

The Long-Term Effects of Sexual Assault

Unresolved wounds can impact current health, even if the trauma occurred long ago.

Even if it occurred decades ago, time doesn't necessarily dissolve the trauma experienced from sexual assault. Rather it can lodge into a person's brain and body, creating lingering pain and dysfunction that can impact health for a long time.

Though sexual predators attack both males and females, women are far more likely to experience the crime. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates, 1 in 3 women has experienced sexual violence involving physical contact during her lifetime.



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Speaking with a trauma-trained specialist can help you heal old wounds and renew your ability to trust.

Long-Term Health Impacts

Licensed clinical social

worker and trauma specialist at the UCLA Rape Treatment Center Jane Willens has been treating women for decades. Some have been assaulted recently and others a long time ago. The violation, according to Willens, is typically accompanied by a loss of self-esteem and feelings of powerlessness and worthlessness.

"I always emphasize that no matter how many decades have passed since their sexual assault or trauma, it's never too late to seek mental health treatment," says Willens. "It's common to see intense emotions such as guilt, self-blame, and shame. There is often underlying anxiety, anger, and depression. The assault also impacts the ability to trust oneself and others, particularly if the assailant was a known acquaintance."

Willens further describes the impact of sexual trauma as neurobiological, meaning the trauma can affect the brain and nervous systems. Trauma-related symptoms may include chronic headaches, body aches, fatigue, dizziness and nausea, sexual difficulties, as well as emotional issues.

Speaking Your Truth Matters

Sexual violence is extremely difficult to measure. It's quite possible that many older women have kept silent about what's happened to them. Some women may be in denial or not

quite clear on what constitutes sexual assault. Until the 1970s, the rape laws in every state in the union included an exemption if the rapist and the victim were husband and wife. Nebraska became the first state to abolish the

exemption in 1976. But it took until 1993 for all 50 states to finally eliminate the "marital rape exemption." Sexual assault refers to sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the informed consent of the victim. It includes rape, attempted rape, unwanted sexual touching, and forcing a person to perform sexual acts, such as oral sex.

Despite the consciousness raising of the Me Too movement, many women remain silent. It takes incredible courage to call law enforcement, a rape treatment center, or trauma therapist. But doing so can make a significant difference in a person's health and quality of life.

"Trauma can create barriers in relationships, be it romantic, familial, or friendships," says Willens. "Talking with a licensed and trauma-informed therapist can help survivors, no matter how old, face unresolved fears and feelings they've held down for so long. In therapy, people learn adaptive coping tools to regain personal power and control to feel safe and trusting enough to participate in relationships."

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

The overall incidence of sexual abuse against women ages 65+ is much lower compared to younger women ages 18-34 (estimated 3% vs 54%). The Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape evaluates reports of sexual abuse, including elder sexual abuse, and finds the following:

- Only about 30% of people over the age of 65 report sexual abuse to the authorities.
- About 83% of older victims reside in an institutional care center, such as a nursing home.
- About 27% of sexual abuse occurred in either the elder's own home or in the perpetrator's home.
- About 80% of the time, the perpetrator of elder sexual abuse was the caregiver to the elder.

Resources for Information and Services

In the Los Angeles area, the UCLA Rape Treatment Center (www.ucla-health.org/rtc/therapy-services) provides free, comprehensive, treatment for sexual assault victims 24 hours a day, including highly specialized emergency medical care, counseling, and information about rights and options to help victims make informed choices and decisions. The center also provides ongoing, trauma-informed therapy and other support services for victims and their significant others. RAINN (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network) operates a 24/7 national hotline (800-656-HOPE/RAINN.org).

Older adults with dementia may be at increased risk of sexual abuse. Signs include bruising, irritation/pain in the genital area, problems walking/sitting, bloody underwear, and social or emotional withdrawal from others. Just because a person has cognitive decline does not mean she or he can't participate and benefit from counseling. If you suspect someone is being abused, talk with the person privately and get advice from a rape treatment center. ■