

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) In the Aftermath of Sexual Assault

Just Detention International (JDI) is a non-profit human rights organization that seeks to end sexual abuse in all forms of detention. JDI provides the general information below in an effort to respond to questions that we regularly receive from prisoner rape survivors, most of whom do not have access to crisis intervention services immediately following a sexual assault. Please remember that each survivor responds to sexual assault differently. Crisis intervention must be tailored to the individual and should be provided by a qualified professional.

1. I was sexually assaulted and feel like it's my fault. Am I to blame?

Many survivors of sexual assault feel – as you do – that they are to blame. Perhaps others told you that you “wanted it” or that you could have prevented the assault. Although feelings of guilt are very common after a sexual assault, you did nothing to cause it, and it's not your fault.

No one deserves to be sexually assaulted. Sexual assault is an act of violence in which the perpetrator uses sex as a weapon. No matter what you may have done, you are not responsible for the rapist's behavior, even if the perpetrator claimed you provoked him or her. Just like any violent crime, sexual assault is never the victim's fault. You are not to blame.

You might believe that by blaming yourself for the abuse or by trying to figure out what you did wrong, you can make sure that it will never happen again. You did nothing to cause the sexual assault, and blaming yourself will not make you safer – it will only prolong the hurt and pain.

2. What is a “rape kit” and how do I get one?

A “rape kit”, also known as a Sexual Assault Forensic Exam (SAFE), refers to a medical procedure following a sexual assault to collect forensic evidence. It is the best way to document an assault and to help prosecute the perpetrator. You have the right to refuse this exam if one is offered to you.

Although laws vary, most states require that survivors be offered a medical forensic exam if a sexual assault occurred less than 120 hours (5 days) ago. The exam should be conducted by a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) or another qualified forensic medical professional. Most correctional medical staff are not qualified to conduct “rape kits”, so you may be taken to a hospital or clinic for the exam. Only a qualified medical professional should decide whether or not a SAFE exam is necessary.

Each exam is different, but most follow the same general procedure. You will first be asked a series of questions by the medical professional performing the “rape kit”. During the exam, fibers from your clothing and hair, as well as bodily fluids – such as saliva or semen – will be collected to help identify the rapist. Swabs from your anus, vagina or mouth, as well as samples of cervical tissue, may be taken. The exam should also involve a blood test, which will check for sexually transmitted diseases and infections, as well as pregnancy for female survivors. The “rape kit” could take up to four hours to complete.

A “rape kit” can be an uncomfortable, frightening experience for someone who has just been assaulted. You may also feel relieved to receive medical attention and to have the chance to provide evidence to assist in the prosecution of the rapist(s).

During the exam, you have the following rights: to ask that any non-essential people leave the room; to have a sexual assault advocate present; to have all procedures, tests, and forms fully explained to you; to refuse any part of the exam or to end the exam at any time; to have copies of the exam reports; to receive medication to prevent sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy or to refuse this medicine; and to have a confidential HIV test.

3. I was sexually assaulted and I feel like I’m “going crazy.” How can I cope in here?

You are not alone. Many survivors of sexual abuse behind bars experience similar feelings following a sexual assault. You may feel overwhelmed, depressed, afraid, anxious, hurt, shocked, confused, angry, guilty, shameful or relieved. You may experience rapid mood swings or have trouble concentrating and remembering things or be uninterested in activities you used to enjoy. You may also have thoughts of wanting to die. These feelings are very common reactions to sexual assault, particularly if you continue to be abused or denied the care you need to heal.

Sexual assault is devastating and violates a survivor’s mind, body, and spirit. During the assault, you may have felt a loss of control and safety, perhaps even that your life was at risk. An event as traumatic as sexual assault can trigger many intense emotions for survivors and may leave deep emotional wounds that take time to heal.

Many survivors experience Rape Trauma Syndrome (RTS), which describes the feelings, thoughts, reactions or symptoms that frequently occur after a sexual assault. It can be very challenging to cope with your feelings while you are still incarcerated. The daily trauma of being behind bars makes the stress of rape even more difficult to cope with. You may feel unsafe, have no privacy, or be forced to interact with the perpetrator(s). Even though it can be difficult to recover from a sexual assault while you are still locked up, healing is possible. For most survivors, this is a lifelong process. You have taken a very important step by reaching out for help. For more information on Rape Trauma Syndrome and how to cope while you are still behind bars, please refer to the enclosed handbook for survivors entitled *Hope for Healing*.

You may also find it helpful to talk with a counselor or psychologist about your feelings. Some survivors do not feel comfortable sharing what happened with prison mental health staff. If you feel that way, you may want to contact a local rape crisis center for information and support. Please refer to the enclosed *Resource Guide for Survivors of Sexual Assault Behind Bars* for a list of rape crisis centers in your state that are willing to work with survivors of prisoner rape. Most can be contacted by letter if you are unable to call. If you do not see a center nearby, contact the state sexual assault coalition to find out which center provides services in your area.

You may feel like you are the only one this has ever happened to. Please know that you are not alone. Unfortunately, many other people have also been sexually abused in custody, by both inmates and staff. Every day, JDI hears from survivors of sexual abuse behind bars from around the country. Like you, these survivors are trying their best to heal and to move on with their lives. If you are interested in reading the testimonies of other survivors of sexual abuse in custody, please let us know. We would be more than happy to send them to you and to assist you in any way that we can. We wish you all the best.