
Sexual Violence and Mental Health

Sexual assault can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, eating and sleeping disorders, suicidality, and a wide range of short- and long-term mental health struggles among children, teens, and adults. Perpetrators often target people with vulnerabilities, such as mental illness, because they may be less likely to report or when they do, less likely to be believed or viewed as credible. Sexual assault victims who also struggle with mental health issues or mental illnesses often face layers of social stigma, which can exacerbate their isolation and make it more difficult to access services. Trauma and other mental health struggles can undermine a person's ability to concentrate at school or work, thus jeopardizing their economic stability.

- There is a 50-95% chance that a woman will develop PTSD after being raped.¹
- The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study found a direct link between child maltreatment, including sexual abuse, and depression, psychotropic medication use, and low mental health scores in adulthood; the higher number of ACEs, the greater risk for mental health struggles in adulthood.²
- Short term psychological reactions to sexual assault may include feelings of shock, fear, anxiety, confusion, isolation, depression, despair, hopelessness, self-blame, guilt, and shame, sleep disorders, and concentration problems. Many survivors report a reduction of symptoms within the first few months, but some report symptoms that persist for years.³
- According to one study, even when evaluated several years after the assault, survivors are more likely to have a serious psychiatric diagnosis, including major depression, alcohol abuse and dependence, drug abuse and dependence, generalized anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder.⁴
- The risk of developing mental health problems relates to assault severity, other negative life experiences, maladaptive beliefs, and perceptions of lack of control.⁵
- The prevalence of trauma-related disorders among poor women was higher than that among women in the general population. A high percentage (83%) of low-income women in one study had been physically or sexually assaulted during their life span. Thus, it is not surprising that PTSD, substance use disorders, and major depression were

1 John Hopkins University School of Public Health, 1999.

2 Chapman et al., 2004.

3 Yuan, Koss, & Stone, 2006.

4 Campbell, 2001.

5 Yuan et al., 2006.

disproportionately represented with lifetime rates of PTSD three times greater than in the general female population.⁶

- Individuals with mental illnesses or under the influence of drugs or alcohol are even more vulnerable to attack, and less likely or able to seek help afterwards.⁷
- The lifetime risk for violent victimization is so high for homeless women with severe mental illness (97%) that many consider sexual violence to be expected and part of the norm. Given the high rates of violence, it is not surprising that many homeless women suffer from emotional symptoms, including major depression (47%), substance abuse (45%) and PTSD (39%).⁸

For more information or to find a rape crisis center near you, contact the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape, www.pcar.org or 1-800-692-7445.

⁶ Bassuk, Buckner, Perloff, & Bassuk, 1998.

⁷ Breslau et al., 1999.

⁸ Goodman, Fels, & Glenn, 2006.