

RAPE TRAUMA SYNDROME - IMPACT OF CRIME

Submitted by the Child Witness Institute

KEY CONCEPTS	
Rape Trauma Syndrome	Impact of Rape
Reactions of Rape Victim	Symptoms of Rape Trauma Syndrome
Behaviour of Rape Victim	Impact of Sexual Violence

Rape Trauma Syndrome is the description given to a group of reactions – emotional, physical and behavioural – experienced by victims of rape or attempted rape. This phrase was introduced by Burgess and Holmstrom¹ to describe the symptoms experienced by victims. The major symptoms of Rape Trauma Syndrome include:

- re-experiencing the trauma: rape victims may experience recurrent nightmares about the rape, flashbacks or an inability to stop remembering the rape.
- social withdrawal: this is where the victim becomes numb ('psychic numbing') and does not experience any feelings.
- avoidance behaviours and actions: victims try to avoid any feelings or thoughts that may remind them of the assault.
- increased physiological arousal characteristics: these symptoms include an exaggerated startle response, hypervigilance, sleep disorders or difficulty concentrating.

Even though every victim's experience of rape is unique, Burgess and Holstrom² argue that victims process their trauma in a series of stages and they separated the clusters of reactions into two stages: an acute, immediate phase of disruption and disorganization; and a long-term process of reorganization. The length of each phase can vary, and people may move back and forth between stages. Since the initial research was conducted, a further stage, known as the 'underground phase' has been identified. The following is a brief summary of the stages and the behaviour exhibited during these stages.

Acute Stage

The acute stage occurs immediately after the assault and can last for between a few days and several weeks. Victims describe a wide variety of symptoms during this period, both emotional and physical. Initially the physical and emotional impact of the incident may be so intense that the victim feels shock and disbelief. This is usually followed by fear, whether it be fear of physical injury or some form of retaliation. Other feelings range from humiliation, degradation, guilt, shame and embarrassment to self-blame, anger and revenge. Victims vary as to how they express their emotions. Some may exhibit outward

¹ Burgess, A.W. and Holmstrom, L.L. 1974. *Rape trauma syndrome*. *American Journal of Psychiatry*. 131(9): 981.

² Ibid.

signs of distress while others may be controlled and mask or hide their feelings. During this stage, victims may display the following behaviours:

- agitation or hysteria or total calmness (shock);
- crying spells and anxiety attacks;
- difficulty concentrating, making decisions and doing simple everyday tasks;
- show little emotion as though numb or stunned and even inappropriate behaviour like laughing;
- have poor recall of the rape or other memories; and
- feelings of sadness or anger, anxiety, extreme rage or hostility.

Underground Stage³

This stage is followed by the underground stage, which is where the victim returns to her life as if nothing has happened. The victim may try to block thoughts of the assault from their minds. They may refuse to talk about it and focus on forgetting what happened. Victims may remain in this stage for years and, although they appear to have dealt with the incident, they may not have resolved the emotional issues. This stage is about avoidance and the victim will deliberately try to avoid any reminders of the rape. Although the victim resumes her normal life on the outside, there is a lot of turmoil internally, and the following behaviours have been documented:

- continuing anxiety;
- sense of helplessness;
- persistent fear and/ or depression;
- severe mood swings;
- vivid dreams, recurrent nightmares, insomnia;
- physical problems;
- appetite disturbances (nausea, vomiting, compulsive eating);
- denying assault and minimising impact;
- withdrawal from friends or relatives;
- preoccupation with personal safety;
- hesitation about forming new relationships and distrustful of relationships;
- sexual problems; and
- disruption of normal everyday routines (staying out of work/school etc).

Reorganisation Stage

The final stage is the resolution or reorganisation stage, and this is the period when the rape is no longer the central focus in the victim's life. The victim begins to accept that she will never forget what happened, but that the pain and memories are beginning to lessen. Some of the behaviours exhibited in the previous stages may flare up but these tend to be less frequent and are less intense. Behaviours found in this stage include:

- recurring thoughts about the trauma;
- hyper-vigilance;

³ Burgess, A.W. and Holmstrom, L.L. 1985. *Rape trauma syndrome and post traumatic stress response* in Burgess, A.W. (ed) **Rape and Sexual Assault**. New York: Garland Publishing. 46.

- nightmares, flashbacks and sleep disturbances; and
- constant efforts to avoid the memories of the trauma have a huge impact on life.

While some victims are able to move forward and take control of their lives, others continue to suffer, and may even develop post-traumatic stress disorder for years and requires continuous counseling and support. As mentioned above, each victim processes the traumatic event in her own way and, therefore, although there are three stages in the recovery process, they can proceed through these at different paces and some may even revert to a previous stage or never reach the final stage.⁴

⁴ Burgess, A.W. and Holmstrom, L.L. 1979. *Adaptive strategies and recovery from rape*. **American Journal of Psychiatry**. 136(10): 1278; Burgess, A.W. 1983. *Rape Trauma Syndrome*. **Behavioral Sciences and the Law**. 1(3): 97.