

# After Sexual Assault

*A Recovery Guide for Survivors*



moving victims of violence from crisis to confidence

24-Hour Hotline: **212 227 3000**

[www.safehorizon.org](http://www.safehorizon.org)

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# How to Contact Safe Horizon

**SAFE HORIZON** hopes this guide will help aid the recovery of anyone whose life has been impacted by a sexual assault.

**SAFE HORIZON** is the nation's leading non-profit victim assistance organization. Safe Horizon provides services to crime victims throughout New York's five boroughs. Our programs in community offices, shelters, courts, and police precincts help more than 250,000 New Yorkers every year.

Rape, Sexual Assault, and Incest Hotline (24 hours a day)	212 227 3000
Domestic Violence Hotline (24 hours a day)	1 800 621 HOPE
Brooklyn Community Program	718 834 6688
Manhattan-Bronx Community Program	212 316 2100
Queens Community Program	718 899 1233
Staten Island Community Program	718 720 2591
Counseling Center	347 328 8110

The **SAFE HORIZON** Community Program and the printing of this brochure is supported with funds from the New York State Department of Health, the New York State Office of Victim Services, the Sexual Assault Services Program, and the New York City Office of the Criminal Justice Coordinator.

## Considering Your Safety

Many people who experience sexual assault have concerns about their safety and the safety of people that they care about. In thinking about your safety, it can help to think about the things you may have tried in the past or may be doing now to keep yourself and your loved ones safe. What worked and what didn't work is a good place to start as you think about other things you might try.

If you were sexually assaulted by an intimate partner or someone in your family, you may be concerned about other things that are happening in that relationship. For example, this person might also be saying hurtful things to you, hurting you in other ways, or making threats. If you are being hurt or threatened, or are scared of someone close to you, there are options out there for you. You can call Safe Horizon's Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-621-HOPE (4673) to find out more about these options.

It can be challenging to figure out what you want to do to be safer, and you may want to talk to someone about it, or find out more about what options might work for you. When faced with choices about your safety, it may feel like you have to choose between things that are important to you. Some of the options may mean letting go of other things you need. These are hard choices to make. The choices that make sense for you may not be ones that others understand. People in your life who care about you may not agree with your decisions. They may tell you that you are doing the wrong thing, or get upset if you change your mind about what to do. It can be hard to cope with the ways other people react to your choices. It may feel like you aren't getting the support you need. If you want to sit down with someone who can talk through the choices with you and support you to figure out what might work for you, you can call one of the Community Programs in the back of this booklet.

# Options to Consider

## Going to the hospital

One option you might choose is to go to a hospital emergency room to get checked out. If you have been injured, your injuries will be treated at the hospital.

Some people choose this option because they are worried about pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections (STIs). At the hospital, you may be offered pregnancy prevention medication and HIV and STI prevention medication. One thing to know is that the sooner you go, the more likely it would be that you can get that medicine, and that the medicine would be effective.

In addition, going to the hospital is a way that you can have evidence gathered in case you want to report what happened to the police. You can decide whether to report to the police before you go to the hospital, when you get there, or afterwards. It is your choice.<sup>1</sup> Physical evidence can be preserved in case you decide to report it later.

<sup>1</sup> If you are under the age of 18 and you were sexually assaulted by a caregiver, or your caregiver is not protecting you from harm, child abuse reporting laws apply. Also, in cases where the sexual assault involved the use of certain weapons, the hospital may need to contact law enforcement

All of these responses have been reported by many survivors of sexual assault. If you are having these kinds of reactions, you are not alone, and help is available.

## Post-traumatic stress disorder

The effects of sexual assault can sometimes stay with you over time, or return after some time has passed. These responses can intrude into your daily life and make it difficult to work, maintain relationships, or do every-day tasks. When these responses continue happening over a period of time they can be a sign of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which can occur when people experience situations where they feel helpless or terrified. A therapist can help you sort out whether you have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and talk with you about treatment options (see page 15 for more information).

You may feel alone or isolated. You might lose trust in people close to you. You might have difficulties in building new relationships, or difficulties in your current relationships. You may avoid things, people, or places that feel connected to what happened. You may try to keep what happened out of your mind completely. It might change how you see the world, or affect your relationship with spirituality or religion.

You might jump at noises, or jump when someone surprises or touches you. You might experience panic or have trouble breathing. You might have trouble concentrating, or feel distracted and out-of-sorts. You might feel tired all the time. You may have suicidal thoughts. You may feel disconnected from yourself, or your body. Sometimes it can feel like you are floating above yourself or apart from yourself, or like you aren't real.

It might feel like you can't stop thinking about what happened. It might pop up even when you are thinking about something else and don't want to think about it. You may have memories that come up, or feel like you are reliving it as if it were happening right now. You might have nightmares about it, which may keep happening again and again.

If you want evidence collected, it is likely to be more complete if you go to the hospital as soon as possible, and try to go before washing, brushing your teeth, or taking a shower. If you have already showered or washed, you can still go to the hospital and have evidence gathered.

If you decide to go to the hospital, you can call 311 or our Rape, Sexual Assault, and Incest Hotline at 212-227-3000. You can also ask the police where the closest SAFE Center is. SAFE stands for "Sexual Assault Forensic Exam". A SAFE Center is a place where the staff is specially trained to provide sensitive care to victims of sexual assault. If you prefer, you could go to the closest hospital.

If you decide to go to the hospital after being sexually assaulted and you don't have health insurance, you do not have to pay for any costs related to the Sexual Assault Forensic Exam. The New York State Office of Victim Services can cover the cost of your medical care. They can explain more about this Crime Victims compensation at the hospital, on the Rape, Sexual Assault, and Incest Hotline, or at a Safe Horizon Community Program.

Completing a Sexual Assault Forensic Exam can be a difficult experience. The process can take several hours. It can be hard to talk about what has happened and the exam may feel uncomfortable and intrusive.

You have the right to stop or refuse any medical procedure you don't want to have. And you don't have to go alone. Having someone with you during the exam may help you feel supported during the procedures. If you want, hospital staff or a Safe Horizon Community Program may be able to arrange for an advocate to accompany you.

If you decide to seek medical attention, you can ask the medical professional to explain the process step by step, so that you know what to expect.

### **Legal options and rights**

You may wonder whether or not to report to the police. Or the police may be involved already.

Sexual assault is a crime. Working with the police and courts can be a way to get protection and justice. For some survivors, it is an empowering experience.

It can also be a long and difficult process. And the outcome may not be what you hope for.

## **Your Response to Sexual Assault**

Your response could include many different physical and emotional reactions, including some that may not seem to result directly from sexual assault. You may experience changes in how you sleep or eat. You might experience pain, injury or muscle tension. You might feel shaky, or start trembling or crying, or be unable to cry. You might experience changes in your body where you were assaulted, or feel differently about sex or about your body in general.

You might feel a range of emotions, including anger, embarrassment, grief, guilt, fear, or hopelessness. You may feel shock, or numbness, or feel nothing at all. You might want to forget it and not think about it, or pretend it never happened. You may feel dirty, or ashamed, or blame yourself for what happened. You might feel helpless, or stuck, or have difficulty getting through the day and making decisions.

It may have been sexual assault if you experienced a sexual act as unwanted and did not choose it, or if you were too young to choose it, or if you were forced to do it. What matters is what you think. You get to name what happened to you. The next paragraph is a list of some of the things that can be sexual assault. If you don't wish to read it, you can skip over the paragraph, which is in italics, to the next section. If you decide to read it, you can stop at any point and skip to the next section.

*Sexual assault can include saying sexual things to you or touching you in ways you don't want. It can include things like sexual touching, sexual intercourse, anal sex, oral sex, or the use of objects in a sexual manner. It can include someone exposing themselves to you, or forced nudity. It can include making you watch pornography, be in sexual photographs or films, do sex work or prostitution, or pushing you to talk or write about sex, or have unwanted sex with others. It can include giving you gifts or granting you privileges to get you to do sexual things that make you feel uncomfortable or unsafe.*

If you decide to report a sexual assault, the police will ask you about what has happened, often several times. Their role is to investigate, and based on the evidence, they will decide whether or not they can make an arrest.

If an arrest is made, you will speak to a prosecutor at the district attorney's office. The prosecutor decides whether to bring criminal charges.

You might also change your mind after you report to the police. One thing to know is that once you report to the police, it is in their hands to investigate, and it is the district attorney's decision whether to prosecute. They may go forward with the case even if you change your mind.

You get to decide what makes sense for you and your safety. If you want to report it, you can go to the hospital and tell the hospital staff, call 911 or call the NYPD Sex Crimes Report Hotline at 212-267-RAPE. If you aren't sure whether you want to report it, you can call our hotline or programs to talk it over.

If you decide to report it, and the police arrest the person, there is a way for you to be notified when the person gets released from jail or prison. You can call our hotline or our programs to find out more about this, or contact this service directly. It's called VINE (Victim Information and Notification Everyday). You can reach VINE at 1-888-VINE-4NY, or go to [www.vinelink.com](http://www.vinelink.com).

You have some rights as a crime victim that you might want to pursue. The New York State Office of Victim Services may be able to reimburse you for expenses caused by the crime. There are other general rights that a crime victim has, and you can explore these with a counselor or someone you trust who knows the law. Our hotline or any of the programs listed at the end of this brochure are available as a resource.

If you are being hurt by someone in an intimate or family relationship, there is another legal option available to you. It's called an order of protection. It is a court order that tells the person to stay away from you or stop hurting you.

If you are interested in this, you can call the Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-621-HOPE to learn more about it, and to find out about Safe Horizon court programs that could help you. If you decide to report it, and the case goes to trial, the district attorney may also seek an order of protection for you.

## Was it Sexual Assault?

You may have been sexually assaulted by someone you are close to who is still in your life, perhaps someone who you are in a family or intimate relationship with. It may have been a stranger, or it may be someone in your community or close circles. It may be someone you live with, or who lives nearby. It may be someone you see every day, or on special occasions. It may have been the first time, or it may have happened many times. It might have happened a while ago, and you are now facing it in a different way. It may have happened when you were a child, and something is bringing it up today. It may have been someone from the past who has re-entered your life again.

This person (or people) may have forced, coerced, or demanded that you do things you did not want to do. They may have threatened you or used their position of authority to pressure you. They might have kept going when you said no, or not respected your signal to stop. They might have pushed you into sexual situations when you were a child.

You get to decide, and there are people who you can talk to, people who can support you. People who will listen, and tell you about resources, and help you sort through what you want to do. Safe Horizon can help. You could call one of the programs listed at the end of this guide, or the Rape, Sexual Assault and Incest Hotline at 212-227-3000. Our hotline staff is available for private, confidential conversations 24 hours a day. You can call right now, or at any point while you are looking through this booklet.

This guide will give you some information about sexual assault, and tell you about some of your options. It may also help you to begin sorting out your emotions and concerns, and may help you to make decisions that could help keep you safe.

## Seeking Support or Counseling

You may have people you trust in your life to talk to, who can help you sort through your feelings, reactions, and choices. One thing to consider is that their reactions to your experience may not be what you expect or hope for. People can react in different ways: some may give you their full support, others may express blame. You get to decide who to seek support from, and when.

One option is to talk to a counselor or therapist, someone who has been trained in supporting people who have been sexually assaulted. If you decide to seek counseling, you might find that an outside perspective and someone who will listen to you and not judge you will help you to feel better.

You get to decide whether counseling is something you want. Counseling may bring up memories or feelings that you may not want to deal with right now, or it may feel more important to focus on other things. You may not want to talk about what has happened to you.

In counseling, what you say is confidential and private, with a few exceptions. Counselors may share what you say with others if you tell them about a child that is being abused, that you intend to hurt someone, or if you are a danger to yourself.

If you are in counseling, and you feel you're not getting the help you need, talk with your counselor about this. You are the best judge of what is most helpful to you. If things don't improve, you can choose to go to a different counselor or group. Your counselor may be able to help you find a better option for you.

### **Individual counseling**

Having someone to talk to about how you are feeling may help you to deal with your emotional responses. A counselor may help you express your needs to others and learn how to get those needs met. Sexual assault can change your feelings about yourself and those around you. Counseling might help you cope with these changes. Safe Horizon's Community Program staff can listen, clarify, support, and explore options with you.

### **Group counseling**

Some people want to talk to others who are dealing with similar things. If that is something that you are interested in, one option is a support group. In a support group, you could get support from—and offer support to—other people who are grappling with similar experiences, reactions, and decisions. Sometimes hearing how other people are managing and seeking safety can give you ideas to try for yourself. It can also help to be part of a group of people that understand some of what you

## **After Sexual Assault A Guide for Survivors**

You have probably picked this guide up because something is happening or has happened in your life. Maybe you or someone you are close to has been sexually assaulted. Perhaps you are trying to figure out what you want to do about it, or what it means, or how to cope, or what help is out there. You may feel alone, confused, scared, angry, or like you just want it to go away. Just reading this booklet could be hard.

You get to decide. You get to decide what to do, how to cope, what it means, and what help you want. You get to decide what makes sense for you, including whether you want to read this booklet all the way through, or put it down at any point.

are going through. If you are interested in group counseling, you can reach out to one of our Community Programs, or to our Rape, Sexual Assault and Incest Hotline at 212-227-3000 to find a group that might work for you.

## **Therapy**

If you were sexually assaulted when you were a child or teenager, you may have been feeling the effects for a long time. What happened to you may affect how you view yourself and others, or how you live your life. If you were sexually assaulted as an adult, this may also be true for you. One option to consider is seeing a therapist who can help you sort out how you've been affected, and work with you on ways to cope. In individual therapy, you set the goals and pace in a safe and confidential space. Many survivors find it most helpful to see a therapist who has special training in working with people who have been sexually assaulted.

If you are interested in going to a therapist, you can call Safe Horizon's Counseling Center at 347-328-8110 or contact the Rape, Sexual Assault, and Incest Hotline at 212-227-3000 for a referral.

## Seeking a Safer Place to Live

If you are scared of or being hurt by someone in an intimate or family relationship, one option that may be available to you is domestic violence shelter. Domestic violence shelters are in confidential locations, away from where you have been staying, so that the person who has been hurting you cannot find you. Domestic violence shelter could be a place where you are safer, and away from being hurt. It would mean leaving your current home and being away from the person who sexually assaulted you. There are many reasons that you may not want to separate from the person who is hurting you, or to leave the community and connections you have. You get to decide if a shelter would be right for you. If you are interested in learning more about or seeking domestic violence shelter, you can call Safe Horizon’s Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-621-HOPE.

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