

Understanding Reactions to Traumatic Experiences

The following information is intended to help with understanding how our brains and bodies react to traumatic experiences. Every person is unique, and **there is no right or wrong way** to deal with the complex emotions that come from traumatic experiences, such as sexual assault. Our brains are “wired” to respond in ways that keep us safe. **Survival mode, reflexes, and habits** kick in and replace normal thinking.

- You may be able to make rational choices at some times but not others.
- You may fight back at some times but not always.
- You may remember what happens in great detail, or you may not be able to recall details that you feel like you *should* know.
- You may be unable to think of effective responses or remember important information about your surroundings.

Reflexes & Habits

- A reflex is an automatic action that your body takes in response to something. Reflex responses to trauma can include inability to move (“freezing”), going into “autopilot” mode, dizziness, going limp, or even passing out.
- Habit responses are behaviors that you’ve learned over time. When dealing with aggressive or controlling people, you may have learned to do whatever they tell you, to avoid drawing attention and feeling embarrassed or uncomfortable.

Trauma & Memory

- You may recall some details of your experience very well, and other details in “bits and pieces” or not at all. This is completely normal, because this is how memory works during times of extreme stress.

- The things you *do* remember may not seem valuable or important to others, but they can become more important once they are pieced together.
- You may be unable to recall the order in which things happened, even though people around you are pressing for this information. This is very common. Remember to take a deep breath and do the best you can. It is normal to have clear memories of what happened *right before and right after* the traumatic event, but not during.

Emotions & Needs

- It is important to reestablish your primary needs after a traumatic event, such as safety, control, trustworthy support, understanding, and compassion.
- You may experience extreme emotions and “jumbled” memories at times, and you may feel numb at other times. This is OK.
- You may find yourself trying to cope by using alcohol or drugs, or engaging in risky behaviors. This is a common response to temporary loss of control; you are not alone. Talking to advocates or going to support groups might help with developing healthy habits.
- Pressure to remember or describe an assault in great detail may leave you feeling ashamed, betrayed, or further traumatized. You can always lean on advocates for support when these emotions arise.
- People in the medical and legal systems should try to find ways to meet your needs, within their professional boundaries. Giving you simple options and choices, such as when to take breaks, can help you to feel respected and to engage in the process in ways that work for you. Victim Advocates are trained professionals who can be helpful allies throughout your experience.