

# Information about Sexual Assault and Sexual Abuse

SARC

SEXUAL  
ASSAULT  
RESOURCE  
CENTRE

# SEXUAL ASSAULT RESOURCE CENTRE

## Information about Sexual Assault and Sexual Abuse

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## INTRODUCTION

This booklet provides information to people who have experienced either a recent sexual assault or sexual assault or abuse in the past. It also aims to dispel some of the damaging myths about sexual assault and sexual abuse, which exist in the community and instead acknowledge the extreme distress an assault or abuse can cause.

The booklet gives an explanation of investigative and legal procedures and focuses on rights and options, so it will assist a person in making an informed decision or choice, which is in their best interest.

Information on how to access support in regional areas is also provided.

## THE SEXUAL ASSAULT RESOURCE CENTRE (SARC)

The Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC) has a Medical and Forensic Service and Counselling Service. SARC is a free 24-hour 7 days a week emergency service that offers assistance and support to any person, female or male, aged 13 years and over who has experienced any form of unwanted sexual contact or behaviour, either recently or in the past.

SARC is a confidential service and will not disclose information to another party without a person's prior consent, unless there are concerns for that person or another person's safety.

SARC is not part of the Police service. Involving police is always the choice of the person.

### **Recent Sexual Assault – Crisis Medical, Forensic and Counselling Service:**

SARC defines recent sexual assault as any unwanted sexual contact or behaviour that has occurred within two weeks.

People who have been sexually assaulted within this two week period can contact the SARC 24-hour crisis line on (08) 9340 1828 or freecall 1800 199 888, to gather information about and access to:

- A medical service
- A forensic service
- Counselling support

These services are provided by a team of female counsellors and doctors.

## **Past Sexual Assault and Sexual Abuse – Counselling Service:**

People in the metropolitan and regional areas who have been sexually assaulted or sexually abused more than two weeks ago and require crisis counselling support are able to contact the SARC 24-hour counselling line on (08) 9340 1899.

SARC provides individual and group counselling to people who have been sexually assaulted or abused in the past. These services can be accessed by contacting the counselling line during office hours on (08) 9340 1899.

People can choose to see a male or female counsellor. An Aboriginal person is available to support Aboriginal people if requested.

## **SERVICES IN THE REGIONAL AREAS**

Sexual assault crisis and counselling services are available in some regional areas (refer to Resources – Regional Areas, page 16). Where no sexual assault service is available, services can be accessed direct through a hospital emergency department or the local general practitioner (GP).

## **WHAT IS SEXUAL ASSAULT AND SEXUAL ABUSE?**

### **Sexual Assault:**

Sexual Assault is a crime of violence, where a person uses their power and control to dominate another.

Sexual assault can be any sexual behaviour or act which is threatening, violent, forced, coercive or exploitative and to which a person has not given consent or was not able to give consent.

It can take many forms –

- Sexual harassment – sexual comments, dirty jokes, leering, wolf whistles, etc.
- Exhibitionism
- Voyeurism
- An unwanted sexual touch
- Being forced to masturbate or watch another masturbate
- Being forced, coerced or bribed to view pornographic images
- Being forced to give or receive oral sex
- Being forced to perform sexual acts on themselves or others
- Sexual penetration of a person by penis, object or other parts of the body into the vagina, anus or mouth.

### **Sexual Abuse:**

Sexual abuse occurs when someone in a position of power and authority over another (adult or child) has taken advantage of that person's trust and respect to involve them in sexual activity. Any of the above acts can be involved.

Sexual abuse can occur between:

- A child and an older child or adult
- A disabled person and a carer
- A patient and a medical practitioner
- A counsellor and a client
- Sexual partners.

## MYTHS ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT

There is a wide range of commonly held beliefs in the community about sexual assault and abuse of females and males which helps disguise the nature and frequency of sexual violence and sometimes even its very existence. These myths add to the trauma and distress experienced by those who have been sexually assaulted and have the affect of –

- Blaming the victim for what has happened to them
- Excusing the actions of the perpetrator
- Hiding the reality that people are more likely to be assaulted or abused by someone they know than by a stranger.

Following are some of the most common and unhelpful myths and the facts which challenge these myths.

MYTH	FACT
Women enjoy being sexually assaulted.	Any sexual violence is a frightening and humiliating experience during which the person has no control over what happens. No one enjoys an experience like this.
Men who are assaulted are or will become homosexual.	Both homosexual and heterosexual men can be assaulted.
It is not possible for a man to sexually assault a woman unless he has a weapon.	When someone is in fear of being hurt or killed they will submit to what is being forced upon them.
If a person did not scream or fight or has no injury, it could not have been a sexual assault.	Not screaming or struggling is a common response as a person can become paralysed with fear.
All sexual assaults occur at night in an unfamiliar place away from others.	Many sexual assaults occur during the day and most occur in the homes of the people involved.

## MYTH

Men who assault other men are homosexual.

It is a man's right to have sex with his wife or partner whenever he wants.

Men sexually assault when they are sexually frustrated or so excited they cannot control themselves.

Sexual assault or abuse by strangers is common.

People who are affected by alcohol or drugs are asking to be sexually assaulted.

Sexual abuse of a child or young person occurs within a loving relationship.

Men cannot be sexually assaulted because they can defend themselves.

Women provoke sexual assault by the way they dress or act.

## FACT

Men who assault are often heterosexual and in a relationship with a woman at the time.

Forcing a woman to have sex when she does not want to is always an assault.

Most assaults are premeditated and planned and do not involve a loss of control on the part of the assailant.

The majority of those who are sexually assaulted or abused know the assailant.

Being affected by alcohol or drugs can mean a person is not able to consent to sex.

Sexual abuse of a child or young person is not a loving relationship as abuse can have long-standing and harmful physical and emotional effects.

Sexual violence may be experienced by both men and women.

No woman asks or deserves to be sexually assaulted. Assailants are responsible for their actions.

**All of these myths excuse the behaviour and imply that the assailant is not responsible for his or her actions.**

**In the case of a child, whatever the child's actions, the adult is always responsible.**

## THE IMPACT OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

There is a range of responses a person may have to a sexual assault. Some reactions usually last a few days to a few weeks, but can endure far longer.

These can include –

- Numbness and disbelief. Some people can appear calm and rational, others can be extremely anxious, fearful and disorientated.
- Physical symptoms such as headaches, nausea, stomach aches, loss of appetite, sleeplessness
- Emotional reactions such as shame, guilt, anger, rage, fear
- Feelings of tiredness and being run-down
- Feeling of being dirty
- Feeling responsible for the assault
- Feeling unsafe when alone
- Feelings of isolation and loneliness
- Fear of telling a partner or family
- Avoidance of sex
- Sense of loss of control
- Flashbacks during the day or night or during sex
- Recurrent nightmares.

People who have experienced an assault need to give themselves time to recover and accept that their feelings and emotions are likely to change from one day to the next. Each person responds to and comes to terms with the experience at a different rate and in different ways, depending on age, the circumstances of the assault, their coping strategies and the response of those from whom they seek support.

Talking to someone about the experience soon after an assault may help people deal with its likely emotional impact. At SARC, meeting and talking with a counsellor in the crisis setting gives a person the opportunity to address their reaction to the sexual assault.

## THE IMPACT OF SEXUAL ABUSE

The impact of sexual abuse on a child or a young person can vary. Short and long term affects can include –

- A loss of a sense of self. This happens when the abuse occurred during the important formative years when the child or young person is developing beliefs about him or herself and who they are in the world
- A sense of being different from others or that there is something wrong with them
- Loss of a sense of trust
- Sense of powerlessness
- Low self-esteem
- Emotional reactions such as guilt, shame, anger, fear, rage, sadness, grief, anxiety

- Confusion and disturbance. Many people do not clearly remember being abused but have feelings or thoughts or symptoms
- Flashbacks during the day or night or during sex
- Intrusive thoughts and memories
- Nightmares or bad dreams
- Suicidal thoughts
- Difficulty with giving or receiving affection
- Discomfort or numbness during sex or avoidance of sex
- Unsure of their sexual rights
- Confusion about their sexuality
- Believing that their only value is sexual
- Feeling 'crazy', not heard or depressed within the family (particularly if the perpetrator is a family member)
- Substance abuse – drugs, alcohol or tranquillisers
- Eating disorders – compulsive eating and obesity, bulimia or anorexia nervosa
- Physical symptoms such as headaches, sleep disturbance, nausea, chest pain.

## THE IMPACT OF SEXUAL ASSAULT OR ABUSE ON FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Sexual assault and sexual abuse have consequences not only for the person who has experienced the abuse, but also for partners, family and friends. They may experience grief, frustration and confusion or feel guilty for not having prevented the abuse. Some want revenge or want to take charge of the situation in an effort to make things better. Some feel angry with the person for being assaulted. The person who has been assaulted can often feel responsible for the reactions and feelings of the people close to them.

It can be important for family and friends to find support. They may want to talk about their feelings with people in their own support network or with a counsellor. At SARC, counselling support is available to family and friends.

### **How to help a person who has experienced an assault or abuse:**

Support from family and friends is important, regardless of whether the person was assaulted recently or many years ago.

Family and friends can help by –

- Acknowledging the person's experience and reactions
- Allowing them to be in control of what is happening
- Believing what has happened
- Encouraging them to talk about their feelings and listening to what they say
- Allowing them to talk about the assault or abuse at their own pace
- Assuring them it was not their fault
- Ensuring that the person feels safe



- Allowing privacy, confidentiality and choice
- Being non-judgemental.

### **When a young person has been assaulted:**

Adolescence can be a challenging time for both parents and young people. Moving towards independence will inevitably involve some risk-taking and although this can be difficult for parents to accept, it is an integral part of the young person's development. When a young person has been sexually assaulted, it is important for parents to be aware that the assault had nothing to do with how the young person behaved, for example, how they were dressed, if they were drinking alcohol, or if they were somewhere they should not have been. In a sexual assault, the young person has no control over the situation and is powerless to prevent what happens. The young person is not responsible.

After an assault parents can experience a range of emotions, such as anger, disbelief or sadness and a feeling of loss of control. Parents may decide they need some support during this time, either through talking to friends or through counselling.

Counselling can assist the young person, although some may not want to talk with a 'stranger' about the assault. This decision needs to be respected. The young person should have control over whether they choose to talk to someone and whom they choose to talk to about the assault.

Parents can help by –

- Believing them, as this will have an important effect on the young person's recovery
- Supporting them to deal with the traumatic experience. Parents can sometimes be unsure whether their responses are supportive or correct. What is important is that the relationship they have with their son or daughter is one that enables the young person to feel safe and secure enough to tell them about the assault
- Being consistent and maintaining usual routines. The young person needs their surroundings and home environment to remain the same in order to provide a sense of stability during this period of emotional upheaval
- Being sensitive to the young person's mood changes
- Remaining open to talk about the assault whenever the young person wants to
- Remembering that responsibility for the sexual assault remains solely with the assailant.

Where a young person has been sexually assaulted or abused by a family friend or relative, parents can experience doubt in believing that this has occurred and therefore find it difficult to support their son or daughter. Children and young people rarely lie about assault or abuse and it is important for their recovery that parents believe them and prevent any direct contact between the young person and the offender.

## COPING AFTER A SEXUAL ASSAULT

Because of the trauma associated with a sexual assault, it is important for a person's recovery that they take care of their physical and emotional needs.

Strategies which can assist include –

- Seeking support from others
- Keeping in touch with people and not isolating him or herself
- Taking time out from usual activities, although maintaining a routine is important
- Writing down feelings
- Getting plenty of rest, even if this is difficult
- Eating well balanced meals and eating regularly
- Making time for relaxation
- Getting regular exercise such as walking, cycling or swimming
- Talking the assault through with someone they trust such as a friend, counsellor or family member.

Excessive intake of alcohol, drugs or other stimulants such as coffee or cigarettes are not likely to assist a person's recovery.

## RIGHTS AND OPTIONS

Immediately after a sexual assault a person can be faced with a number of issues to consider. These include –

- whether to report the assault to the police
- whether they want to see a doctor
- whether they want counselling support.

It is important people are aware of their rights and the options available to them. These are explained fully in the following sections.

They can also choose to discuss their rights and options by ringing SARC on 9340 1828 or freecall 1800 199 888 and speaking with a SARC counsellor.

## MEDICAL CARE FOLLOWING A SEXUAL ASSAULT

People who have experienced a sexual assault may have concerns for their health which they would like to discuss with and have checked by a doctor.

### **The SARC Medical and Forensic Service:**

At SARC, the doctors' primary responsibility is to address any urgent health issues. A person with a serious medical condition or injury will be referred to the emergency department of a major hospital. A SARC doctor and counsellor will attend at the hospital at the request of hospital medical staff and with the consent of the person.

To ensure that a person's immediate health concerns are addressed, the SARC doctors provide advice, treatment and follow-up in relation to emergency contraception, risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection. This is carried out only with a person's consent. SARC doctors will provide information about test results, treatment given and follow-up protocols to a person's general practitioner at that person's request.

SARC provides a forensic service to people who have recently been assaulted. This is the impartial detection, documentation (including photography) and interpretation of injury and the collection of physical evidence that may be used in subsequent legal proceedings. This includes writing medico-legal reports and presenting impartial evidence in court.

A forensic service is offered irrespective of whether a person has reported to the police at the time of referral to SARC. Medical records in relation to forensic examination are kept indefinitely and physical evidence is stored securely for a period of 3 months. This gives a person time to decide whether they will report to police. Because of limited storage facilities, physical evidence will be destroyed after this period if the SARC Medical and Forensic Service has not been notified that it is required for a criminal investigation.

A forensic evidence collection kit and manual designed by SARC doctors has been made available to many GP's and Hospitals in regional areas to assist them to collect forensic evidence on a person's behalf.

The professional counselling staff at SARC work as a team with the SARC doctors when a person attends the SARC centre or an emergency department of a hospital after a recent sexual assault. In this crisis setting, counsellors provide support and assistance to help the person deal with the immediate impact of the sexual assault. Counsellors also offer people the option to return for further counselling when they aim to assist the person regain control over their life and reclaim the confidence and the abilities that may have been affected by the assault.

## **COUNSELLING AFTER SEXUAL ASSAULT OR ABUSE**

Sexual assault and sexual abuse are traumatic experiences and it is often useful for people to be able to talk to someone outside of their family or social network about their feelings, fears and concerns.

Professional counselling offers someone to talk to or to seek information from in a safe and confidential environment. Counselling focuses on the feelings and reactions that have arisen as a result of the assault or abuse and how the person can cope with these feelings and reactions.

When a person seeks counselling they have a right to:

- be believed
- have an opportunity to express feelings and thoughts without being judged

- be treated with dignity, respect and understanding
- accurate information
- confidentiality
- make decisions in their own time
- communicate in their own language, with an interpreter if necessary.

## MAKING A DECISION TO REPORT TO POLICE

People who have been sexually assaulted or abused often have strong reasons for choosing whether or not to report to police.

Some of the reasons people give for not reporting are because of –

- fear of not being believed
- feeling humiliated, confused and guilty
- their relationship with the assailant
- feeling responsible for the sexual assault having occurred
- threats of reprisal from the assailant
- uncertainty about the legal process and fear of having to appear in court.

If uncertain about reporting, people can talk to police informally and/or anonymously, either by telephone or in person, to seek more information before making a decision to report.

People can choose to make an **informal report**. This means the police will write down information provided to them. The person then signs a statement saying they do not want the matter investigated.

Alternatively people can make a **formal statement**. *(They have a right to request that a female police officer take a statement, although this can be difficult in some regional areas.)*

The statement is a typed and signed record of details and events leading up to the sexual assault and during and after the incident. Giving a statement can take a number of hours. The police officer will ask for a detailed description of what has happened and will also ask questions so no details are left out. It is very important that the statement is accurate because it will later be released to the defence lawyer if the matter goes to court.

The statement is signed when the person making it is satisfied with the contents. They can choose not to sign immediately if they need time to reconsider the details. They also have the right to add to a statement if more details are remembered at a later time. People can request a copy of their statement.

On the basis of the signed statement the police will investigate and where possible apprehend and charge the assailant.

A person who was sexually abused as a child is able to make a statement to police even though the abuse may have occurred a number of years ago. The police

are obliged to gather further evidence and investigate the complaint. If after a statement is signed the person decides they do not want to proceed, the police should be informed as soon as possible. A form is completed which states they do not want the police to proceed with the investigation. If charges have already been laid, however, it is not possible to withdraw a statement.

It is important to note that if a statement is withdrawn this may affect later claims for Criminal Injuries Compensation.

### **The Police Investigation:**

During a police investigation an assailant is referred to as 'the person of interest'. A person who has made a statement is referred to as 'the complainant'.

Police investigate by gathering evidence which supports a statement. This evidence is later used to prove to the court a crime has been committed.

Police may ask a complainant to accompany them to the place where an assault occurred. This enables police to be sure of the circumstances and also to gather any evidence that may be present. Police will also interview witnesses to an assault or anyone with whom a complainant had contact prior to and soon after an assault.

If police believe they have sufficient evidence to support a statement and have identified and found an assailant, that person will be arrested and charged. A complainant may be asked to identify the assailant at the police station. In some cases, police do not lay charges. This is not necessarily because they do not believe a complainant. Sometimes there is insufficient evidence to enable charges to be laid.

After an assailant is arrested and charged, bail is considered depending on the circumstances. Bail is usually given under conditions, such as an assailant agreeing to have no contact with a complainant. If bail conditions are broken police need to be notified immediately. If a complainant fears for his or her safety or that of others close to them, they should tell police. Police will take this information into consideration when seeking bail conditions.

**If police do not continue with an investigation due to a lack of evidence, complainants can feel disbelieved, disillusioned and can feel they have been denied justice. It can be helpful for them to discuss their feelings with a counsellor or support worker.**

## THE COURT PROCEEDINGS

The court proceedings and legal language can be confusing and many people feel as if **they** are on trial. To testify therefore takes courage.

Talking with an officer from Victim Support Service or Child Witness Service can make the court proceedings less frightening and intimidating as these services are able to provide information about the proceedings as well as provide support. Support workers can, if requested, accompany a person to court.

Some people who have experienced sexual assault or sexual abuse as a child consider that instigating court proceedings is a way of regaining control over the situation and over their own life. They can achieve a sense of justice and have a chance to speak out against the sexual violence. Some people believe speaking out may stop the assailant from repeating offenses against others.

### The Trial:

At a trial an assailant is referred to as 'the accused'. The person who made the complaint is referred to as 'the witness'.

A trial can take place approximately 1 to 2 years after charges have been laid and the assailant arrested. This is dependent on demands for court time.

A trial takes place in the District Court. Evidence from both sides is put before a judge and jury. A jury decides at the end of a trial if the accused is guilty or not guilty. During a trial, the witness is required to go over the details and events of an assault. People are not expected to repeat their statement word for word in court but they are expected to give a similar account of details and order of events. People can refresh their memory of what occurred by reading their statement prior to going into court to give evidence. As a general rule they cannot refer to their statement whilst giving evidence.

The accused is not obliged to give evidence (testify) at all. If the verdict is 'guilty' the accused will be sentenced by a judge.

**Whatever the outcome of the court proceedings, there is no right or wrong way to feel. If a 'not guilty' verdict is given or the accused is convicted but given a light sentence, this is not a reflection on a witness. Many witnesses instead acknowledge that going to court is a victory in itself as they have had the opportunity to speak out about what has happened to them.**

## WHAT IS A VICTIM IMPACT STATEMENT?

A Victim Impact Statement gives a person the opportunity to tell the court about the impact an assault has had upon them. A Victim Impact Statement is provided to the sentencing judge after a guilty verdict is made by the jury and before sentence is passed on the accused.

A Victim Impact Statement can cover –

- the emotional impact experienced as a result of the sexual assault or abuse
- psychological trauma or stress caused by the sexual assault or abuse
- the physiological (health) impact
- the impact on partner, family or friends
- financial loss or suffering
- changes to housing, accommodation, or employment as a result of the assault
- any other comments which it is believed the court should be aware of in relation to the impact of a crime on a person's life.

A witness may wish to give a verbal statement in court or have a court nominated person read a statement on their behalf.

There are a number of options available when preparing a Victim Impact Statement. These options can be discussed with –

- the Police investigating officer
- a Victim Support Service officer
- a Child Witness Service officer
- a SARC counsellor
- a solicitor or prosecutor from the Department of Public Prosecutions.

## WHAT IS CRIMINAL INJURIES COMPENSATION?

Criminal Injuries Compensation is government compensation made available to people who have been injured physically or emotionally as a result of a criminal offence.

Fund monies are collected through the Criminal Injuries Compensation Office. If a victim of crime is compensated through the fund, the Attorney General will attempt to reclaim this money from the person who committed the offence.

The compensation payment varies.

SARC is able to assist people who have been sexually assaulted or abused by preparing a Criminal Injuries Compensation Report.

## RESOURCES (METROPOLITAN)

### **Police Attendance**

Phone 131 444 (24 hour service)

### **Crisis Care**

Phone 9223 1111

**Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC)** – medical, forensic and counselling service

### **24 hour Crisis Line:**

Phone (08) 9340 1828

### **24 hour Counselling Line:**

Phone (08) 9340 1899

### **FreeCall**

Phone 1800 199 888

### **Business Line:**

Phone (08) 9340 1820

**Derbarl Yerrigan Health Service**  
– Aboriginal Medical Service

Phone 9421 3888

### **Health and Health Services Information**

Phone 1300 135 030

### **Healthdirect**

– 24 hour health advice

Phone 1800 022 222

### **Royal Perth Hospital**

– STI testing & treatment

Phone 9224 2178

### **Fremantle Hospital**

– STI testing & treatment

Phone 9431 2149

### **Psychiatric Emergency Team**

Phone 1300 555 788

**Lifeline** – telephone crisis counselling

Phone 13 1114 (24 hour line)

### **FPWA (Family Planning WA)**

– Counselling service

Phone 9227 6177

### **Child Witness Service**

– Non-evidentiary preparation and support to children giving evidence in court

Phone 9425 2850

### **Victim Support Service**

– Counselling and court support service

Phone (08) 9425 2850

Freecall: 1800 818 988

### **Yorgum Aboriginal Corporation**

– Counselling

Phone 9228 0407



## RESOURCES (REGIONAL AREAS)

**Acacia Support Centre**

South Hedland

– counselling service

Phone 9172 5044 (24 hour Crisis Line)

**Albany Regional Hospital**

– hospital casualty department

– counselling service

Phone 9892 2222

**Allambee Counselling Service**

Mandurah

– counselling service

Phone 9535 8263

**Eastern Goldfields Sexual Assault Resource Centre**

– counselling service

Phone 9091 1922

Freecall 1800 688 922 (24 hour Crisis Line)

**Gascoyne Public Health Unit**

– hospital casualty department

– counselling support

Phone 9941 0560

**Chrysalis Support Service Inc, trading as SARC.**

Geraldton

– Sexual Assault Resource Centre

Phone 9964 1833 (24 hour Crisis Line)

**Katanning Community Health**

– Counselling Service

Phone 9821 2815

**Kinway**

Kimberley Region

– counselling service

Phone 9169 1117

**Waratah Womens' Support Centre**

Bunbury

– medical, forensic and counselling service

Freecall 1800 017 303

Phone 9791 2884 (24 hour Crisis Line)

**West Pilbara Health Service**

Wickam/Karratha

Phone 9187 3218



### **Crisis Line**

(08) 9340 1828 (24 hours)

### **Counselling Line**

(08) 9340 1899 (24 hours)

### **Freecall**

1800 199 888

### **Business**

Telephone: (08) 9340 1820

Facsimile: (08) 9381 5426

PO Box 842, SUBIACO WA 6904



Department of Health  
Government of Western Australia

**For more information go to the website:**

[www.wchs.health.wa.gov.au/services/sarc/](http://www.wchs.health.wa.gov.au/services/sarc/)