

Issues for men after sexual assault

The myth that sexual assault doesn't happen to men

Apart from the occasional bad joke most of us never hear about male sexual assault. But it does happen and it's under-reported. Only 5 to 20% of all victims of sexual assault report the crime. The percentage for male victims is lower which leaves many men suffering in silence following an assault.

There is a persistent myth in society that men are immune to being victimised, and that if they were 'real men' they would be able to fight off any attacker. Society reinforces the idea that men can't be forced to do anything they don't want to do.

Common feelings and reactions

For most men, the idea that they could ever be a victim of sexual assault is impossible to accept.

This belief can lead to intense feelings of guilt, shame and inadequacy in men who have experienced sexual assault. They may question whether they deserved it, or somehow wanted to be assaulted, or they may feel ashamed that they 'failed' to defend themselves. Men frequently see their assault as a loss of manhood.

If you're a man and have been sexually assaulted, these feelings are normal, but the thoughts attached to them aren't necessarily true. Remind yourself that you did what was necessary at the time: you survived what may have been a potentially life-threatening situation.

Self-destructive behaviour

Following sexual assault, some men punish themselves because they don't know how to cope with the feelings of guilt, shame and anger.

These self-destructive behaviours can include increased alcohol or drug use and unwarranted aggressiveness. Many men pull back from relationships and so end up feeling even more isolated.

Homosexual men and sexual assault

Some sexual assault of men is motivated by fear and hatred of homosexuality. In these cases, perpetrators use verbal abuse, saying that the victim deserved to be sexually assaulted.

For gay men, sexual assault can lead to feelings of self-blame and self-loathing attached to their sexuality. They may believe that somehow they 'deserved it' and were 'paying the price' for their sexual orientation. Feelings of self-blame can be reinforced by homophobic ignorance and intolerance of others.

Gay men may hesitate to report a sexual assault due to fears of blame, disbelief or intolerance by police or medical professionals. As a result, gay men may miss out on legal protections and essential medical care following an assault.

Heterosexual men and sexual assault

For heterosexual men, sexual assault can cause confusion about their sexuality. Many people believe only gay men are sexually assaulted. So a heterosexual man may begin to believe that he must be gay or that he will become gay because of the assault.

Perpetrators often accuse their victims of enjoying the sexual assault, leading some men to question their own experience.

Sexual assault has nothing to do with sexual orientation, past, present or future. People do not become gay as a result of being sexually assaulted. Sexual assault is an abuse of power by the perpetrator.

Where to seek help following sexual assault

Few men seek help after being sexually assaulted, leaving many victim survivors suffering in silence. But this does not need to be the case.

These specialist services provide non-judgemental and confidential support:

- Sexual Assault Crisis Line (Victoria): 1800 806 292
- 1800 RESPECT (Australia-wide): 1800 737 732
- Your local specialist sexual assault service in Victoria: sasvic.org.au/our-members
- Living Well - for men who have experienced childhood sexual abuse or sexual assault in adulthood www.livingwell.org.au/