

# Hope for Healing

Information for Survivors  
of Sexual Assault in Detention



**Just Detention International (JDI)** is an international human rights organization that seeks to put an end to sexual violence in all forms of detention. JDI works to: engender policies that ensure government accountability for prisoner rape; change flippant and ill-informed public attitudes toward sexual abuse behind bars; and promote access to services for survivors of this type of violence. You may contact JDI for more resources.

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**“Until I read the *Just Detention International* material I had no idea that male rape victims shared so many of the same feelings about the experience. I really thought that I was some kind of freak because of the many things I did, thought, and felt now, and at the time of the experience . . . I want the thousands of raped men to know they are not alone. It wasn’t their fault and they can survive this. I am a survivor, and I become stronger every day. I hope that female rape victims can also find something in this that might comfort them. Rape is rape no matter who it happens to.”**

**— David**

There are people who care about what you have endured and what you are going through now, as you are trying to heal.

## Introduction

**H**ope for Healing is written for men and women who have survived sexual assault in prisons, jails or other forms of detention. The goals of this publication are to offer information about the impact of sexual abuse and to assist survivors in their efforts to heal from this devastating type of violence.

Perhaps the most important message we wish to convey here is that it is possible to heal from sexual assault. At Just Detention International (JDI) we hear from survivors every day. Their stories are disturbing, filled with pain, anger, and sadness. At the same time, we sense the strength of all people who contact us. Their decision to write to JDI, to reach out for help, is in itself a sign that they have started the crucial healing process.

In a note to survivors of prisoner rape, TJ Parsell, himself a survivor and JDI's former President, says:

*"I was gang-raped at 17, on my first day in general population in a Michigan prison. Even though I felt hopeless at the time, I want you to know that there is hope. I was able to*

*go on to live a healthy and productive life. I graduated from college, became a successful businessman, and I now advocate for the rights of prisoner rape survivors. I tell you this not to impress you, but to impress upon you that you too can recover from the horrific ordeal you have endured."*

Robin Darbyshire, also a survivor, echoes the same sense of hope. She writes:

*"My life is not the same. I value it more today. Why, because if I had not gone through what I have, I would not have become an activist. Anyone can be assaulted. I was a concert promoter. I am educated. Sexual assault has nothing to do with sex—it deals with power and control. It does not play favorites as to education or color, and the only way to stop it is by breaking the silence and speaking up."*

As a survivor of sexual violence in detention, you are not alone in what happened to you, or in how you feel. There are people who care about what you have endured and what you are going through now, as you are trying to heal. We hope that you will find *Hope for Healing* informative and useful.



Sexual assault is any type of forced or coerced sexual touching, with or without penetration.

## Definitions

Sexual violence takes several forms, all of which may have a profound impact on your life. Surviving an act of sexual violence takes strength, courage, and skill. You, just like every human being, have the right to decide when and how you engage in sexual activity. No one deserves to be raped. If you have been sexually assaulted, the assault was not your fault.

- An act of violence. It does not express love, lust or attraction. Rape expresses dominance, power, and control. Sexual assault is about domination and maintaining or establishing a hierarchy or ownership.
- A crime, and just like any violent crime, sexual assault is never the victim's fault.

### Sexual Assault is:

- Any sexual contact to which you did not consent. Legal terms and definitions differ state by state. Most people use “rape” to mean any kind of unwanted penetration. Sexual assault is any type of forced or coerced sexual touching, with or without penetration. In this booklet, we will use *sexual assault* and *rape* interchangeably. You can use whatever words you think best describe your experience.

### Sexual Harassment is:

- Unwanted sexual advances that create fear or discomfort and make normal functioning impossible. Sexual harassment may be physical or verbal.
- o *Quid Pro Quo*, or “this for that,” is when someone offers you something in exchange for doing what they ask.
- o *Hostile Environment* harassment happens when someone badgers you

to have sex, uses offensive language or exposes you to sexual material like jokes or pornography.

- o *Bystander or Third Party* harassment means that you are forced to watch others being harassed or raped, are passed over for privileges because you said “no” or are forced to harass others.

## Sexual Exploitation is:

- When a person in a position of power or authority pushes you to do something sexual that you would not otherwise do. The perpetrator may be either another prisoner, such as in the case of protective pairing (when you hook up with a more powerful prisoner to get protection), or a corrections official or staff member. An officer, counselor, therapist, clergy or doctor who even asks for a sexual relationship with a prisoner is engaging in sexual exploitation or misconduct.
- While you are incarcerated, any sexual contact by an employee of

the institution, whether or not you consent. All 50 states have passed laws that say that a staff person or officer cannot have any sexual contact with you, even if you consent to it. In some states, you may be disciplined or get further charges for having sexual contact with a staff member.

## Consent is:

- Positive cooperation in act or attitude pursuant to an exercise of free will. In other words, you must agree to the sexual contact and know exactly what is happening and what the pros and cons of saying “yes” are. If you are unable to freely say “yes” or “no” to any sex act because of force, coercion, intimidation, threats, use of authority, false claims by the perpetrator or because you are under the influence of alcohol, street drugs, or medication, asleep or unconscious, or because of a disability, consent is not legally possible. Even if you said “yes” in the past, you still have the right to say “no” to any sexual act at any time.

No one deserves to be raped. If you have been sexually assaulted, the sexual assault was not your fault.



Rape can happen to anyone, no matter how strong,  
no matter how smart.

## Myths and Realities

**M**ost of us are taught to think that if we are smart, careful, and follow certain rules, we can stop something like sexual violence from happening to us. We want you to understand the facts about sexual assault, particularly behind bars, so you can begin to believe that you did not cause yourself to be attacked. Rape can happen to anyone, no matter how strong, no matter how smart. It takes a great deal of strength, intelligence, and courage to survive a sexual assault.

At JDI, we often hear the myth that being raped is worse for men, especially straight men. Some people think rape is worse for women or worse if the rapist is a stranger. The reality is that all rapes are

devastating and violations of body, mind, and spirit. Sexual assault takes your feeling of control and safety away no matter who you are and no matter who the perpetrator is. Every survivor has characteristics or previous experiences that impact the way the assault feels to her or him.

Survivors often wonder what they did to cause a sexual assault to happen to them. Sometimes placing responsibility on yourself feels safer, as if by blaming yourself you can make sure it will never happen again. This does not really keep you safer because you did not cause the assault. Experiencing some feelings of guilt is normal, but you are not responsible for the rapist's behavior. The rape was not your fault.

You are not responsible for the rapist's behavior.  
The rape was not your fault.

# Myths

# Realities

It could never happen to me.

Anybody can be raped, regardless of age, gender, class, race, occupation, religion, sexual orientation or physical appearance.

Rapists are acting on impulse.

Some rapists take any opportunity to assault someone, but many rapes are planned ahead of time.

A rapist is easy to spot in a crowd.

A rapist looks like anyone else. Most rapists are young to middle-aged, straight men of any race, ethnicity or class.

If you do not “fight back” it is not really rape.

There are many ways to fight to survive. Some survivors “freeze” or “space out.” Deciding to be still or to pretend to “go along” with a rapist is another way to fight back and is not the same as consent. If you did not want it, it was sexual assault.

Only rapists and child molesters get raped in prison.

Non-violent, first-time offenders, youth, and inmates who are gay or transgender are targeted most often. People who are physically small or have a mental illness or disability or are incarcerated on charges for prostitution are also targeted.

It’s just part of the punishment.

Prisoner rape violates your constitutional rights under the 8th Amendment and is considered torture by international human rights law. No one deserves to be raped. It is not part of the punishment.

Anything you did to live through the rape is valid. For most people, the main task during an assault is survival.

## Common Reactions During an Assault

Every survivor is different and reacts in his or her own unique way to sexual violence. If you do not recognize yourself here, that does not mean your reaction was wrong. For most people, the main task during an assault is survival. Anything you did to live through the rape is valid. Some common reactions during a sexual assault are:

- **Freezing:** The experience of being sexually assaulted is shocking. A reasonable response for many survivors is to freeze, feeling unable to think, move or speak. When your life and safety are threatened, your fight-or-flight reaction is triggered. If you are in a situation where either physically fighting or running is impossible or dangerous, the only option is to flee mentally. If you have been assaulted in the past, this reaction is even more likely. Freezing probably helped to keep you alive.
- **Yielding:** Another way many survivors describe yielding is “giving in” or pretending to cooperate. Many survivors are able to figure out what the perpetrator wants and try to minimize injuries by seeming to go along with the rapist. There is no shame in deciding that you do not want to die or have serious physical injuries. The fact that you were able to think clearly enough to strategize is impressive in itself.
- **Bargaining:** Some survivors will try to cut a deal during the assault. Bargaining might mean performing one sex act if the perpetrator agrees not to do another or convincing him to wear a condom. It might also be the beginning of entering into so-called protective pairing (having sex in exchange for protection).
- **Physical Fighting:** There are many ways to fight. Anything you did to survive was fighting back. Some survivors have the reaction of screaming, pushing, kicking, scratching or hitting. The rapist who is not

looking for a physical fight may give up. Many rapists are looking for a fight and will respond even more violently. You are the only one who was there and your instincts helped protect you. If you did fight off the attacker, you may feel empowered by that. But you may still have many of the feelings listed in the next section. Attempted rape is also sexual assault.

- ***Terror and Disbelief:*** Many survivors experience feelings of extreme fear, helplessness, and hopelessness during an assault. A sexual assault is an experience where you have no

control over what is happening to you. Terror, which does not go away when the assault is over, is a normal reaction.

- ***Sexual Response:*** It is normal to experience some physical response that usually signals sexual pleasure during a sexual assault. The physical response might be signs or feelings of arousal or orgasm. A sexual response makes many survivors feel very ashamed, but does not mean you wanted or liked the sexual assault. Your body is designed to respond to touch. You have nothing to be ashamed of.

**“I didn’t want to go to the infirmary, because I was still so ashamed about what had happened to me, but I had to. They gave me a test, and that’s when I got the devastating news. I was HIV-positive . . . Fighting for my life is now my full-time job. They took my life, but they didn’t take my ability to live my life . . . Every day I wake up and I’m just grateful that I’m still here.”**

**— Kendall**

You survived. That means you did everything right.

Every survivor experiences Rape Trauma Syndrome in his or her own way depending on previous experience with trauma, resources, life experiences, and personality.

# Rape Trauma Syndrome

**R**ape Trauma Syndrome (RTS) describes the feelings, thoughts, reactions or symptoms that frequently occur after a sexual assault. Every survivor is unique and will experience RTS in his or her own way depending on previous experience with trauma, resources, life experiences, and personality. Rape Trauma Syndrome is a type of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In fact, many mental health professionals use the term “PTSD” to describe “RTS.”

Survivors often feel like they are “going crazy.” Healing takes time and sometimes the process is scary and overwhelming. With support you can heal. The hurt you feel in the immediate aftermath of an assault will not last forever. Remember, Rape Trauma Syndrome and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder are essentially normal reactions to an abnormal level of stress.

Rape Trauma Syndrome has three phases that last different lengths of time for each person. You might experience them in order, or you might find that you

go back and forth. They are called phases because they do not last forever.

## Acute Crisis Phase

- The acute crisis usually occurs right after the assault or when the survivor remembers or begins to think about the assault for the first time. The survivor’s life is disrupted and he or she is left feeling overwhelmed, disoriented, and unable to cope.
- Unfortunately, this is also when survivors in detention are expected to report the crime, especially if there is hope of gathering physical evidence. Making such complicated decisions right now is often impossible. Most survivors are unable to process the assault, much less make decisions around telling and reporting.
- Survivors may experience a wide range of emotions, including fear,

anger, hurt, shock, sadness, self-blame, relief, and shame.

- A survivor who is expressing his or her feelings may cry, laugh, shake or yell. A survivor who is controlling his or her emotions may feel numb or seem too quiet, matter of fact or even robotic. This does not mean the assault did not affect him or her.
- Daily tasks become difficult to manage. Bathing, grooming, eating, and sleeping are often disrupted. Some survivors eat, sleep or bathe a lot more than usual while some are unable to do any or all of these activities.
- Concentration and decision-making are difficult or impossible. Survivors may have no energy or, on the other hand, may feel driven to stay very busy.
- The assault is often relived in nightmares, flashbacks, by replaying it or in unwanted thoughts that feel out of control. Sometimes the nightmares, flashbacks or thoughts can be so real that it feels like the rape is happening again.
- Survivors experience “hyper-vigilance,” which means being super alert or feeling jumpy and anxious. Hyper-vigilance is not paranoia. It is natural to be fearful because you should have been safe and you were not. You may feel afraid even in situations where you felt safe before. You may worry that you will never feel safe again. If you were assaulted

by a corrections official, you may fear all officers or staff.

## Outward Adjustment Phase

- To others it may look as if the survivor has adjusted. Survivors in the outward adjustment phase feel a need to “get back to normal” and go on with life.
- Grooming, eating, and other daily tasks may return to normal. However, trouble sleeping is still very common.
- The intensity of emotions seems to fade. Nightmares and flashbacks probably still happen, but less often and the triggers have to be stronger.
- You may decide to talk about the assault now, to ask for counseling, to tell someone about it or to ask for a housing change. You may also decide to repress, or try to forget about, the assault. Either way is your best attempt to regain control over your life.
- Survivors often try to avoid any reminders of the assault. Unlike during the acute crisis phase, when everything was a reminder, avoidance might be possible if you are able to stay away from people, places or situations that bring up strong feelings.

Survivors often feel like they are “going crazy.” Healing takes time and sometimes the process is scary and overwhelming. With support you can heal.

- Deep feelings may surface after the initial crisis has passed and you fully realize what has happened. Sadness and hopelessness that look like depression are common. You may cry often, lose interest in activities or programs or even feel like hurting or killing yourself. If you are thinking about harming yourself, it is really important to talk to someone.
- Maybe you feel like you can function, but you are not really better. Many survivors describe this as “just existing” or feeling “like a robot.”
- Anger often comes up during outward adjustment. You may feel angry with yourself, the perpetrator or your living situation. Some survivors feel angry with everything. Anger can be scary, especially if it is hard to find any healthy way to express it. Anger can also be the feeling that gives you the energy to heal.
- Many survivors feel bad about themselves; they have lower self-esteem than before the assault. You may blame yourself or feel guilty or so ashamed that you begin to believe that you deserved to be assaulted.
- After the initial crisis, it is normal to begin to question your sexual orientation, your feelings about sexuality or your desire to be sexual again. Sex is a strong reminder of the assault and can be a difficult trigger.
- If you are in a situation where you are being assaulted regularly, you may not fully get to the outward adjustment stage until you are away from the abusive situation. You may feel like you are living somewhere between the first and second phases.

## Integration Phase

- Many survivors report that they feel like they were one person before the assault and are another person after the assault. Integration is when you accept the sexual assault as part of your life experience and bring together the best aspects of those two halves of yourself in a way that works for you.
- You have practiced positive ways to cope so that when strong or difficult feelings surface, they do not take over. Everything you have done and gone through since the rape is part of the journey to integration.
- Some survivors say that they like themselves and their lives better now than before the assault. That does not mean they are glad they were raped. It means that they take joy in their own healing process. They were able to take something terrible and make good come out of it.
- The healing process after a sexual assault may take months or years.
- Many survivors decide to help other survivors or to work for change in society. Activism can be a terrific way to further your own healing process and to give hope to other survivors.

## Reactivation of Crisis

The second or third phases may be temporarily interrupted by a reactivation of crisis. The feelings of the acute crisis phase seem to come back and can be triggered by sights, smells, sounds, situations or memories.

- Triggers are like buttons to the trauma. At first, it may feel like everything is a trigger. As time goes

on, triggers will have to be much stronger to reactivate a crisis.

- A reactivation of crisis is an important part of the healing process. Every time you work back through the phases you will gain skills and strengths that improve your life and health.
- A reactivation of crisis does not mean you are back at square one of the healing process. All the good work you have done is still there.
- If you have experienced any other traumatic event, such as childhood abuse, you may find that you go into crisis about that as well as the recent sexual assault.
- An important time to reach out for support is when a crisis is reactivated.

## When the Assaults Keep Happening: Complex PTSD

Everything in the section on RTS can occur after one traumatic experience, yet you may be in a situation where you are being sexual assaulted, harassed or exploited on a daily basis. Some prisoners experience sexual slavery or are forced into prostitution over a period of time.

Psychiatrist and activist Judith Hermann coined the term *Complex PTSD* to describe what happens when someone survives repeated trauma. No one can survive prolonged abuse without having it change them in some way. When under the control of a perpetrator and unable to flee, even a very healthy person may experience:

- Feeling sad all the time, feeling hopeless enough to plan to hurt or kill yourself, feeling explosive anger or feeling numb.
- Changes in thinking and memory, like forgetting all or part of a traumatic event, reliving traumatic events, blocking out chunks of time, and feeling detached (separate) from your thoughts or your body.
- Seeing yourself as different and separate from every other person, feeling helpless and believing that you are “marked” in some permanent way.
- Thinking that the perpetrator is all-powerful, feeling obsessed with him or her or having intense revenge fantasies.
- Relating to other people differently by isolating yourself, distrusting everyone or looking for someone to rescue you.
- Seeing the world in new ways, such as losing faith, having a sense of impending doom (feeling like something awful is going to happen all the time), feeling disconnected from your family or community or not being able to handle everyday events.

The more times you have been assaulted, the more likely you are to believe that the abuse happened because of you. Many survivors of repeated trauma switch from thinking “it must have happened because of something I did” to “it happened because of who I am.”

Remember that no one can force another person to commit rape or assault. It is a choice the perpetrator made. Self-blame does not keep you safer and it stops the healing process.



The daily trauma of being behind bars makes the stress of the rape even more difficult.

# Challenges of Incarceration

The daily trauma of being behind bars makes the stress of the rape even more difficult. You may be unable to move about freely, may have no privacy, and may have to live with the perpetrator.

Deep feelings of shame are common for survivors of sexual assault. Most of us have a need to keep our most embarrassing or shameful moments private. In detention settings, secrets are usually very hard to keep and gossip spreads quickly. Many survivors are devastated to find that everyone seems to have heard the perpetrator's, or some other untrue, version of the assault.

Some of the other challenges for survivors who are incarcerated are:

- In prison or jail you have very little control over things to which most survivors are sensitive, like noise, light, and crowds.
  - You may have to be alone more than is good for you or you may need to be alone and not be able to get any
- space. If you are feeling overwhelmed, being isolated can either be scary and dangerous or it can be a relief. If at all possible, reach out by writing to a loved one or to Just Detention International, or by asking to talk with someone. Even if you do not want to talk about the rape, human contact can make a difference.
- You are expected to appear calm and follow directions at all times. When you are in a crisis and feeling disoriented, irritable or anxious, it may seem impossible to go on as usual.
  - You may feel so desperate that you think about provoking a dangerous situation to break the tension.
  - Sharing or showing your feelings in any way might not be safe or may mark you as someone with a mental health problem or as a target for perpetrators.
  - You may have questions and fears about who will find out about the

assault. Perhaps you worry about how the rape changes the way inmates or corrections officials think about you, impacts your review hearing or changes your opportunities in the facility.

- You may have contracted a sexually transmitted disease or HIV or become pregnant as a result of the

assault. If that is the case, fears about who will find out and how being assaulted will change your experience in the institution and your life on the outside are probably heightened.

Remember to be patient with yourself and to take time to think through your actions. Trust your judgment about what is safe and right for you.

**“ . . . the guard came to get me at 3 am . . . this he thought allowed him access to rape me. And he did . . . Afterwards he offered me my paper jumpsuit and as I was putting it on another guard entered and became extremely suspicious. You’d think this would have been enough to prosecute. But it hasn’t been. An ‘inconclusive’ rape test conducted after my shower meant no follow up.**

**My hands have been tied. My life has not. I am married, I have three children now, and I am in school studying to be a Social Worker with a specialty in addictions rehabilitation.”**

**—Hope**

Healing is possible. It won’t always hurt as much as it does right now.

Finding ways to take care of yourself after a sexual assault is the first important step in the healing process.

## Decisions in the Aftermath

**F**inding ways to take care of yourself after a sexual assault is the first important step in the healing process. You have some important decisions to make, even if the first decision may be that you are not ready to make them right now. Some of the things to think about are:

### Medical attention

- It is very important to get medical attention after an assault. You may be physically injured and in danger of infection or there may be a chance you were exposed to a sexually transmitted disease, or that you are pregnant.
- If you decide to tell medical staff within 72 hours of the assault, they often do a forensic exam to collect evidence and provide medical care. You may also ask for medicine to help prevent sexually transmitted disease or pregnancy and to be tested for HIV.
- You may be able to get medical care without saying what happened. In some institutions you are able to file a report about a sexual assault without giving the name of the perpetrator.
- You have the right to take your time to decide what you want to do in case you are pregnant. It is never okay for someone to pressure you to have an abortion or to carry the pregnancy to term. You may ask about your facility's policies about emergency contraception (the "morning-after pill"), abortion, pregnancy, and caring for newborns, so that you have all the information you need before you make a decision.
- Many survivors experience stress-related illnesses like stomach problems and headaches.

## Deciding who to tell

- You have the right to have control over your story. Sorting through who to tell about a sexual assault is an important step in the healing process.
- Many survivors do not tell anyone. It can be very scary to risk letting strong feelings out and to wait for another person's reaction.
- The perpetrator may tell others his or her side of the story or someone else may spread rumors. If you had injuries that made it necessary for you to seek medical care, others may know too. Losing control of the disclosure process can be very painful.
- Many survivors find themselves telling everyone, because at least that way the truth is being spread instead of rumors. Many survivors also hope that if they tell enough people, someone will help them.
- Think about who has been supportive or fair to you in the past. In some institutions, clergy or mental health staff may keep conversations confidential. Maybe there is another prisoner who you trust, or a friend or loved one on the outside with whom you can correspond.
- You may be able to call a local rape crisis center confidentially. Feel free to write to Just Detention International and request contact information for rape crisis centers in your state.
- If you know you need a housing change, you may have to tell an official that something happened. You can take some time to plan what you will say.

## Reporting Decisions

- Deciding whether or not to report a sexual assault is very difficult for most survivors. Reporting may simply not be possible for you right now. Or, it may be the only way to stay alive. Only you know.
- The exact legal process will vary from state to state and institution to institution. Some of the relevant information may be in your inmate orientation packet.
- You may be able to ask a mental health or other staff member questions about the process before deciding whether to file a report. In most detention settings, staff members are required to report any crime that happens on their grounds, so ask general questions without giving any information if you are still undecided.
- All medical professionals are required to report to law enforcement when they treat injuries that are clearly from a crime.
- Many survivors see reporting as a good way to get some control back. On the other hand, you may have to tell your story many times and the process can be both slow and unsatisfying.
- Reporting is the only way that the institution will know that the rapist is dangerous and hopefully protect you and others from him or her. However, you are entitled to decide what is best or possible for you right now.
- Writing in a journal is a good way to work through some of these difficult decisions. If you do write in a journal and you feel safe keeping it, the journal can be a helpful record if you decide to file a formal report in the future.

As you make progress in your healing process, you will learn new coping skills and find out what works best for you.

# Defense Mechanisms and Coping Skills

## Defense Mechanisms

**D**efense mechanisms protect a person from emotional pain. You may use a defense mechanism and not be aware of it. Survivors often know they are doing something differently but are not sure why and may feel ashamed. When people are in impossible situations, with no way out, what they do to survive does not always look good or even make sense. At some point you will not need the defense mechanism anymore and you will use healthier ways to cope. Do not beat yourself up about it.

Some of the common defense mechanisms that survivors use are:

- ***Pretending nothing happened or denial.*** Being raped can be so shocking that a survivor may not be able to find somewhere in his or her brain to put the experience. Some survivors call the rape something else or find a way to say it was not that bad and some literally put the fact that they were assaulted out of their heads. In prison or jail, denial might feel like the only possibility. You may be able to pretend you were never assaulted but still have the strong feelings of the acute crisis phase of RTS, which can be very confusing. Be patient and gentle with yourself. Do not try to force yourself to remember or to talk about what happened if you are not ready.
- ***Suicidal thoughts/plans/actions.*** If you are in a situation where you feel afraid and isolated and you see no way out, thinking about suicide may seem reasonable. Many survivors say that their feelings are so strong and hard to express, that they cannot imagine any other way to show how they are feeling. Please remember that if you die now, there is no hope of

healing. Even if you are not ready to talk about the sexual assault, please consider talking to someone you trust about your thoughts of killing yourself.

- ***Self-harm.*** Sometimes survivors cut, burn, hit or starve themselves. Self-harm can provide a release of tension. The physical pain can be a momentary relief from the emotional pain. The act of hurting yourself can also make you feel, for a moment, like you are back in control of your body. However, the self-harm very quickly makes most survivors feel more out of control and becomes a new problem. Please consider talking to someone if you are hurting yourself. You deserve not to be hurt anymore.
- ***Risky behavior.*** For some survivors, creating danger is another way to try and commit suicide. Picking fights with other prisoners or officers, making escape attempts, stealing or renegeing on a debt or promise are all ways of placing yourself in life-and-death situations. For some survivors this relieves some of the feelings of helplessness because of the rush of getting into a dangerous situation and seeing if they can get out alive.
- ***Becoming more sexually active than before or deciding never to be sexual again.*** Some survivors feel like they will never be able to feel good about being sexual again and some survivors start having much more sex than before the assault. Most people understand the first reaction and are confused by the second. For some survivors, it feels like saying “no” did

not work, so it is hopeless or dangerous to try. For other survivors, going after sexual activity feels like the best way to be in control of not being raped again. Some survivors may try to have a positive sexual experience in order to erase the rape.

- ***Alcohol and other drug use.*** Many survivors use alcohol and other drugs to numb their feelings, to get through the day or to be able to perform in a sexual slavery or prostitution situation. Many survivors find that getting drunk or high helps them survive in the short-term, but the alcohol or drug use quickly becomes a problem that makes things worse and makes the survivor feel even more out of control. Support for recovering from addictions may be available within your institution. You can get the support of a group, whether you are ready to talk about the rape or not. Remember that the 12 Steps used in Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous were not written about healing from sexual assault, although they can be helpful for a sexual assault survivor who has an addiction.
- ***Dissociating or spacing out.*** Most survivors dissociate to some extent in response to stress, danger or very strong feelings. Spacing out can be the only way to “escape” when you are held captive, especially if you have survived multiple assaults. Mentally escaping can become a problem when it begins to happen often or is out of your control. If you find yourself missing chunks of time, ending up in places to which you do not remember going, or hearing that you did or said things you do not

remember, you may be dissociating. Seeking mental health help is important, when it feels safe to do so, if you are dissociating so much that it is interrupting your life.

## Coping Skills

Coping skills are tools used to process and deal with feelings. People are usually aware of using them and see them as a healthy and positive part of the healing process. As you make progress in your healing process, you will learn new coping skills and find out what works best for you.

Some examples of coping skills are:

- **Talking to someone.** One of the hardest parts of surviving a sexual assault is feeling alone and separate from everyone else. If you can find a supportive and understanding person to talk to, it can help you to work through your feelings, feel less alone, feel less “crazy,” and plan for your future. If you try to talk to someone and they have an unsupportive attitude or blame you for the assault, remember that their reaction has to do with their own thoughts and feelings about rape; it has nothing to do with you.
- **Writing or drawing.** A journal can be a great way to express feelings in a safe and private way. If you are afraid of what will happen if someone finds your journal, drawings can be an even more private way to express yourself. Some people tear up what they have written after they are finished. Writing letters to loved ones or supportive organizations can also be an important tool.

- **Planning for your future.** It is said that the best revenge is living well. Many survivors find that pouring their energy into their own healing is the best coping skill. There may be educational programs you can join at your facility, or you can request access to books and educate yourself.
- **Exercising.** A sexual assault is a physical, as well as mental and spiritual, violation. Exercising can help to work out some of the difficult feelings. It can also help you to feel more in control of your body.
- **Handling triggers.** Flashbacks, panic attacks, and unwanted thoughts after a sexual assault can be terrifying. Below are some simple ways to try and deal with them in the moment:

### Deep Breathing

- 1) Breathe in through your nose for a count of four.
- 2) Hold your breath for a count of four.
- 3) Breathe out through your mouth for a count of four.
- 4) Hold your breath out for a count of four.
- 5) Repeat until your heart slows to normal and the feeling of panic eases.

*You may prefer to come up with a simple, calming phrase to repeat instead of counting, such as, “calm down, calm down.”*

## **A Safe Place**

- 1) Get into a comfortable position and do the breathing exercise above.
- 2) Picture a place where you feel completely safe (it can be real or imaginary). Picture every detail about the place. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you feel? What do you smell? Are you alone? What are you doing? Spend some time imagining this place, so that you become very familiar with it. You may want to write about or draw the safe place.
- 3) Come up with a cue that will help you to “visit” your safe place when you need to. The cue can be the word “stop,” tapping your hand, or anything that will help you avoid a panic attack. When you feel a panic attack or a flashback starting, use your cue to signal that it is time to picture your safe place.
- 4) Continue to imagine the safe place until the flashback or anxiety has passed.
- 5) Do another deep breathing exercise before going on with your day.

## **Grounding**

- 1) When you feel a flashback or panic attack coming on or you begin to have unwanted (intrusive) thoughts, say or think “STOP.”
- 2) Grab onto something solid (the arms of a chair, the table, the bed post or something comforting like a book or photograph) and answer the following questions: Where am I? What is happening now? Repeat the answers at least twice. For example, I am in class. I am safe right now.
- 3) If you can, change what you are doing. For example, if you are listening to music or watching TV, turn it off or step away. If you are in a class or at work, draw/scribble something calming. If there is a safe person (another prisoner or a staff member), try to get near that person.
- 4) Make a plan for what you will do next.
- 5) Tell yourself that you handled this situation well.



Rape is a crime and the perpetrator uses sexual acts as weapons.

## Sex and Sexuality

Rape is a crime and the perpetrator uses sexual acts as weapons. As a result, it can have a big impact on your feelings about sex and sexuality. It is important to remember that sexual assault is not about lust, attraction or miscommunication. The perpetrator used the rape to be in control and to make you feel powerless.

- Healing your sexuality is a process that will take time. Any sexual contact or feelings may be a trigger right now. Be patient with yourself.
- Feeling safe and comfortable is necessary for any healthy sexual activity. If at all possible, do not try to force yourself to be sexual when you do not really want to. If this is not a choice you can make right now, take any opportunity to have some control. Maybe you can avoid certain sex acts that are particularly difficult. It might be that asking for a housing change or protective custody is your only option, regardless of the consequences.
- Flashbacks to the assault during consensual sex or masturbation are very common. This can be confusing if you are engaging in something that is pleasurable. If you can stop whatever is happening right then, do so.
- If your body responded with sexual arousal or orgasm during the sexual assault, you may feel ashamed any time you have sexual feelings. Some survivors begin to fantasize about being out of control during sex or while masturbating to ease the shame, which is not a sign of any desire to be raped again.
- Many survivors wonder about their sexual orientation, feeling like their sexuality has been so deeply wounded that their sexual orientation has changed. Sexual assault does not determine sexual orientation. However, most survivors do go through a time when they question or explore different ways to feel good about being sexual. This is a normal and healthy part of the healing process.

- Many survivors find that they become more sexually active, including through masturbation, after the assault. Increasing sexual activity may not be the reaction we expect, but it is normal. However, if the sexual activity is a reaction to trauma, it may not feel like a real choice and may make the feelings of degradation and shame worse.
- Lesbian, gay, and bisexual survivors have many of the same feelings as straight people after a rape. Any kind of sex may be a trigger. However, lesbian, gay, and bisexual survivors may have been targeted for a hate crime because of their sexual orientation. This discrimination can increase self-blame, self-hatred, and fear.

Sexual assault does not determine sexual orientation. However, most survivors do go through a time when they question or explore different ways to feel good about being sexual.

**“As a prisoner, life is an on-going struggle. But as a transsexual prisoner the struggles are unlimited. I’ve done a majority of my life under and within the system, and know I am not the only one . . . I can’t erase nor change being and becoming a victim of rape, but I can, now, fight to change that others do not become victims as well . . . I realize that I am a wonderful person and it is not my fault what other people’s sicknesses are and were. And it’s not your fault either . . .”**

**— Latavia**

All parts of your identity . . . particularly gender, will affect your experiences as a survivor of sexual assault.

## Gender Roles

Survivors of rape experience the assault and healing process in a very personal way. However, the crime occurs within a broader cultural context that accepts violence against certain groups of people. All parts of your identity, such as your race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and particularly gender, will affect your experiences as a survivor of sexual assault.

Rape is a highly personal crime in which you are treated like you do not matter. It is a deeply hurtful and dehumanizing experience for anyone. The feelings of disgrace and shame are deep. After an assault, survivors of all gender identities, races, and cultures tend to question who they are, what they want, and how to reorganize their very selves. Survivors do this successfully all the time. Healing is possible.

The following is intended to help you think about how your experience as a survivor is impacted by your understanding of gender roles and your gender identity.

### Men

- Being raped is an assault against many commonly held stereotypes about what it means “to be a man.” Men are supposed to be able to fight anyone off. The need to be tough, invulnerable, and aggressive is drummed into many young boys. Boys who do not like or fit this mold are often subjected to sexual harassment and assault from a very young age.
- In detention settings, the need to be a tough guy is a matter of life and death. In prisons and jails, the definition of masculinity is even more violent and controlling than on the outside.
- The sexual assault experience can lead a male survivor to question his identity as a man and leave him feeling as if he does not know how to behave even in simple situations. A survivor may react by taking on

extremely macho behaviors, to appear less vulnerable, or by taking on feminine attributes and dress in an attempt to protect himself.

- Part of the healing process will be to define for yourself a new, hopefully more affirming, version of masculinity, including honoring the positive ways in which you have been strong.

## Women

- Most women are aware of the possibility of being raped from a young age. Women and girls are often told about the ways they can prevent sexual assault—by not wearing certain clothes, not seeming sexual, never being drunk, not going out without a male escort, the list goes on. Unfortunately, such rules place the responsibility of preventing sexual assault on women and therefore also place the blame on female survivors.
- Women and girls are frequently taught that all men want sex and it is the job of women to set the sexual limits. This leads women survivors to blame themselves for the assault and many to feel that they hate being women. Women often change their dress and appearance after an assault to appear less traditionally feminine.
- Women prisoners are very likely to be survivors of gender-based violence (sexual assault, domestic violence,

sexual harassment or exploitation) prior to being incarcerated, which complicates the healing process.

- Part of the healing process will be to acknowledge the strengths and survival skills that you already possess and prepare to use them for your benefit.

## Transgender People

- Transgender prisoners are at particularly high risk for sexual assault.
- Transgender people are very likely to think, and may have been told, that the rape happened because of who they are. This message often leads a survivor to feel like a bad person who deserves such treatment.
- Transgender people are likely to have been targeted for sexual assault in the community as well. Multiple traumatic experiences compound each other and complicate healing. It is tough enough to survive the oppression that transgender people face, without additional trauma.
- Please remember that the assault did not happen because of who you are. It happened because someone else decided to commit a violent crime.
- Part of the healing process will be to honor your strengths and recognize what a powerful person you can be on the other side of this time of turmoil.

Healing is possible.

You have the right to decide what is best for you and what you need to do to survive and heal.

## Your Rights

### **As a survivor of sexual assault in detention, you have the right:**

- to be treated with respect by others;
- to decide who to tell;
- to decide how best to take care of yourself;
- to ask questions about what will happen if you report and how to get medical care;
- to be listened to and supported;
- to have any fears of retaliation taken seriously;
- to take your time to heal;
- to feel all of your feelings;
- to request a housing or cell change for your safety;
- to request to speak with mental health staff;
- to contact a support agency like Just Detention International or a rape crisis center;
- to seek advice from a lawyer.

### **If you file a formal report, you have the right:**

- to choose the person to whom you make the report;
- to have a sexual assault victim advocate present at each stage of the process, from the medical exam to the sentencing;
- in many states, to request that your name and information be kept confidential;
- to obtain reports/records about your assault;
- to file a grievance if you have been discriminated against;
- to decide later not to participate in court proceedings.

### **During the medical exam, you have the right:**

- to request that any non-essential people leave the room;
- to have an advocate in the room;

- to have all procedures, tests, and forms fully explained to you;
- to refuse any part of the exam or to end the exam at any time;
- to have copies of the exam reports;
- to receive medicine to prevent sexually transmitted disease or pregnancy. You also have the right to refuse this medicine;
- to have a confidential HIV test.

You have the right to explore your options and reject any that do not feel right or safe.

**“I denied the incident for more than 11 years, until something my girlfriend told me triggered everything . . . I found a very compassionate psychiatrist who has extensive dealings with prisoner rape . . . I have decided that I will lend whatever help I can to other rape survivors.**

**My name is Bill.  
I am a rape survivor.”**

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