



24 Hour Crisis/Information & Referral Line (253) 474-7273 or 1-800-756-7273

Questions asked by Victims/Survivors

Asked by adult victims (19 years of age or older):

How long do I have to report my assault or abuse to law enforcement, as an adult?

...You have up to three years following the assault to decide to report.

What is sexual assault/rape?

...Sexual assault is any unwelcome sexual contact and includes such acts as kissing, fondling of breasts, etc. Rape is any form of sexual penetration (no matter how slight) of the mouth, vagina or anus with a penis, finger, tongue or object. Sexual intercourse becomes a sexual assault or rape when a person does not or is unable to give knowing consent to the sex act.

Is it rape if the victim and perpetrator are married?

...In most cases, yes it is. Each case is different. In the State of Washington, rape in the 3rd degree is not illegal between spouses, but a husband could be charged with rape in the 1st or 2nd degree. Any time someone forces another to have sex without consent it is rape.

Is it rape even if you do not say 'no' or fight back?

...Yes it is. People respond to threatening situations differently. It is not unusual for a person to be so frightened that they freeze up and can't say no or fight off the attacker or they may fear for their life if they fight.

What should I do if I am raped? Where do I go?

...If you were raped, there are many decisions you and you alone can make. You can choose to report the rape to law enforcement or go to the hospital to get medical attention. Once at the hospital, a sexual assault nurse examiner will examine you and collect the forensic evidence from the rape. Tacoma General's Forensic Nurse Examiner Services (FNES) employ specially trained nurses to collect the forensic evidence. The FNES nurses are available to see a rape victim at most of the hospitals in Pierce County. You can call the Sexual Assault Center of Pierce County for more information, assistance, and support whether or not you choose to report the crime to law enforcement, call us at (253) 474-7273 or 1-800-756-7273.

No one will believe that I was raped because I had too much to drink.

...It does not matter how much you had to drink. A Sexual Assault Advocate will believe you. You were in no position to be able to give informed consent to the sex act. You were taken advantage of. You could not consent to sex. It is not your fault. Call our 24-Hour Crisis, Information and Referral Line and speak with an advocate for support and assistance at (253) 474-7273 or 1-800-756-7273.

What is a legal advocate and what can they do for me?

...A legal advocate is someone who can help the victim navigate through the criminal and judicial systems. A legal advocate offers assistance by being there (with the victim) to support them during the criminal and civil proceedings, when reporting to law enforcement, filing for orders of protection, advocating during court proceedings, supporting them after the case has been closed and offering referrals to attorneys.

What should I expect following a sexual assault?

...Know that although individuals can respond very differently to being sexually assaulted/abused there are some common reactions. Following an assault many victims blame themselves and feel that they should have been able to prevent the assault. Hindsight is always 20/20. Your behaviors or decisions did not cause you to be assaulted/abused – that was solely the perpetrators responsibility. Many victims find they are confused or upset by the way that they did or did not respond during the assault/abuse or in the hours, days, weeks, months or years that followed. We cannot accurately predict how we will respond.

Research into trauma shows that there are many factors that influence an individual's response. Trauma by definition overwhelms a person's normal ways of coping. Many survivors find that they may have frozen, gone numb or been unable to talk or otherwise communicate during the assault. Others describe difficulty thinking clearly and making choices. These are all common reactions to dangerous situations. Studies have shown that the way people respond to sexual assault/abuse is a complicated process determined by their history and literally the way that their body reacts to severe stress.

We know that during severe stress certain chemicals are released into the body which cause a wide variety of responses often talked about as the "fight, flight or freeze" responses. Victims do not have control over how their body will respond. We do know that these same factors will play a role in your recovery from the sexual assault/abuse. It can be helpful to understand the differing ways that survivors respond during recovery and how you can begin to influence this.

What if my assault was a long time ago?

...Many people feel like they have put the sexual assault/abuse/harassment behind them only to have it pop up when they least expect it. For many survivors there were reasons why the assault may not have been processed when it happened. Many attempt to push the painful memories and feelings down and hope that they will stay there. While this response is understandable, rarely does it work for the long run. Others may have addressed many of the issues from sexual assault/abuse in the past but recently have experienced some triggering event that makes them feel as though they are reliving the experience. Know that you are not alone and that many survivors are dealing with the impact of sexual assault/abuse many years later. Support is available to you.

If I contact SACPC, will you have to report the sexual assault to the police?

...Washington State law requires that volunteers and staff at SACPC be mandated reporters. What this means is that if you tell us about someone under the age of 18

(including yourself) who is being or has been hurt or abused in some way, we are required to report this to either law enforcement or Child Protective Services. Also, if the victim is now over the age of 18 but the perpetrator still has on-going access to children (for example: a coach, teacher, etc.), we are required to report this. However, typically in order to make a report we need information from you such as name, address, etc...there is no requirement that you give us this information to receive services. In other words, you could call our crisis line anonymously, just to talk and without further information we cannot make a report.

We believe that mandated reporting is useful for protecting children. We always put the safety of our clients and potential victims first. We will also always be upfront and honest about our reporting requirements. If you are 18 or older and you are discussing an assault that happened to you, and as far as you know the perpetrator does not currently have on-going access to children, we are not required to make a report. Should you choose to report a sexual assault, our advocates are always available to assist you.

How can I keep myself safe?

...There are many things we all can do to reduce the likelihood that we will be sexually assaulted. It is best that our harm reduction techniques are based in the reality of sexual assault and abuse as it really occurs. As an adult you are most likely to be assaulted by someone known to you. Only about 15% of sexual assaults happen to adults by strangers. Therefore it is important to understand that you are most likely to be sexually assaulted by someone that you trust to some degree, someone that you feel at least somewhat safe being alone with (co-worker, date, family member, friend, acquaintance, a friend of a friend, professional service provider i.e., doctor, teacher, attorney, minister, counselor, real estate agent...) in short, potentially anyone.

Many victims do not know they are in a potentially dangerous situation until it is too late. When a person touches you sexually without your direct consent or after you express your lack of consent in some way (pulling away, saying no, etc...) and the person continually coerces or forces you into contact, you are being sexually assaulted. It is not uncommon that adults may have been alone many times with people who eventually assault them and have had no prior assault. Sometimes they were safe, sometimes they were not--all dependent on the actions of the perpetrator.

So what can be done to reduce your risk? Be particularly wary of people who seem too good to be true, they are more likely to have a hidden agenda. Avoid contact with those people who try to talk you out of your decisions or preferences. Attempt to be clear and direct in your interactions with others. Let others know if they are offending you or if you are uncomfortable and see if they respect your wishes about small things. Put your instincts and needs above offending someone else or appearing rude. Trust that you have a right to remove yourself from situations or people that make you feel uncomfortable.

If you have difficulty expressing limits and saying no to others in every day situations you may want to consult a helping professional or make use of books or other resources to help you. Self-defense classes can be useful but you must be able to use the techniques

against people you know and may see again if they are to be effective in deterring sexual assault. Know that alcohol or drug consumption by the potential perpetrator increases the likelihood of them committing a sexual assault and that your consumption may also impact your ability to protect yourself.

Lastly remember that we cannot accurately predict how we will respond during a sexual assault. Like any trauma, we cannot know that we will be able to implement the course of action we now think would be best when we are at risk. If a sexual assault/rape occurs know that it was not caused by your actions or inactions. Perpetrators are the only people responsible for causing a sexual assault.

Asked by adult survivors of child sexual abuse:

Is it normal to still be upset about my abuse?

...It is very normal to still be upset; everyone copes differently to traumatic situations such as childhood sexual abuse. People get upset at themselves and others for not stopping the abuse, if coping mechanisms are unhealthy or begin to no longer work, then it might be beneficial to seek support from professionals skilled in working with survivors of childhood sexual abuse.