

# CARING FOR YOURSELF

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## HOW YOU MAY BE FEELING

If you have experienced sexual violence/sexual assault/intimate partner violence, you may be surprised by your emotional reactions. You may have a range of emotional reactions or be surprised by how calm you feel. There is no right or wrong way to feel; the emotions you are experiencing are the right ones for you.

You may feel that what has happened to you is your fault. Please know that this is not the case, you do not hold any blame in this occurrence. You did not make this happen or deserve this.

It is hard to think clearly when you have been subjected to trauma. You may find yourself doing things you would not expect yourself to do. This can be a confusing and overwhelming time. It takes time and energy to heal after you have been assaulted; you may not feel better right away. Be patient with yourself and give yourself the time you need to figure out how this experience has affected you.

You may find yourself experiencing a range of physical and emotional reactions, including:

- A feeling of being lost, alone or out of touch
- A feeling that no one understands what you have experienced or are currently experiencing
- Feeling confused or the inability to think clearly
- A change in eating habits and/or nausea
- Fatigue that may be sudden or sporadic
- Changes in your sleeping patterns
- Headaches and tension
- A feeling of grief and loss
- Reliving the experience in the form of thoughts and/or flashbacks
- A change in the way you feel about intimacy
- A feeling of discomfort when close to or touched by others
- An inability to trust others
- Feelings of fear, such as a fear of being alone or going out at night
- A feeling of being nervous or anxious
- A feeling of low self-confidence

It is important to understand the emotions you are feeling are part of the healing process. These reactions can help you understand how the experience has affected you. Taking the time to understand these reactions is an important part of the recovery process. It is important to take care of yourself, to seek out support, and to get answers to any questions you may still have after reading this information. There are also 24-hour crisis support lines offered in various languages that you can call if you need immediate or after-hours support.

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## REPORTING TO THE POLICE

Some people know immediately whether they wish to report to the police or not. Some are not sure what they want to do. You may need additional information before you make this important decision. Do not allow anyone to pressure you to decide about legal matters before you are ready. You must give yourself enough time to make the decision that is right for you.

At the Sexual Assault/Domestic Violence Treatment Centre, you have the option to store forensic evidence for one year (if you wish to have a Sexual Assault Evidence Kit completed). This is to give you the time you need to make this decision. If you decide to release the evidence kit to the police, there are nurses available to assist with this. Remember that, nothing is done without your consent; you make the decisions.

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## TECHNIQUES FOR GETTING THROUGH DIFFICULT TIMES

### DEEP BREATHING

- Sit or stand comfortably
- Inhale slowly through the nose (and push out stomach)
- Hold for a few seconds
- Exhale blowing the air out slowly
- Repeat several times
- Try to shift your focus from breathing to feeling relaxed

### MEDITATION

- Sit comfortably
- Reduce distractions
- Mentally focus on one peaceful word, thought or image
- Breathe deeply
- If you feel intrusive or scary thoughts, let them pass

### VISUALIZATION

- Picture a calm setting, real or imagined
- Imagine yourself in this setting
- Look around at the visual details
- Pay attention to specific smells, sounds, feelings, sensations
- Focus on the calmness you feel in this setting

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## STRATEGIES TO HELP MANAGE FLASHBACKS, INTENSE ANXIETY, AND/OR PANIC

The following suggestions are referred to as “grounding techniques”:

1. Find a calm and quiet space.
2. Breathe deep breaths through your nose. This increases the air flow to your lungs and helps to reduce your heart rate and panic reaction. Exhale through your mouth.
3. Do not try to control or fight your reactions. Accept them and let them pass, reminding yourself the panic is not dangerous and will pass.
4. Confide in someone and, if you feel comfortable, tell them how you feel.
5. Move around or engage in physical activity.
6. Focus on simple objects around you. Some people find it helpful to go through a sequence where they identify five things they can see, five things they can hear, five things they can smell, and continue through the process until the panic subsides.
7. Touch the floor and the physical objects around you. These actions help you to feel grounded in some way. For example, plant your feet on the floor, remind yourself of the current time and date. Breathe slowly and regularly through your nose to reduce possible hyperventilation.
8. Use positive self-talk along with slow breathing.
9. Ask yourself, “What is the most supportive thing I could do for myself right now?”

Experiment with different strategies when you feel nervous, anxious, or upset. Over time, you will learn which strategies work best for you.

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## HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR SLEEP

**The following are suggestions that may help improve your sleep:**

1. Exercise during the day, preferably in the late afternoon before dinner. Aerobic exercise (20 minutes or more) is better, but 45 minutes to an hour of brisk walking is helpful.
2. Try to remain consistent in the times that you go to sleep and wake up, even if you are tired in the morning.
3. Do not try to make yourself sleep. If you are not able to fall asleep after 20-30 minutes in bed, try to engage in a relaxing activity. Return to bed when you are sleepy.
4. Avoid heavy meals before bedtime or going to bed hungry (a small snack before bedtime may be helpful).
5. Avoid drinking alcohol before bedtime.
6. Have quiet time during the last hour or two of the day. Avoid vigorous physical or mental activity during this time.
7. Reduce caffeine and nicotine consumption as much as possible. If you must have caffeine, have it early in the day.
8. Develop a sleep ritual before bedtime. This is an activity you do every night before you get into bed.
9. Try to avoid napping during the day.
10. Do not let yourself be afraid of not sleeping. Work on accepting the nights when you are unable to sleep. The less you fight, resist, or fear sleeplessness, the more likely it will be to go away.
11. Talk about feelings, emotions, and thoughts with a support person, they can be a friend, family member or counsellor. Getting more emotional support and expressing your feelings can help improve your sleep.