

Contact Us

Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine (SASSMM) helps people who are hurt by sexual violence.

Statewide Sexual Assault Helpline, available 24/7:

1-800-871-7741

Free and private support

SASSMM

Sexual Assault Support Services
of Midcoast Maine

If you live outside of Maine, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSRVC) can help connect you with local resources. Visit www.nsvrc.org for more information.

You can also call the National Sexual Violence Hotline at 1-800-656-4673 or visit RAINN's website at www.rainn.org.

Sex and Intimacy After Trauma:

Questions and Answers for
Survivors of Sexual Assault

Sexual Assault Support Services
of Midcoast Maine



Why am I struggling with intimacy and trust?

Sex, dating, relationships, and intimacy can be really confusing after going through something that overwhelms the mind and body, often talked about as “trauma.” Sexual assault, sexual harassment, and sexual abuse are all forms of trauma. Most survivors of sexual violence knew, trusted, and oftentimes loved the person who hurt them. It is common after assault to feel less connected to your body, emotions, or sexual intimacy with others. That is okay. Healing is a process with ups and downs, and you are so strong for sitting with those feelings. You will be able to get through this, even if it doesn't feel like you can right now.

Why has my interest in sex changed?

Some people may feel like their interest in sex and/or intimacy has decreased after sexual assault, while others may feel that theirs has increased. Both experiences – or something in between – are normal and valid. It's normal to have changes in sexuality, especially after something traumatic. Sexual violence is an act of power and control and often a violation of trust. Getting back a sense of control over your life – however that may look for you – can be an important part of healing. When sexual assault happens, the survivor's choice was taken away. Making your own decisions and feeling in control can feel helpful and empowering. Each person should get to decide what they do with their bodies in their healing journey. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to react to sexual trauma.

I thought that I was ready to be intimate again, but now I feel worse.

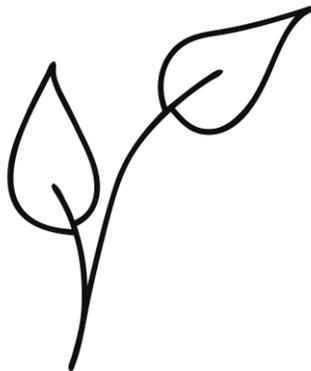
You are doing the best you can to heal from something traumatic. Some survivors who step back from intimacy after an assault may later decide to resume sexual activity with a partner. For some, it can be upsetting to realize that they do not yet feel safe experiencing physical or sexual closeness with another person. Figuring out what you feel ready for can be really hard, and it's okay if you feel like you moved too fast. Sorting through all of these feelings is hard work and you are doing the best you can to make the best decisions for you. It is okay to take the time you need. If you are feeling guilty, know that feeling safe finding out what you don't like can be important in understanding what you need.

Is what I'm going through "normal?"

It's normal for our sex drives and desire for intimacy to change throughout our lives, especially after experiencing sexual assault. There is nothing wrong with what you are feeling. You are going through something difficult and you know what is best for you. Talking to friends or loved ones you trust, calling the Statewide Sexual Assault Helpline (1-800-871-7741), or finding a therapist are always good options to help process what is going on. If you feel like your responses to an assault are interfering with your relationships, school, job, or mental health, then it might be a good idea to find a therapist who understands trauma. If you need help finding one, SASSMM can help you.

What will intimacy look like now?

Emotional and physical closeness are a normal and healthy part of our lives. Each person gets to decide for themselves what this looks like in their life, and it's okay for this to change based on your comfort level. You have the right to enjoy safe intimacy that you feel good about. Intimacy moving forward might look like taking time to think first what feels safe and exciting for you, starting with holding hands, starting and stopping, discovering new triggers, feeling disconnected during sex, or noticing that your sex drive may be absent or accelerated. These feelings can be hard to sit with and work through, but it's always okay for your needs with sex and intimacy change. Being able to talk openly with an intimate partner is really important to make sure everyone feels safe and respected. Just because you consented to one activity doesn't mean that you consented to something else and you always have the right to stop if something doesn't feel right. Sometimes talking to your partner about past trauma, at whatever level feels comfortable, can help better assess your comfort with that person. But this option isn't always the best choice for everyone. The trauma you lived through is yours to define, and you get to decide who you share your story with.



How will I ever trust someone again?

After sexual assault, many people may not trust other people or certain places. They may also feel a sense of broken trust with themselves. Even though an assault is never the survivor's fault, many feel a sense of guilt and self-blame. It may take time to trust again, and it is okay to move slowly. Being able to talk openly with another person can be a powerful way to build trust. While consent is necessary during any sexual activity, it is also an important part of many every day decisions! Consent means asking someone before you do something or before something happens. Consent is an active "Yes" and the person consenting always needs to feel safe saying no. It's okay if this takes time and a lot of practice! Sometimes practicing consent can feel a bit weird if you aren't used to it, but after some experience, it can feel like second nature and make everyone feel safer and more comfortable.

What if I'm afraid of moving too fast?

You are going through a lot, and it's okay to feel overwhelmed. It's absolutely okay to say what you need or want and to move at your own pace. It's also okay if these boundaries change! You have the right to feel however you do and to tell people what is okay around you and what is not. Being clear and sticking with your boundaries can help you feel like you have more control in situations that don't feel right. Saying and standing by a boundary can be really hard especially with people who are not used to them. Only you can decide what feels good with your body and life, and it's okay if this changes over time. It's also normal to not know what you want yet, and it's okay to take time to figure that out. Sometimes people can push for explanations, but you do not have to explain why something doesn't make you feel comfortable if you don't want to. Your boundaries are valid whether or not you or someone else understands them.

My mind and body feel disconnected since the assault. What can I do?

Whenever you are ready, you can try some activities that help you notice physical sensations and the feelings they bring up. Rebuilding awareness between your mind and body can take time. You do not have to rush into anything. Sometimes starting with finding that connection with yourself first can be helpful. For example, wiggling your pinky finger, giving yourself a hug, taking a warm bath, or applying a lotion. Also, we know there can be a lot of shame surrounding self-pleasure, but masturbation is normal and healthy and can help you better understand what you find pleasurable. It's totally understandable if that's changed since the assault. If you would like to try feeling connected with someone you trust, you could also try trauma-informed yoga, getting a massage, or holding hands with a friend or loved one. These are all just potential options since what feels comfortable for one person may not feel comfortable for another person. The important thing is to pay attention to your body and what you are feeling.



Why do I feel guilty?

Many survivors feel guilty after an assault and the reasons behind this are personal for every person. While the feeling of responsibility after an assault is common, you are not responsible for what happened. The person who hurt you made a decision to cause harm and what happened to you was not okay in any way. Sexual assault is NOT sex, it is violence. Sometimes survivors feel guilty about their body's response during an assault, like if they had an orgasm. There are many physiological responses that aren't always tied to an emotional response. Some people have an orgasm or another physiological response during an assault and it does NOT mean they wanted what happened in any way. Survivors may also feel guilty if their interest for closeness with others has changed, but it's normal for this to change at different points in our lives, especially after trauma. For more help with this you can connect with a therapist who you trust to talk about sex with.