

Reclaiming your Sexuality

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Most survivors of sexual violence will experience difficulties with sex and intimacy. It is important to remember that how you feel is natural; you should not feel obligated to automatically be healed after something so traumatic. All survivors heal at different speeds, and sexual healing is no different. Although you can start working on sexual healing at any time, many people find it easier to wait until they have made progress in other areas of healing. Often, addressing the underlying issues can have a huge impact on your sexual healing. Try not to push yourself—there is no time frame, and having a desire to heal and a willingness to put in the necessary work is very important.

Realize that you deserve to have a healthy sex life

It sounds simple enough, but it doesn't necessarily come naturally to survivors of sexual violence. Many survivors feel that because they were raped, they should not want to have sex. They may feel that it is wrong to enjoy something that was used against them in such an awful way. It is important to find a way to separate rape and sex, and to acknowledge that it is perfectly acceptable to want sex and to initiate sex.

Take a break from sex

This may sound like it defeats the whole purpose, but many survivors find it helpful to stop having sex for a period of time while they work on the underlying issues. There is no set period of time; every individual will be different. Because sexual contact after rape can lead to flashbacks, pushing yourself could end up making you feel worse. However, making a conscious decision to abstain from sex for a period of time can take away the pressure and allow you to work on other important aspects of your sexual healing.

For many survivors, taking that break can be a sacrifice that ends up paying off in the end. If this is something you choose to do, it is important to remember that you must not feel guilty. You are not withholding sex from your partner or denying them anything. You are in this together, and you are also missing out by not having sex.

Work with your partner

It is not necessary to have a partner in order to work on your sexual healing, but if you do, it is very important to get them involved in the process. It can be frustrating for partners if they are unsure of what to do, and many survivors worry that their partners will feel hurt or neglected.

If you are working on intimacy with a partner you were sexually active with before the rape, he or she may have certain expectations. Remember that you are not obligated to do anything you do not feel comfortable with, and it is okay if you are not immediately able to be comfortable with certain acts. Talk with your partner and explain that you are struggling with certain things, and offer him or her different ways to help you.

Survivors working with a new sexual partner may take the opportunity to start over, or they may struggle because there is no existing foundation to build on. Do not feel obligated to share more than you are comfortable with. It is perfectly fine to explain that you are not comfortable with certain acts. Everyone has likes and dislikes, and you should never feel pressured to do anything you do not want, no matter what your past experiences may have involved.

Communication is key; talk about how you are feeling and what you each need. Tell your partner what you like, what you don't like, what you would like to be able to do. Lean on each other; you may have been the one who was raped, but this affects your partner as well.

Talk about sex

It is important to have open communication with your partner, but it can also be helpful to find other outlets. You may choose to see a therapist who specializes in sex therapy. A therapist can help you work through your issues and can help you find specific things for you and your partner to try. Some survivors find it helpful to talk to their friends or to other survivors about sex. Talking with others can help you refocus on the healthy aspects of sex. You may also consider reading threads on the message board or starting your own thread in the Sex & Intimacy forum.

Try touching and trust exercises

Different survivors will struggle with different things. Even if you are not having a hard time with all kinds of touch, it can be beneficial to work on some form of touching exercises.

These can help build intimacy and trust between you and your partner, and will serve as a foundation for your sexual healing. You may also find it helpful to start over in a sense, and rediscover your likes and dislikes.

Wendy Maltz goes into detail about specific touching exercises in her book The Sexual Healing Journey or in her video Relearning Touch. Touch exercises can be adapted to your needs and to your stage of healing.

Although the process may be frustrating, it does provide a good base. Remember to make it as fun as possible. Healing doesn't have to be a negative thing. Laugh with your partner; turn it into a game. Just because you are not having sex does not mean you can't find ways to have fun. Cuddling, kissing and holding hands can go a long way to building intimacy and to regaining your sex life.

Be patient

It may be the last thing you want to hear, but it's true. It will take time, and you are bound to have setbacks. But all the work you invest in it now will pay off in the future. It is very important that you do not push yourself to do things before you are ready. Accept that it is okay if things do not happen right away or if you have a hard time. If it were easy, it probably wouldn't be worth having. Remember that no matter how much you are struggling or how you feel about sex, it is absolutely possible to heal and enjoys a healthy sex life.

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