

Low Self-Esteem & Relationships: How to Reclaim Yourself

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After rape or sexual abuse, survivors often find their self-esteem suffers significantly. Our negative view of ourselves can create difficulties in our personal lives, specifically in relationships with others. We may lose our personal power that allows us to lead healthy and balanced lives.

Healthy relationships require both parties to feel confident about their voice and their personal value. When these are missing, the relationship can take a tremendous toll on our emotional well-being.

Another aspect of a healthy relationship - whether that be with a romantic partner, a friend, your family or a colleague - is good communication. However, as a survivor the ability to be open about your thoughts and your emotions can often be extremely difficult. You may have been told that nobody wants to hear you, you may have received the message during the abuse that what you have to say isn't important, you may feel scared, ashamed or embarrassed when you share your feelings, or perhaps you simply feel that what you have to say is not worth listening to. All of these things (and there are many others!) make it really hard to share openly within any kind of relationship.

However, it is important to learn how to communicate as well as you can - a lack of communication can lead to misunderstandings, hurt feelings and a loss of intimacy. For example, your romantic partner may begin to feel rejected and unloved when you turn away from him when he initiates sex - not realizing that the reason you do so is not because of him but because of your past. If you were able to let him know that it's not him but the emotions and memories that sex in general brings up in you it might help him to be more supportive of you. You may have a friend you love very much who consistently makes inappropriate jokes about sexual abuse, not knowing that you are a survivor and out of ignorance not realizing the impact of her words - because you don't feel able to tell her that you don't want to hear these jokes you pull away from her friendship, and a relationship is lost that could have been saved with a simple conversation. Or you may end up burning out at work because you were unable to tell your boss that you couldn't take on all the extra work she asked you to do. There are many instances in life where it's important to be able to communicate your feelings and thoughts, and if this is something you struggle with it is definitely a skill to work on as you continue to heal.

Like any other aspects of healing from rape and/or sexual abuse, low self-esteem is

very common. If this issue is something you struggle with, know that you are not alone. However you find your self-perceptions changed after such horrible trauma(s), know that you are valuable, worthy of respect and deserving of love and support. No one has the power to take that away from you.

Rape and sexual abuse are violations of our mind, body, and spirit. Because of these violations, it is extremely difficult to reclaim our personal worth. Without this self-driven empowerment, we can feel less than those around us. This feeling then causes issues in our personal, professional, and academic lives.

We often find it challenging to:

- feel secure in our emotions, reactions, and expectations
- stand up for ourselves

The Role of Self-Blame

Self-blame can be a major reason for our low self-esteem. We often use self-blame to shield our minds from the true nature of our traumas in order to lessen the pain of being violated. It's much easier to believe we had a role in our attack(s) than to accept we had absolutely no control over what happened. In addition, many of our abusers fuel this mindset by their actions and words either during the abuse, after, or both.

Overcoming self-blame is a significant stepping stone to reclaiming ourselves. Pandora's has wonderful articles specifically dedicated to the topic of self-blame: [Was It My Fault? Self-Blame & Survivors](#), [Countering Self-Blame](#), and [Why Child Sexual Abuse Can NEVER Be Your Fault](#). One of these articles has a particularly powerful quote that has stuck with me personally for many years:

Only one person makes the choice to rape. ...The only person who can prevent rape is the rapist him or herself. Bad decisions, neutral decisions, good decisions; to me it doesn't matter. We should be able to live our lives; we should be able to trust our family and our neighbors. Rapists should not rape. Period. ([Was It My Fault? Self-Blame & Survivors](#), par 15).

No matter how you came to feel that you are responsible, you never were and never will be. Rape involves a complete loss of choice and for that reason your traumas(s) can never be your fault in any way.

How to Feel Secure in Your Reactions and Expectations

One result of low self-esteem in relationships is to constantly feel insecure and in doubt of our emotional reactions and expectations of the other party. If someone says something that makes us upset or frustrated, we may ask ourselves, "Am I over-reacting?" I personally run many conversations at my work or with my significant other by my therapist. Even when we know logically we may be right, our emotional responses tell us we are wrong.

What can help - It may be a good idea to keep a journal of situations you feel insecure about. See if a pattern develops. Try to answer these questions about each situation you doubt yourself in:

1. What is this situation about?
2. Who is involved (my significant other, co-workers, teachers, etc.)?
3. What emotions do I feel?
4. Why do I doubt myself in this situation?

It is often very helpful to get feedback from others. If you have a therapist, bring the journal entries with you and see what he/she has to say. It is also wonderful to receive feedback from those who can relate to your feelings and situations. Join and log onto the Pandora's Aquarium message board, chat room, and online support group and make a post about how you are feeling or search/respond to other posts about similar experiences.

How to Stand Up for Ourselves

Standing up for ourselves can be very complicated. If we feel insecure about why we need to stand up for ourselves, then it may seem to be an impossible task to be more assertive.

What can help – try standing up for yourself in small steps. It is a big leap to go from never saying anything to someone else about your reactions to all of a sudden feeling confident about your feelings. These activities may provide the stepping stones to becoming more assertive:

1. After the situation, write down what happened as objectively as possible.
2. Afterwards, go back and see where you reacted. Go over the other person's words or actions.
3. Imagine that you could stand up to that person directly. Write down what you would say.
4. Take some time out and come back to your writing a few hours or days later to

reflect.

5. Review your writings; do you still feel the same way? Would you still want to react in the same manner?
6. If so, try generating a letter to that person. Include what happened and respond without the fear of doing so face-to-face.
7. Send the letter if you feel compelled to do so, or if that is not something you are able to do think of another ritual that might help you. Some survivors find it healing to burn these letters, rip them up, place them in a locked box and so on.

After trying these activities, it may become easier for you to assert yourself in particular situations. If you send your letter it may also be an appropriate and effective way to stand up for yourself in many situations. For example, I personally try to stand up for myself as much as I can over email or letters. I write emails and letters (where applicable) to my boss, my co-workers and my significant other.

Rebuilding our self-esteem can be a difficult and long journey. As difficult as reclaiming ourselves may be, we must remember that we are worth it. We deserve to feel secure about what we need and want out of life and others. We deserve to stand up for ourselves. No matter what others do or say, we deserve to have a voice and feel empowered.

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