

SURVIVING RAPE (OR OTHER TRAUMA): THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

by Susan Bartelstone, Crime Prevention Specialist

Rape is not sex. It's a violent crime that's about power, aggression, hostility, control.

Legally, it's defined as a completed act of sexual violence forcefully performed against the will of another person, including the use of psychological force and coercion, as well as the use of foreign objects.

Sexual Assault is defined as unwanted sexual contact between an unwilling victim and a perpetrator that DOESN'T lead to rape: Fondling, touching, being coerced to sit on someone's lap, being poked or patted in a sexual manner, being kissed or hugged against your will are some examples.

Though different, these terms are often used interchangeably. Legal definitions may vary state by state.



Go to your happy place to destress!

Visit crimeprevention101.com and receive the free eBook "All-Time Top Tips for Keeping Yourself Safe!"

Tips and Options

Received the following email: I am a 36-year old female living in the Midwest. Having survived an attack by both a stranger and an acquaintance, I'd like to know how one goes about finding any sense of security in her life. I've taken two self-defense courses, both of which were very good. I feel more confident in my physical ability to defend myself, but I haven't found that they have addressed all the problems I've been dealing with, specifically the intimidation and the psychological component that attackers use in a sexual assault. Even if I'm physically able to defend myself, it doesn't benefit me if I can't get past the intimidation and fear factor.

Also, I was one who "froze" during my assault and was unable to fight back. I want to know if there is a way to combat that "freeze" reaction.

Anonymous, Anywhere, USA

No one deserves to be raped or abused ever! Don't blame the victim, no matter the circumstances of the crime. The fault ALWAYS lies with the rapist.

My answer to Anonymous: What you're feeling is very common in the aftermath of not one but two! attacks and it's going to take time, patience and sustained effort to heal. No right or wrong responses exist in a crime scenario. The only thing that's important is that you survived and you're taking steps to overcome your fears and regain your peace of mind.

In terms of dealing with the intimidation, it's not helpful to berate yourself for freezing during an assault (this is a common response) or for your difficulty in coming to terms with your fears and the other psychological residue of the attacks.

■ **Treatment.** You didn't mention whether you've had any counseling. "Traditional" counseling is an ESSENTIAL part of the healing process and is a recommended on-going step. Contact a rape crisis center or woman's organization in your area immediately for a referral to a qualified trauma specialist (critically important). Don't hesitate to "shop" for the best fit. I'll be difficult to override your intimidation and fears, however, until your deep-seated (perhaps buried) memories of the trauma have been fully worked through and released. A few "alternative" methods exist that can **augment** counseling and are best used in conjunction with more traditional methods.

One modality is **Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy (EMDR)**, an innovative and highly effective therapeutic approach known for uncovering buried trauma and memories very quickly and resolving them. Check with the [EMDR International Association](http://www.emdrinternational.com) for trained therapists in your area. Another method is **Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT)** which involves "tapping" away depression and [Reiki](http://www.reiki.com) (a Japanese technique for stress reduction and healing).

■ **Support:** A Survivor Support Group is another tool in the ongoing healing process. Nothing can take the supportive place of others who've simply "been there too." You can choose between physical groups that meet regularly, online groups with no face-to-face contact (check out Facebook and other social media platforms) or even email support groups (go to Hopeforhealing.org for more resources).

■ **Defensive Training.** It's great that you've taken two self defense courses (**one a year** is my customary recommendation). Make sure your next one is a realistic-scenario-driven class where you get to strike full force on a padded attacker. This



✓ **Get a canister of Pepper Spray**

* [National Center for Victims of Crime](#)

The word "he" when referring to a rapist is used solely for expediency. They can be women as well as men, and teens as well as adults.

The word "she: when referring to rape victims is used solely for expediency and because statistically, women account for the majority of rape victims (91%). But victims may be any gender, age or sexual orientation. Any advice would be basically the same for any victim.

* [National Sexual Violence Resource Center \(NSVRC\)](#)

No absolutes exist in crime scenarios and no advice can address every variable. Evaluate each situation individually and only respond in the way you judge will ensure your safety or survival. Sometimes nothing can be done to prevent an undesirable outcome.

* SAAM: <https://www.nsvrc.org/saam>

Sexual Assault Awareness Month designates April as the month to acknowledge the prevalence of rape and sexual assault nationwide. It highlights sexual violence as a public health, human rights and social justice issue. It also commemorates its survivors and reinforces the continuing need for prevention efforts. Commit to ending the violence within our homes, our communities, and where ever else our voices reach. Let's make April meaningful and remember it all 12 months.

particular type of training is the best way to address your fears of a future "freeze" response should another assault (or even a very stressful situation) befall you. Also, consider taking up martial arts (for at least a year or two). Look for a woman-run school with feminist-flavored classes. They have a different vibe and provide a therapeutic atmosphere for survivors. The [National Women's Martial Arts Federation \(NWMAF\)](#) or the [American Women's Self Defense Association \(AWSDA\)](#) can help you find something appropriate in your area.

**** [National Sexual Assault Hotline, RAINN @ 1-800-656-4673](#) ****

Additional Suggestions:

■ **Safety proof your home:** Local Crime Prevention Officers do (free) home safety checks. If the attack occurred IN your home, your State's **Victim Compensation Office** might pay for new doors, more secure windows, alarms, medical expenses, therapy and self defense or martial arts classes. A safer home will increase your peace of mind.

■ **Safety Plans.** Planning in advance prepares you to think and act quickly despite fear, so make Safety Plans for **at least five areas** in your life that cause you concern. For pointers, see the eBook **Make a Safety Plan** @ www.crimeprevention101.com.

■ **Be kind to yourself.** Healing from trauma can take a long time and it's highly subjective how long it takes each individual to put what happened into perspective. To assist the healing, take **significant** time every day to pamper yourself. Learn mindful meditation. Luxuriate in soothing baths. Listen to relaxing music. Get a foot or body massage, a mani/pedi, have your hair styled regularly (beauty schools are looking for people to practice on so money doesn't have to be an obstacle). Go to the movies or binge-watch TV shows (often as you need to!). Sleep with a stuffed animal or get an **emotional support animal**. For organizations, resources and more information about comfort or therapy animals: <https://duckduckgo.com/?q=emotional+support+animals&atb=v204-1&ia=news>.

■ **Keep a journal.** Journaling helps you process your thoughts; observe the destructive and constructive behavioral patterns that help or impede healing; and over time, show you your overall progress. You might want to check out the eBook **The Road to Recovery Healing Journal** @ [www.crimeprevention101.com/Safety Store](http://www.crimeprevention101.com/SafetyStore).

■ **Find spirituality.** Pray, meditate or look for a spiritual path that makes sense to you. Loss of faith in God is common after a trauma. The benefits of regaining that faith can't be understated regarding the return of peace of mind. Works powerfully for many. Not a choice for everyone.

■ **Do new things.** Every day, or as often as you can, when you're ready for new ventures. It'll be empowering; give you something to look forward to; perhaps a reason to leave the house. Being creative is a powerful healing force, so take voice lessons, acting lessons, write a book, learn to play a musical instrument, paint...something you never made time for before.

■ **Get physical!** Sitting around eating junk food and packing on the pounds won't serve you in the long run. Distress over your appearance (or health concerns) will just add to your depression. Use some of your anger in a productive way. Join a gym, take dancing, boxing or karate lessons. Running or regular walking are the easiest and cheapest ways. All are great stress relievers.

■ **Get politically active.** Working to help prevent what happened to you from happening to others can be extraordinarily healing. Contact your federal, state and local legislators about important issues like maintaining funding for counselors and treatment centers for survivors and anti-violence education campaigns. Reach out to advocacy groups. If you add your voice to the discussion, much can be accomplished!

You're NEVER going to forget what happened to you, but you can learn to put it into perspective and get on with your life. I hope I've given you some good options towards that goal.