

## **Sexual Violence and Grief**

© 2007 Pandora's Project

By: Shannon

One of the most common questions survivors of sexual violence ask is, "Will the pain ever end?" When you're dealing with the events of your past, the pain can seem overwhelming and never ending. Survivors are left to cope with a lot of grief, over what happened and what was lost. Will you ever get your life back? Will you ever reclaim the "old you"? Will you ever sleep without nightmares, or have a carefree day? The answer is yes, but there is a process of grieving that most survivors go through.

### **Turning a Boulder into a Pebble**

When you first begin dealing with sexual violence, it is like you've been handed a huge boulder you must carry. The boulder is heavy, and it hurts to carry. You always feel burdened by it. It's always scratching you and hurting your hands and shoulders. Even when you're doing other things, that boulder is always on your mind; you can't just leave it at home. You're always thinking about it.

But, gradually, as you carry that boulder around, it erodes and becomes smaller. It becomes easier to carry, less burdensome. It's still painful and frustrating, but you can focus on other things too. The boulder keeps getting smaller and smaller, as time passes, you work through therapy, talk to other survivors, and tell your story.

Eventually the huge boulder is no bigger than a pebble. It will never go away, but at this size, you can put it your pocket. Every once in awhile you feel it, but the pain is manageable. It's still part of you, but it doesn't define you. You can take it out when you need to, to look at it and remember, but you can also keep it hidden from view. You've taken a huge, rocky boulder and turned into a small, smooth stone. You have reclaimed your life.



## Stages of Grief <sup>1</sup>

It may also help to consider the stages common to sexual violence survivors and all those experiencing grief. You may not experience all stages, and you might not experience them in this order. You might even go back a stage or two as new memories surface or you deal with new emotions. However, it can help to identify where you are in the process of recovery and to see each stage not as a conclusion, but as a step on the journey to recovery.

### **1. Shock and Denial - "It can't happen to me!"**

After experiencing sexual violence, there's such total confusion and disbelief that a person often goes numb; the mind-body system has to shut down. It is also common for a survivor to deny that what happened was rape, or to downplay it - "it wasn't so bad."

### **2. Fear, Panic and Shame - "What do I do now?"**

Once the shock wears off, you are no longer numb. There are some predictable next steps, such as profound anxiety and vulnerability: how will I survive this loss of innocence, the violation, facing my friends and family, living my life again? There's a mounting sense of being out of control, which for many survivors also evokes feelings of shame and inadequacy. And this lack of control, not surprisingly, can make the memory of the sexual violence even worse. A survivor may feel like his or her life is over, like the spirit has died. The effects of sexual violence are long-lasting.

### **3. Rage and/or Helplessness - "How dare someone do this to me!"**

Often people in this phase swing between rage and profound sadness. Both states can be induced by deep underlying vulnerability or helplessness. You've been wounded, feel exposed and just want to lash out. Or you turn the rage inward in depression and self-hatred. Now it's crawling under the covers of escapism, or going through the motions of living or, even, straining as hard as you can to reign victorious over your basic unworthiness; to battle a fear of failure and lurking dread of being sucked into that compelling black hole of helplessness.

Though the only person responsible for sexual violence is the perpetrator, many survivors are likely to over attribute self-responsibility, that is, to blame themselves for what happened. It is often easier to try to blame yourself than to understand why someone else would hurt another person the way you've been hurt. That's why the next phase, while often maddening, is also essential for moving through the grief process.

### **4. Guilt and Ambivalence - "Damned if you do or if you don't."**

The feelings and old voices of guilt and shame (violating or compromising an internalized core value or essential part of your self-identity, integrity and esteem) can become louder and more incessant. Self-directed rage keeps taunting you for shortcomings, unworthiness, etc., and can ultimately drain you.

It is at this stage that many survivors wonder if the pain will ever end. You might be part of a support group, seeing therapy, journaling about your assault, but feel like nothing is helping. At this point, it is important to reach out. Hold onto hope. It will get better.

### **5. Focused Anger and Letting Go - "Finding the good from out of the bad"**

To reach that powerful, purposeful and passionate state of focused anger a survivor must often blend rage and sadness. Some rage can propel us out of a shocked, paralyzed or ambivalent state. Yet, you must also face your sadness and loss and struggle with

uncertainty to temper uncontrollable aggression, to make sadder yet wiser assessments and decisions.

If you've worked hard to integrate the previous stages then the reward is "focused anger": "What happened to me was terrible and wrong...but is there another side?" You're ready to loosen the knot of hurt and pain. You're ready to see that while you might never be the person you were before, you are now stronger, wiser, and capable of reclaiming your voice and your life. At this stage survivors frequently start using their experiences to help others (for instance, speaking out or volunteering at a rape crisis center). Though what happened to us was wrong and can never be justified, we might even begin to see the gifts that survival has given us.

## **6. Exploration and New Identity or going from victim to survivor to thriver (even if scared).**

Letting go is often unnerving. You've invested so much into simply surviving. You might feel like being a survivor is the only thing that defines you. But at this stage, you've incorporated what happened into your life - it is not who you are, but just part of who you are. You'll likely find that you think about what happened a lot less, and feel more like a stronger version of the "old you."

This vulnerable yet fluid state provides unprecedented opportunities to get to know yourself, to assess your true individuality – strengths and weaknesses – and not only as it relates to sexual violence. Now is the time for a full scale person-in-situation life inventory. How healthy or toxic are seemingly vital relationships and friendships? What about your health? During this transitional window, do dysfunctional coping patterns -- habits of drinking, smoking, drugging, eating, lack of exercise and limited socializing or spiritual support -- need to be challenged? What do you need to truly move forward?

1. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, MD, is credited with the original five stages of grief in *On Death & Dying*, (Simon & Schuster/Touchstone), 1969. These Stages of Grief are adapted here, with permission, from [http://www.stressdoc.com/grief\\_depression.htm](http://www.stressdoc.com/grief_depression.htm). Mark Gorkin, LICSW, known as "The Stress Doc"™, is the Internet's and America Online's "Online Psychohumorist"™. An experienced psychotherapist, "The Doc" is a nationally recognized speaker, and training and OD consultant specializing in Stress, Anger Management,

Reorganizational Change, Team Building and HUMOR! Check out his USA Today Online "Hotsite" Website -- <http://www.stressdoc.com>. For info on his workshops or for his free newsletter, email [stressdoc@aol.com](mailto:stressdoc@aol.com) or call 202-232-8662.

*This article is copyrighted and unauthorized reproduction is prohibited. If you wish to use this article online or in print, please contact [admin@pandys.org](mailto:admin@pandys.org) to request permission. Visit [www.PandorasProject.org](http://www.PandorasProject.org) for more information and articles.*

