

# Rape Trauma Syndrome

Rape Trauma Syndrome is a common reaction to a rape or sexual assault. It is the human reaction to an unnatural or extreme event.

## There are three phases to Rape Trauma Syndrome

### 1. Acute Phase

This phase occurs immediately after the assault and usually lasts a few days to several weeks. In this phase individuals can have many reactions but they typically fall into three categories of reactions:

1. **Expressed-** This is when the survivor is openly emotional. He or she may appear agitated or hysterical, he or she may suffer from crying spells or anxiety attacks.
2. **Controlled-** This is when the survivor appears to be without emotion and acts as if "nothing happened" and "everything is fine." This appearance of calm may be shock.
3. **Shocked Disbelief-** This is when the survivor reacts with a strong sense of disorientation. He or she may have difficulty concentrating, making decisions, or doing everyday tasks. He or she may also have poor recall of the assault.

### 2. The Outward Adjustment Phase

During this phase the individual resumes what appears to be his or her "normal" life but inside is suffering from considerable turmoil. In this phase there are five primary coping techniques:

1. **Minimization-** Pretends that "everything is fine" or that "it could have been worse."
2. **Dramatization-** Cannot stop talking about the assault and it is what dominates their life and identity.
3. **Suppression-** Refuses to discuss, acts as if it did not happen.
4. **Explanation-** Analyzes what happened- what the individual did, what the rapist was thinking/feeling.
5. **Flight-** Tries to escape the pain (moving, changing jobs, changing appearance, changing relationships, etc.).

There are many symptoms or behaviors that appear during this phase including:

- Continuing anxiety
- Severe mood swings
- Sense of helplessness
- Persistent fear or phobia
- Depression

- Rage
- Difficulty sleeping (nightmares, insomnia, etc.)
- Eating difficulties (nausea, vomiting, compulsive eating, etc.)
- Denial
- Withdrawal from friends, family, activities
- Hypervigilance
- Reluctance to leave house and/or go places that remind the individual of the assault
- Sexual problems
- Difficulty concentrating
- Flashbacks

All of these symptoms and behaviors may make the individual more willing to seek counseling and/or to discuss the assault.

### **3. The Resolution Phase**

During this phase the assault is no longer the central focus of the individual's life. While he or she may recognize that he or she will never forget the assault; the pain and negative outcomes lessen over time. Often the individual will begin to accept the rape as part of his or her life and chooses to move on.

**NOTE:** This model assumes that individuals will take steps forward and backwards in their healing process and that while there are phases it is not a linear progression and will be different for every person.