

Effects that Mental Health May Have on Sexual Violence

Victims of sexual violence often suffer from shock, confusion, anger, humiliation and guilt, which can be intensified by a mental health condition.

People with schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, or clinical depression can be at an increased risk of sexual violence. It is estimated that some 23,000 people in Newfoundland and Labrador have one of these three conditions.

People with mental health conditions are approximately 15 times more likely to be the victims of sexual violence.

People with mental health illnesses are less likely to report the occurrence of a sexual assault.

Stigma and discrimination are common barriers to reporting a crime. Many victims with mental health conditions fear they will be not be perceived as credible because of their mental health diagnosis.

NL Sexual Assault Crisis and Prevention Centre

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24-hour, Crisis Support and
Information Line:

Toll Free: 1-800-726-2743

St. John's: 726-1411

Mental Health and Sexual Violence

24-Hour Crisis Support
& Information Line:
1-800-726-2743

Newfoundland and Labrador Sexual Assault
Crisis and Prevention Centre



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For resources and references regarding the information within this pamphlet, please feel free to contact our office.

Mental Health and Sexual Violence

Effects Sexual Violence May Have on Mental Health

Sexual violence has what is called a “ripple effect” in society. Like the ever expanding ripples across water when an object is dropped into it, effects from sexual violence are far reaching. It can impact not only the victim, but also to their family, friends and service providers.

The effects of sexual assault on mental health can be just as serious as physical injuries. Nine out of ten incidents of violence have an emotional effect on the victim. The most commonly reported effects are anger, fear, and becoming more cautious and less trusting.

The emotional and psychological effects of sexual assault can also include:

- Depression
- Confusion
- Anxiety
- Mood swings
- Flashbacks
- Guilt
- Fear
- Anger

All of these responses are normal, and may be temporary or last for a longer period of time. Many people find it helpful to access the support of friends, or service providers in dealing with these effects.

Effects Sexual Violence May Have on the Victim

Depression: can include extended periods of sadness and suicidal thoughts.

Suicidal Behaviour: is often a response to crisis when a person is overwhelmed by grief, hurt, depression, hopelessness or helplessness.

Flashbacks: memories of past traumas, victims may feel as though they are reliving their sexual assault which can be a terrifying experience.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: often called rape trauma syndrome; it is associated with fear, nightmares, obsessive thoughts, and anger.

Borderline Personality Disorder: impulsive behaviours such as: intense anger, suicidal tendencies, self-mutilation, promiscuity, and difficulties with relationships.

Substance Abuse: victims of sexual violence may be more likely to improperly use prescription drugs, illegal drugs or other substances.

Eating Disorders: are characterized by extreme disruptions in eating behaviours and intense anxiety over body weight and/ or appearance; may develop as a way of regaining control over the body or a way to cope with stress associated with being a victim of sexual violence.

These effects can make it difficult to function in everyday life. The fear of stigma can also make it difficult to reach out to supports.

Effects Sexual Violence May Have on Family, Friends and Service Providers

“Secondary victimization” is when friends and family members of the victim become upset and suffer negative effects after hearing about the assault.

Friends, family and the service provider can suffer effects similar to those of the victim and can relapse into these conditions as they learn more and more about the assault.

They can experience anger, shock, fear of what others will think, nightmares, and feeling alone in dealing with it.

Self Care

Self care means looking after yourself in a healthy way and doing things that are important to you. Taking care of ourselves is essential, especially when helping others. Your feelings are important signals and if ignored can escalate into greater health problems. Debriefing and peer support are the most effective coping strategies to manage emotions that are caused by dealing with a difficult disclosure.

For confidential support on how you have been affected by an experience of sexual violence, please call:

24 hour Crisis Support & Information Line
1-800-726-2743