may vary from individual to individual, but we know there are oftentimes a set of common feelings and reactions among survivors of sexual assault. The vast majority of survivors go through a period of acute or intense psychological reaction after an assault. This relatively short-term phase may be full of fear, anxiety, sexual dysfunction, difficulties with self-esteem, and depression. It is also very common for survivors to experience bodily pains or strange body sensations, as well as a range of other emotional and behavioral responses (e.g., nightmares, troubles sleeping, feelings of fatigue, etc.). Remember that it is normal to experience these things. It is normal to experience anxiety and/or depression. Don’t hesitate to speak to professionals and familiarize yourself with how what you are feeling emotionally, mentally, and physically is normal.

You must remind yourself that your responses following a sexual assault do not mean you are crazy or that you are going crazy (many survivors have this feeling of “going crazy” or somehow becoming “mentally ill”). For many, the reactions
that follow a sexual assault, no matter how “crazy” or scary they may seem, are completely normal reactions to a traumatic situation. Even if you experience difficulty dealing with the effects of the assault, the recovery process will often leave you with greater insight, personal strengths, and abilities that you never had (or never thought you possessed) prior to the assault. Even though you may feel that you are in a terrible situation, there are ways of going about your recovery that may ultimately help to bring out your inner resilience and sources of strength that you never knew you had.

Feelings come and go

Research on the after effects of sexual assault has consistently shown that the intensity of one’s early reactions to the assault lessen significantly over time. For instance, in 2-3 months, many of the more acute reactions have improved greatly but may not yet have returned to normal. Try to be mindful of your own body’s responses and track your emotions throughout the day. You will see that feelings of discomfort and distress may set in and be scary and uncomfortable, but that these feelings begin to subside with time. For all people, it is helpful to remember that feelings come and go—you will not get “stuck” in a certain negative feeling. Plus, tracking your emotions and gaining better insight into your body’s responses to certain events will help you develop a sense of control and understanding that will be useful to your recovery and beyond.

Find your sources of security and remember that you are safe

Sexual assault often represents an attack to one’s sense of security. It is important to not allow the assault to totally take from you your feelings of security. Remember that you are safe—repeat the phrase “I am safe” aloud or silently whenever you experience stress or discomfort. Look at your life and reflect on all the things that provide you comfort or that you experience as secure and safe. Perhaps you feel safe in your bedroom. Perhaps you feel a sense of security when spending time with a cherished pet. Perhaps you feel safe with a close friend or family member. Remember that these sources of security and safety are assets of yours, and will be important sources of comfort throughout your life.
When your sense of security is confronted, you can always create and implement new strategies to help re-gain your feelings of safety and security. You may find yourself temporarily distrusting or suspicious of others. This is a protective device that represents an emotional coping skill. These fears will diminish over time. You will regain your sense of trust once you have had the chance to heal and feel less vulnerable. In the meantime, you may find it helpful to make changes in your daily life that make sense to you to feel safe:

You may wish to change your locks
You may sign up for a self-defense course
You may decide to stay with a family member or friend for a while

It is common to see survivors of sexual assault express a sense of feeling unsure about themselves or displaying a temporary lack of their usual self-confidence. Choices and decisions that once seemed routine may now feel monumental. Survivors may often feel as though the assault makes it necessary to alter their entire lifestyle to feel safe again. Below are some suggestions to follow as you move forward:

Try to make as many decisions about your life as you can. Even making small decisions will help in your overall quest to regain security and control.

You may find it comforting or helpful to make some changes in your life. For example, you may want to change your exercise routine. You may want to adopt healthier eating habits. You may decide to re-arrange the furniture in your living space. No matter what you decide, these small changes can help you feel that you are taking back control.

Trust your instincts about what the right thing is for you.
Self-Care

Take time for yourself. It is very difficult for people to step back and allow themselves to do something they enjoy and find relaxing or renewing. Your mind and body require certain things for vitality, life, and energy. By taking time to engage in activities that you like (reading, running, cooking or ordering your favorite food, moving your muscles, learning a new hobby, etc.), you will increase your skills of resilience and work toward restoring and maintaining peace of mind and balance in your life. You deserve to take time for yourself!

You may have experienced another crisis at some point in your life. Did something help you through this crisis? Perhaps you found help in going for a walk, listening to music, talking with certain friends or family, working out, practicing meditation, or breathing exercises.

Self-care is critical. Preventing undue stress is an important task in your recovery process. Fortunately, there are many things you may find helpful and easy to do:

- Allow yourself to receive support from friends and family. Identify those who you trust to affirm your personal strengths and validate your feelings.

- Talk about the sexual assault and express your feelings. As you do this, make sure you have chosen the environment, determined the appropriate the time, and selected with whom to talk about the assault. It is okay to set boundaries and only disclose what feels comfortable for you.

- Practice stress reduction techniques—go for a jog, practice yoga, schedule a massage, listen to your favorite music, take a hot bath, practice prayer or meditation, etc.

- Stick to a balanced diet and a routine sleep schedule. You may find it difficult to maintain a steady sleep cycle, but this will be an important component of your healing. Try to avoid the use (or overuse) of stimulants such as caffeine, nicotine, and sugar.
- Be creative. Doing something creative (whether just starting or resuming an old creative hobby) will help in the healing process. Tap into this part of your “self” and allow your spaces of creativity to help you relax and rejuvenate.

- Don’t be afraid to take some leisure time. Set aside for yourself periods of uninterrupted leisure time to take part in some activity you enjoy such as reading.

- For some it may be helpful to keep a journal as a way of expressing your thoughts and feelings.

  It is okay to release some of the anger or hurt that you feel, but try to do it in a healthy way. For example, you may choose to write a letter to your attacker that expresses your feelings. Of course, you can choose whether or not to send the letter. It may also be helpful to draw pictures that express the anger you feel towards the attacker as a healthy way of releasing emotional pain.

- Enjoy those that you love. Don’t hesitate to tell someone you love that you love them. Hug those you love. Hugging often helps one feel better and the expression of gentle and comforting personal touch can be healing to the mind and body.

- Tell yourself that you are safe (even if you don’t yet feel safe). The sexual assault is over.
Moving Forward

Your sexuality and sexual-functioning belong to YOU!

It is important to make the distinction that sexual assault is not sex.

Intimate consensual sexual contact should be pleasurable for both partners. Open communication is crucial to regaining a healthy and resilient sexual functioning. You may also find it helpful to speak with a therapist trained in sexual trauma recovery.

Sexual assault can have deep impacts on one’s sexual functioning and sense of sexual satisfaction. Therefore, it is important to work toward reclaiming your body, establishing clear body boundaries, and learning how to re-embrace a healthy sexuality as you move through your recovery. Take as much time as you need to re-adjust and feel comfortable expressing your sexuality again. It is important to work through your fears related to your sexuality and being sexual. One of the most common responses after a sexual assault is the tendency to avoid sex.

Start to think about how you want to define and express your boundaries moving forward. For example, you may want to have more clear views on the use of contraceptives or the use of alcohol. You may also choose to work on re-defining the ways in which you communicate with your partner about sexual issues.

Sexual healing takes time and should not be rushed. If you are in an intimate relationship, share your needs and limits with your partner when it comes to all types of sexual touching or contact. Communicate with your partner and let them know what kinds of sexual intimacy are comfortable to you. Remember that you have the right to say no to being sexual until you feel completely ready.
Survivor Spotlight:
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Not all survivors of sexual assault experience symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but many survivors can experience symptoms that fit with the criteria for PTSD. Examples of these symptoms may be:

- Reexperiencing of the assault (whether through a flashback or nightmare).
- A tendency to try to avoid thoughts and reminders of the assault.
- An increased sense of arousal (e.g., difficulties sleeping or concentrating, a heightened startle response, etc.). You may experience a general feeling of concern that your nerves have been frayed or that your nervous system has been ruined or damaged. This common feeling often leads individuals to believe that they are ‘going crazy’ or that they are somehow permanently damaged. You are not going crazy, and these types of thoughts and feelings are totally normal and your own your brain’s and body’s way of coping with the assault.

One study that examined PTSD symptoms among women who were raped, found that 94% of women experienced these symptoms during the two weeks immediately following the rape. Nine months later, about 30% of the women were still reporting this pattern of symptoms. The National women’s Study reported that almost 1/3 of all rape survivors develop PTSD sometime during their lives and 11% of rape survivors currently suffer from the disorder.

After a sexual assault, you may be tempted to turn inward and seek out ways of numbing your immediate feelings and responses to the assault. This is a totally normal response to an abnormal event! Some survivors experience feelings of denial or disbelief. These feelings may lead to feelings of emotional detachment or depletion. Others may respond to the assault with reactions such as withdrawing socially, crying uncontrollably, laughing nervously, or constantly reminding others that they are “fine.” These responses are completely normal and are a few ways in which survivors react to feelings of being overwhelmed.

Survivor’s Guide
Survivors of sexual assault who respond initially with intense feelings of anger, and who try to hold their anger in rather than express their anger, tend to experience more severe symptoms in the months following the assault. There are a number of outlets for you to express yourself in healthy ways. You have a right to feel angry. It is, however, important to express your feelings without hurting yourself or others. Seek out a support group, talk to a therapist who specializes in trauma-related issues, and confide in a trusted friend. See “Resources at KU” for information on various resources available to you.
Social and Educational Adjustment

Along with changes in other areas of your life, it is likely that one’s social and educational functioning may be affected following sexual assault. It is crucial to be gentle with yourself as you take steps to reclaim your life. It is important to take the appropriate amount of time for you to adjust and reorganize your life. You will be able to move forward with your life. Don’t hesitate or be afraid to seek assistance if you need help dealing with the trauma or if you find yourself struggling academically.

Academic Options

Survivors of sexual harassment may request assistance with academic matters. To the extent these requests are reasonable and can be accommodated, every effort will be made to provide the appropriate assistance. More information on academic options and resources can be obtained by contacting the office of Institutional Opportunity & Access (IOA).

Emotional Support & Medical Care

Students can seek emotional support through the center and Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS). Both offices support students who are working through an experience of sexual harassment. Students can receive medical attention through Student Health Services. The center can help coordinate services available to students on and off campus, including information about personal safety. CAPS services are confidential, except under limited circumstances.
Featured Resources

**Institutional Opportunity & Access** - The office of IOA has an institutional responsibility to enhance and strengthen diversity and inclusion at the University of Kansas. IOA's passion is to communicate with staff, faculty members, residents, graduate teaching assistants and students on the anti-discrimination laws, both federal and state, as well as the University of Kansas policies and procedures, to prohibit discrimination.

**Emily Taylor Center for Women & Gender Equity** - The mission of the Emily Taylor Center for Women & Gender Equity (ETC4WGE) at the University of Kansas is to provide leadership and advocacy in promoting gender equity and challenge gender-related barriers which impede full access and inclusion. This is accomplished by raising awareness of critical issues, providing opportunities to translate awareness into action and empowering individuals to advocate for themselves and others.

**The Willow Domestic Violence Center** strives to eliminate family and domestic violence in our communities by providing safety, education, and advocacy. Therefore, we are dedicated to the empowerment of survivors of domestic violence; the creation of a peaceful, safe space; the promotion of equality and respect for all people; the appreciation of differences, and the social action necessary to achieve these.

**GaDuGi SafeCenter, Inc.** impacts our community by providing 24-hour comprehensive victim-centered services for women, children and men affected by sexual violence for Douglas, Franklin, and Jefferson Counties. We engage in creative collaboration with community partners to develop and implement prevention education and community awareness.
Resources at KU
University of Kansas
Sexual Violence Prevention Services: 785-864-3600
Counseling & Psychological Services
caps.ku.edu: 785-864-2277
KU Student Housing
housing.ku.edu: 785-864-4560
KU Student Health Services
studenthealth.ku.edu: 785-864-9500
KU Office of Public Safety
ku.edu/~kucops (non-emergency): 785-864-5900
Emily Taylor Center for Women & Gender Equity
emilytaylorcenter.ku.edu: 785-864-3552
Office of Institutional Opportunity & Access
ioa.ku.edu/: 785-864-6414
Legal Services for Students
legalservices.ku.edu: 785-864-5665
Vice Provost for Student Affairs
studentaffairs.ku.edu: 785-864-4060
GaDuGi SafeCenter: 785-843-8985
Lawrence Police Department
(non-emergency): 785-832-7509
Willow Domestic Violence Center
(non-emergency): 785-331-2034
Lawrence Memorial Hospital
(Emergency Room): 785-505-6162

Services that provide 24-hour assistance
KU and/or Lawrence Police.........................911
GaDuGi SafeCenter.........................785-843-8985
Willow Domestic Violence Center........785-843-3333
Headquarters Crisis Counseling Center......785-841-2345
Bert Nash Mental Health Center...........785-843-9192
Kansas Crisis Hotline..................888-END-ABUSE
888-363-2287
National Sexual Assault Hotline...........800-656-HOPE
800-656-4673

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