#notyourfault

What you need to know about sexual violence and recovery, with information tips and experience stories
As well as useful information, this booklet also includes ten experience stories. Ten stories from brave people who have experienced sexual violence and can now talk about it. About what happened and how it affected them. But also, about how they picked themselves up and found their inner strength. I hope that these stories act as a source of motivation for others who have been through similar experiences.

Indeed, many children, youngsters and adults are not yet ready to share their stories. Does that make them any less brave? Absolutely not! It demands an indescribable amount of courage and strength to carry such a massive secret. And to come up with a way to get through each day and to relate to a life in which you are or have been used and in which you feel betrayed and trapped.

When you read the stories in this booklet, you will see that it is possible to recover and heal after experiencing sexual violence. Everyone has that chance. A chance to feel differently, to think differently, to pick up the pieces of your life again. But that is often very hard to do alone. It helps if you have someone you can share your story with, at a time that suits you.

This booklet is about strength and hope. About the way back up and about support. About finding a lighter place. I hope everyone can find that place.

Iva Bicanic
Managing director of
The Sexual Assault Center
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About the Sexual Assault Center</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luuk’s story</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About sexual violence</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequently asked questions</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marijn Louis’s story</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychoeducation</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen’s story</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapies</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica’s story</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responses from those around you</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellemijn’s story</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tips!</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where can you go?</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
About the Sexual Assault Center

The Sexual Assault Center is a place where victims of sexual assault or rape can get all the help they need: forensic, medical and psychological help. A team of doctors, nurses, police and other professionals work together to provide specialist care to victims of sexual assault and rape.

Who is it for?
The Sexual Assault Center is for anyone who has had a traumatic sexual experience, irrespective of age, gender, identity or sexual preference.

Contact the Sexual Assault Center
If you have had a traumatic sexual experience and need help, please contact us. We are available day and night on 0800–0188. Calls to us are free.

You can also chat with us (anonymously) via: www.chatmetcsg.nl.

For more information, go to: www.centrumseksueelgeweld.nl/csg-en/

Tip!
Put the number of the Sexual Assault Center in your phone: 0800–0188.
Seek help within seven days
It is important that you seek help as soon as possible after having a traumatic sexual experience. And preferably within 72 hours. That way we can provide you with the best possible level of help. Within that time, there are significant medical, psychological and forensic options. Consider securing traces of DNA of the perpetrator, preventing pregnancy, infection and post-traumatic stress disorder. However, it is never too late to call or chat with us. Even if you had a traumatic sexual experience a while ago, you can still contact the Sexual Assault Center.
‘I have regained control’

When he was 14, Luuk (now 24) was raped by a man he had a date with. He processed his experience by creating art.

‘When I was in the first year of secondary school, I thought it was important to belong, to be someone. I had a girlfriend at the time and when she asked me to undress in front of a webcam, I did. She filmed everything and the images went through the entire school within no time. Everyone knew about it. Anyone who hung out with me was picked on, so no one wanted to be around me. I felt lonely and was also struggling with my own sexuality. Did I fancy men or women?

I met a 30-year-old man online and after months of chatting, I agreed to meet him in the woods. He told me that having sex was nice, and I thought: okay. I let him but once we got started, I didn’t like it anymore. I said: I don’t like this. He said: You soon will. Then he raped me. I froze. I did nothing to stop him.

I still remember the mix of emotions that ran through my head: it will be over soon, maybe I will start to like it, as long as he likes it. When I got home, all I wanted to do was shower and forget it ever happened.

I focused on the fun and positive things in life and blocked the traumatic memory. But I wasn’t doing very well. I felt lonely, became depressed and developed anorexia. But I never linked it to what I had gone through. I never really thought I had been raped. When I thought of rape, I thought of a woman being dragged into a forest.

I didn’t think about it for years. That was until a year ago. I was really stressed and suddenly had panic attacks – also during sex. Really weird. I sought help from a psychologist and
the rape came up. I had buried it for all those years but looking back I realised all my projects at the art academy could be traced back to that moment. I made a documentary about sex, photographed naked men in the woods, I transformed myself through drag so I could show my emotions from a feminine side. When I realised that, I thought: keep going. I can either feel sorry for myself or process this traumatic experience through my art.

‘I focused on the fun and positive things in life and blocked the traumatic memory.’

I am currently working on a film about rape. With this project, it is the first time I feel like I have regained control. In fact, I can consciously work with it and talk about what happened to me. I want to transform my negative experience into the strength to help others. What I would like to say to others who have been through the same thing is find a way to express yourself. You can do that either by talking or listening to music but also through writing or painting. Find something that suits you.’
About sexual violence

What is sexual violence?
Sexual violence is a term used for all sexual acts that someone is forced to do, undergo or see. Sexual violence can occur both online as well as offline.

Sexual assault, rape, sexual abuse, incest, sexual molestation and online sexual abuse are all forms of sexual violence.

Facts and figures

Figures
• One in eight women have been a victim of rape.
• One in 25 men have been a victim of rape.
• Each year, there are 100,000 victims of sexual violence in the Netherlands.
• 90% of these victims are women, 10% are men.

Risks
• Risk of rape is four times greater for the 12-24 age group.
• People with an intellectual impairment are four times more likely to be victims.
• Alcohol consumption increases the risk of sexual violence.
• Homosexual and bisexual men are more likely to be victims of sexual violence than heterosexual men.

About the perpetrators
• The perpetrator is female in 6% of the cases.
• Most perpetrators are family members or friends.
• With one-third of male victims over the age of 16, the perpetrator is female.
**Physical responses**
- One in five victims have an erection or become moist.
- 50% of victims feel paralysed.
- 70% of victims freeze or cooperate.

**Consequences**
- 7% of victims fall pregnant.
- 45% of the women and 65% of the men run the risk of a post-traumatic stress disorder following rape.
- Without therapy, two-thirds of victims will experience sexual violence again.
- Blaming the victim is often more damaging than the incident itself.
- 73% of victims only speak up after a year, and 45% only after five years. Boys and men often wait longer.
- 30% of abused children show no behavioural signs.

(Source: Sexual Assault Center Fact Sheet 2020)
Frequently asked questions

When you have experienced sexual violence, you will probably have many questions. You can find the three most frequently asked questions below. We asked Iva Bicanic, managing director of the Sexual Assault Center, to answer the questions to the best of her ability.

1. Will I ever be my old self again?

‘No, not completely. What I’ve learnt from victims is that they can never totally forget the experience or experiences and that something changes in you, for example your trust in others. But that doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy life. You can also lead a fulfilling, fun and good life after experiencing sexual violence. Those feelings and thoughts you have shortly after a traumatic sexual experience will not be that intense forever. If they do not decrease after a month, it is time to get professional help. And in any case, it is never too late to seek help.’

2. Why did this happen to me?

‘Please know that the sexual assault was not your fault. And it has nothing to do with you as a person. The assault happened because the perpetrator was sexually aroused and crossed the line. Perpetrators make use of the circumstances. For example, they abuse children who don’t dare to speak up or who lack love and attention at home. Or they commit their offence in a certain place, where you just happened to be. It happened because the other wanted it to, not because there is anything wrong with you.’
3. Why did I do nothing to prevent it from happening?

‘You may have felt paralysed during the sexual assault. It is a state in which you could not do anything, could not move, could not scream, could not defend yourself. That is called tonic immobility or freeze, and it is an automatic reaction by your body. Your body goes into survival mode and in fact says: it’d rather be assaulted than dead. Roughly 70 per cent of victims go through this. Afterwards, you can feel incredibly guilty about the fact you did nothing to save yourself. But please be aware, there is nothing you could have done about it. Doing nothing is normal victim behaviour.’
‘Now, I know that I am not a bad person’

When he was a child, Marijn Louis (52) was sexually abused by his teacher. He wrote down his experiences in his book ‘Omarm het Leven’ (Embrace Life).

‘I was 13 when a teacher asked me if I wanted to stay the night at his house. I was chuffed to bits! My home life was a mess, my parents ignored me and then my teacher suddenly appeared. He was someone who did think I was worth his time. That first night I stayed at his, he came to my bedroom. That’s when the abuse started, and it lasted 18 months.

I had a really tough time in the years afterwards. Everything fell apart, I fell apart and landed in a completely psychotic state, with voices in my head shouting at me. They screamed, screeched. For years. Still even now at times. And all those years I never understood what had happened to me during the abuse, why my body reacted like it did, why I got an erection and had orgasms. It was as if I was giving my teacher consent for what he was doing to me. After all, you get an erection because you want to have sex. That’s what I always thought.

That was until I read a newspaper interview with Iva Bicanic from the Sexual Assault Center a few years ago. She said that men can get an erection when they fear for their lives. That it’s a completely normal physical response, also with sexual abuse, and that you have absolutely no control over it. Right
then, all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. I felt so relieved. I learnt that panic not only expresses itself in your mind but also in your body. That is exactly what happened to me when I was abused. It was not because I wanted it and liked it. Not because I was bad or guilty of what happened. It was the fear. All those years, the voices in my head pushed me into a corner: you are bad, it’s your own fault. I felt disgusting, like a pervert. I didn’t have to do that anymore. I could let go of the problem I had worried about my entire life. What a relief.

If only a wise man or woman had stood beside me earlier and told me how logical it was, how a body works and that it wasn’t my fault. That would have made such a difference to me. It could have exonerated me and perhaps I wouldn’t have felt so lonely.

Now, I know that I am not a bad person, even if I still get erections when I don’t want them. My body is reacting, and I know why now: because I am experiencing intense fear. Understanding yourself and your body can be a great comfort. It can ensure that you know: I am okay, it is not my fault.'
When you have had a traumatic sexual experience, you will probably go through a very tough time. You may be confronted with a vast array of emotions, thoughts and physical responses. You may blame yourself for what happened to you or have questions about how come you reacted in a certain way during the sexual assault. In this booklet, we explain a little more about this.

**Physical responses during a sexual assault**

**Freeze response**

Seventy per cent of victims freeze or cooperate during sexual abuse. This is also known as the freeze response. Your body freezes, rendering you incapable of doing or saying anything. You feel paralysed as it were. This is an automatic response by your body, and you have no control over it. Your body goes this survival mode to protect you. If you experienced this freeze response during the assault, you may be angry at yourself afterwards for not fighting back. Therefore, it is important to know that your body takes over in times of extreme stress and that there was nothing you could have done about it.
How often does paralysis occur during sexual violence?

- Loss of voice: 80%
- Jaws clenched: 80%
- Eyes close: 71%
- Inability to yell or scream: 77%
- Feeling frozen or paralysed: 89%
- Cold: 71%
- Paralysed muscles: 87%
- Feeling no pain: 71%
- Trembling: 77%
- Inability to move: 71%

1 Source: Van Minnen, A., ‘Verlamd van Angst’ (Frozen by Fear) Amsterdam: Boom publishers, 2017
**Sexual arousal**
Many victims notice their body physically responds during a sexual assault. Boys and men can have an erection or orgasm and girls and women can get a moist vagina. This is an automatic response by your body to protect you. Your body automatically responds to sexual stimuli, even when those stimuli are threatening. Fear and stress cause all blood vessels in the body to widen, also around your genitals. That is how an erection of moistness can occur. Having a physical response has nothing to do with arousal or consent.

**Symptoms that can arise after sexual violence**
Various symptoms can arise after going through a traumatic sexual experience. These symptoms can be different for everyone. Below, we list a few of the most common symptoms:

**Flashbacks**
Or in other words: the images of the assault play out repeatedly in your head. Some victims have this throughout the day, others mainly in the evenings when they go to sleep or in the form of nightmares. It can help to talk about what you have been through.

**Good to know**
- 70% of victims freeze or cooperate.
- 79% of victims exhibit genital arousal.
- 96% of victims obey the perpetrator.
- These are survival responses. Your body does this automatically to protect you.
  You have no control over it.
during the daytime. You could also distract yourself just before going to sleep so that you don’t have to think about the incident. Some victims think they are going mad due to the flashbacks. That is a normal reaction. If all goes well, the flashback will steadily decrease.

**Avoidance**
You avoid thoughts, feelings and activities that make you think of the assault. That is completely normal straight after experiencing sexual violence. If all goes well, the avoidance will decrease after a time. If that is not the case, try to differentiate between things you are avoiding because they could be dangerous (such as going into a dark forest on your own) and the things that ‘feel’ dangerous (such as going outside). Try and do the things that feel dangerous. Your brain will learn that the things you are scared of won’t happen. It also helps to try and pick up your normal life again as much as you can, by going to school or work.

**Vigilance**
Straight after an intense experience, many people feel they must be vigilant all the time because danger lurks everywhere. Due to the traumatic experience, your body usually remains in a state of high alertness for a while. This makes it harder to fall asleep, you have difficulty concentrating, get angry quickly and startle easily. This often decreases by itself. It also helps to pick up your normal life again.

**Negative thoughts and feeling depressed**
You could also be feeling depressed or have negative thoughts, about yourself, others or even the whole world. You feel like you can’t trust anyone anymore. The feelings of depression may cause you to be less inclined to do things or you talk less to other people. Look for support from those around you. Talk to people you trust, so that they can help you to remain positive in what is a difficult situation for you.
Feelings of guilt and shame
You may blame yourself for what happened and/or you are angry at yourself because you feel you didn’t do enough to stop the perpetrator. You would not be the only one. Many victims of a sexual assault or rape feel that way. It is important to differentiate between being guilty and feeling guilty. Even if you feel guilty, you are not. No one is allowed to touch you without your consent.

Doubts about your sexual preference
Experiencing sexual violence can cause you to feel confused. If as a boy or man you were assaulted by another man, you could for example start questioning whether you are homosexual, certainly if you had an erection and/or ejaculated during the sexual assault. The fact your body responded by getting an erection has nothing to do with arousal or consent and it does not reflect on your sexual preference.

Long-term consequences of sexual violence

Stress responses after sexual violence
If you have gone through a traumatic sexual experience, you will most likely have stress responses right after the sexual assault. These include feeling numb, insomnia, fear and anger. These are all normal responses. It is important to know that these stress responses usually decrease with time. If these stress responses do not decrease after four weeks, there is a big chance you have a post-traumatic stress disorder.

Post-traumatic stress disorder after sexual violence
A post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSS) means you are unable to process the traumatic experience or experiences. You keep going over the events in your mind, while doing your best not to. You get angry quickly and have negative thoughts about yourself and others. It is terrible to have a PTSS. PTSS is
often accompanied by depression or another disorder. It is important to get over that PTSS through trauma therapy. Also, because if you have a PTSS, you run a higher risk of becoming a victim of sexual violence again.

**Recurring memories after sexual violence**
Even if you have had professional help to process the sexual assault, and even if it happened a long time ago, traumatic emotions could recur. There is a chance that certain events in your life could trigger the trauma. For example, when starting a new relationship or having children. It may also be the case that you only understand what happened to you during your childhood when you reach adulthood.

**Re-victimisation**
Without therapy, two-thirds of all victims of sexual violence experience it again. This is called re-victimisation. How does that work? Going through a traumatic sexual experience can make you vulnerable. For example, you could feel guilty, have a post-traumatic stress disorder and/or low self-esteem. If you do not seek help that vulnerability could mean someone oversteps your boundaries again. It is therefore important that you seek help after experiencing sexual violence to avoid it happening again.

**Good to know**
Whatever you have been through and whatever your symptoms are, you can always contact the Sexual Assault Center. No matter whether you experienced sexual violence recently or a long time ago. You can call or chat with us for information and advice. See www.centrumseksueelgeweld.nl/csg-en/
‘My life is good again’

Ellen (28) was in the hands of a pimp from age 13 to 16 and again from age 18 to 22.

‘My parents thought I had too much sex with men. That was my mindset when I went into a shelter for victims of loverboys at age 16. I didn’t want to accept that I was a victim, that my own boyfriend sold me to other men all those years. He was my whole world, the man of my dreams. I was willing to do what he wanted. It took some time before I realised I was being abused. Oh my god... I felt fat and dirty, had to throw up and I cried a lot.

After an intensive period in the shelter, I went back home to my parents. In hindsight, I should have moved somewhere else. When I want home alone one night after going out, I was pulled off my bike and taken back to my pimp. I was right back in the same situation. I was sold and abused all over again. To make sure I did what was asked of me, my pimp gave me drugs, GHB and speed. That’s how I became addicted.

The situation ended abruptly four years later when all my loved ones suddenly appeared in my parents’ living room: an intervention. One by one, my family and friends said I was no longer welcome if I didn’t leave that world. That was my wake-up call. It was now or never. I went straight to a rehab clinic and then into therapy. I had EMDR and psychomotor therapy (PMT), among others. I find it easy to talk, as long as it is not about anything serious. Then I shut down. With PMT you work a lot with movement, attachment and trust. Walking to someone with your eyes closed, for example, or falling
backwards into someone’s arms. I hated it in the beginning. I thought, there’s no way I’m going to do that. But I persevered. Slowly but surely, I regained my trust in people. That enabled me to be open to healthy relationships.

My life is good again, with a boyfriend and two children. And I feel good. Of course I have bad days, but who doesn’t? I deal with the situation very differently now. I can still feel awful about what happened, but I can live with it thanks to the therapy. I am the person I am now because of everything I went through. I would like to say to anyone who has experienced sexual violence: start the recovery process, no matter how scary it seems. Seek help, get therapy. And do as many normal things as you can, like playing sports, being around people, finding a place in society. And keep faith in humanity. I thought no one could be trusted, that every man was bad, but that’s wrong. There is always someone who cares about you.’

‘All my loved ones suddenly appeared in my parents’ living room: an intervention.’
Therapies

If you have been through sexual violence, therapy could be of great help to you. The best type of therapy for each person varies. Below, we list a few options.

**Cognitive behavioural therapy**
Cognitive behavioural therapy assumes that thoughts and convictions can affect our emotions and behaviour. If these thoughts are negative and unrealistic, the therapist tries to help you change these thoughts back into realistic and helpful ones. An example: many victims believe that they are guilty of the sexual assault. The therapist tries to teach you a new thought pattern, with thoughts that are beneficial to you. For more information, go to: www.cognitievegedragstherapie.nl

**Imaginaire exposure**
Using imaginal exposure, you tell the story of your experience of sexual assault. The therapist uses your story to repeatedly expose you to it. The therapist often uses an audio recording each session that you also listen to daily. This teaches you that you can share your experience and it increasingly becomes a thing of the past. Exposing you to painful memories ensures your fear lessens and that the incorrect thoughts are converted into helpful thoughts.
Go to: www.cognitievegedragstherapie.nl.

**Narrative exposure therapy**
During this type of therapy, also called NET, you create a life story with your therapist. Along that story line you place all the significant events in your life, the nice and not so nice ones. You start at your birth and end with your life at this moment in time. You talk about your feelings and thoughts at those moments. By talking extensively
about your traumatic experiences, the accompanying pain you feel will eventually lessen. Narrative exposure therapy is often used to treat PTSS. More information: www.cognitievegedragstherapie.nl.

**Pelvic floor therapy**
Experiencing sexual violence can cause issues in your pelvic floor. For example, you could have trouble defecating, urinating or having sex. You could also experience pain, such as back pain, stomach pains and pain in the pelvic floor. A pelvic floor therapist can help you relax that part of your body, for example. Go to: www.bekkenfysiotherapie.nl.

**Help with sexual problems**
Your experiences of sexual violence may result in problems having pleasurable sex. You may experience pain during intercourse or relive the traumatic experience. Sexologists from the Netherlands Association for Sexology (NVVS) are specialised in this type of problem and can provide support. For more information, go to: www.nvvs.info.

**EMDR**
EMDR stands for Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing. It is a therapy that helps you to alleviate intense images and memories. It is often a short therapy. During the therapy, you concentrate on images of the sexual assault, while simultaneously being given
one or more tasks. For example, following a light, hearing beeping in your ears or holding vibrating objects in your hands. As you are doing several tasks at once, the emotional load and the clarity of the images of the abuse diminish. For more information, go to: www.emdr.nl.

**ITT**

Intensive trauma therapy (ITT) is used to reduce PTSS symptoms. In a short time (for example, a few consecutive days), various trauma therapies are used. It is often a combination of cognitive behavioural therapy and EMDR and sport. With your therapists, you confront your fears and the traumatic memories. The fear lessens, your thoughts change, the flashbacks decrease and recalling the events causes less tension.

**Haptotherapy**

Haptotherapy helps you get back in touch with your emotions and listen to your body. This enables you to better recognise your boundaries. The therapist helps in this through discussions, touching and exercises. Touching plays a significant role within this type of therapy. What happens to you when someone touches you? What do you like and like less? For more information, go to: www.haptotherapeuten-vvh.nl.
'You can understand yourself and your body. Understanding your body can be a comfort. It can ensure you know that you are okay, it’s not as you think. I am okay, it is not my fault.' (Marijn Louis)
‘As long as you are fighting, you are not healing’

As a young girl, Jessica (25) was abused by her grandfather. She is a social worker and trained to be an experience expert.

‘My grandfather sexually abused me from when I was age five to eight. It happened when I stayed at my grandfather and grandmother’s house or when they babysat me. When I was a little girl, I thought it was normal. I thought all children did this with their grandfather. But I never told anyone at the time because my grandfather said it was our little secret. And he said I was special: so special that I was allowed to share this with him. He favoured me, he always sent my sister away saying she was naughty. And then I would be alone with him...

It was only when I was around 12 years old that I realised what my grandfather was doing wasn’t normal. I reached puberty and sex was discussed. Then I knew: this is not right. It all came out. I had flashbacks, panic attacks, nightmares and I sought my escape in drink and drugs. I had hidden away my trauma for all that time and then it surfaced. I told a female friend about it, who went on to contact the school social worker. I was really angry about that to start with, but that woman really helped me. I could always knock on her door, and she was there when I told my parents.

Fortunately, my parents have always believed and supported me. They didn’t waste any time looking for help for me. That help was in the shape of EMDR. No, it is not fun, it’s really hard actually. But it did help me to process certain things. As a child you don’t realise that what happened was crazy. Even though
what my grandfather did wasn’t nice, it was a bit exciting at the start – you feel all kinds of things – also at that spot. I felt guilty about that for years. Had I brought the abuse on myself? I was able to let go of that thought through the EMDR.

Talking with my friends also helped me. The way they responded did me good and helped me put things into perspective. If you say out loud what happened, you hear how ridiculous it sounds: a five-year-old bringing abuse on themselves. It enabled me to understand that it wasn’t my fault. I am proud of myself.

I’ve gotten through this so I can cope with anything. Other victims deserve to feel that way too.

I would say to them, don’t avoid it. All the while you are fighting your trauma and not accepting that it’s part of you, you won’t heal. The feelings of guilt and shame will keep haunting you. My mantra is: you will find the strength. Everyone has strength if you give it space.’
Responses from those around you

Support from those around you after sexual violence
After going through a traumatic sexual experience, it is extremely important that you get support from those around you. People you can trust, who you can talk to and who are there for you. Victims who are supported by those around them recover quicker than victims who don’t get that support. Below, we give you a number of tips that you can show to others.

1. Listen attentively
Let the other person know you are there for them and listen attentively. Many victims are scared of not being believed, making it harder for them to share their story. Even if you don’t know what to say, listening is often enough.

2. Support your loved one
You may have questions for your loved one. Those questions could trigger unwanted feelings in the victim or even come across as accusatory. Try to be there for them and offer support. Accept it if they do not want to tell you everything (right away).

3. Be aware of emotions
Some victims are angry, and others are extremely sad. Everyone responds differently. Whatever emotions your loved one is feeling, remember they are allowed to exist, even if you have trouble dealing with them.

4. Ask questions about touching
Sometimes, people who have experienced sexual violence would rather not be touched for a while. A well-intentioned kiss or hug could trigger unwanted memories in the initial period after the incident. Carefully ask if it is okay for you to touch them or let the other person take the initiative.
5. Ask your partner what they desire
It can be difficult to have sex after a non-consensual sexual experience. If you are in a romantic relationship with the victim, do not pressure them into having intercourse. Ask your partner what they desire in terms of sexuality and intimacy.

6. Offer practical help
Can I go grocery shopping for you? Shall I go with you to the appointment? A victim could find practical help very helpful. So ask if there is anything you can do for them.

7. Respect choices
A person who has been a victim of sexual violence faces a number of choices. To report it to the police or not? To get psychological help or not? It is important they are given good information and that they can make their own decisions at their own pace.

8. Do not go telling other people
Let your loved one decide who is and who is not allowed to know what happened. Do not tell their story to other people without consent.

9. Be patient
It can take a lot of time to process a non-consensual sexual experience. You can help by being patient and keep listening.

10. Do not forget yourself!
You may be extremely angry at the perpetrator or feel guilty that you were unable to prevent the other’s non-consensual sexual experience. You too need to be able to get these feelings off your chest. It is important that you find someone else you can talk to. Tell your loved one that you too are seeking help from someone.
**Victim blaming after sexual assault**

Many people who have experienced sexual violence receive negative responses from those around them. The victim is not believed or is seen as being guilty. Examples of this are: ‘You shouldn’t have gone there on your own.’ ‘You shouldn’t have gotten drunk.’ Or: ‘You shouldn’t have worn such a short skirt.’ Others may ask you questions, such as ‘Why didn’t you simply get away.’ ‘Why didn’t you fight back?’ These types of questions could make you feel guilty. We call these responses from those around you ‘victim blaming’: you are blamed for what happened, while you are not guilty at all. Victim blaming can have negative consequences for you as a victim. It could cause you to feel guilty and ashamed. And it could negatively affect how you process the traumatic incident.

**Good to know**

Unfortunately, people around you often have trouble responding to experiences of sexual violence. It can seem like they are blaming you for what has happened. This is called victim blaming. We hope you got positive and supportive responses. That you were believed and taken seriously by the important people in your life.
'All the while you are fighting your trauma and not accepting that it's part of you, you won't heal. Everyone has strength if you give it space.'  (Jessica)
‘I was at the wrong place at the wrong time. That’s how I see it. After taking the train, I walked from the station to my house, it was evening, and suddenly a lost jogger appeared. A jogger who had set his sights on me. He threw me to the ground and started groping me right away. “I just want to look,” he said in an almost friendly way. That felt like a relief, that he was only after my body and didn’t want to kill me. He raped me on the cycle path.

That feeling of helplessness, being at the mercy of a rapist, it changed my life. The world became an unsafe place to me. I thought that there would be someone waiting for me at every corner to do something to me. Something awful. Stories of rape and even murder constantly haunted me. When I arrived at my destination, I thought: I made it, I’m still alive but I’m sure it will all go wrong tomorrow. It gave me stomach ache.

I became scared of the dark, couldn’t be alone anymore, didn’t dare to go outside. To avoid my anxiety, I started using avoidance tricks. I took medicine so I could sleep, I put a bucket next to my bed to use as a toilet, I never again took a “difficult” route on the bike, and I memorised the number plates of suspicious cars. I was preoccupied with danger all the time, which led to me

Ellemijn (28) was raped by an unknown man when she was 18. Her body froze during the rape, so Ellemijn was unable to fight back. The perpetrator has never been caught.
I wasn't preoccupied with danger all the time, which led to me alienating myself from those around me.

I was preoccupied with danger all the time, which led to me alienating myself from those around me.

I didn't understand how they could view the world as an innocent place.

I had various forms of therapy for seven years, but it didn't help enough. When my therapist told me to go outside in the dark, I thought this is life-threatening. I sabotaged the therapy, didn't do what was asked of me. I heard about avoidance behaviour by coincidence. What it is and the effect it can have on your life. And that's when the penny dropped. I understood this is about me. All of a sudden, I understood I was constantly displaying avoidance behaviour.

I started practicing, practicing, practicing. Staying in my seat if a strange man came and sat next to me, sleeping a night on my own, that kind of thing. I got braver and braver. I started to realise more and more that I would be able to fight back if I was ever threatened. The fact I was at my rapist's mercy back then doesn't mean I am always at his mercy. I could be very different next time I gradually escaped my self-made prison. I can be at home alone again. No longer need a babysitter. I can do it by myself, and I dare to live again.
‘Start the recovery process, no matter how scary it seems. Seek help, get therapy and keep faith in humanity. There is always someone who cares about you.’ (Ellen)
Viewing tip
On www.centrumseksueelgeweld.nl/csg-en/, you can find vlogs for children, parents, teachers and help organisations about sexual assault.

Do tips
Talk about it!
No matter how hard it is, try and talk to someone about what happened. Someone you trust. You don’t have to go into the details of what happened, but don’t carry it around on your own. By talking to others, you can get support and help. Examples of people you could take into your confidence are a friend, brother/sister, your partner, your father or mother, a teacher or your GP. You can also (anonymously) call or chat to someone at the Sexual Assault Center. Call for free 0800-0188 or chat via www.chatmetcsg.nl.

Write about it
If you don’t dare to tell someone about what happened, it can help to write down your story. You put what happened into words. If you are not a great writer, you may be able to find another way to express your feelings. You could draw, take photographs or play music for example. Creativity can have a healing effect.
Create your own safe place
A safe place where you feel totally comfortable. A place where you can completely be yourself, where there is no danger and where you are not scared. You can create this place yourself, in 2D, so on paper or digitally or even in 3D like a kind of diorama. If you want to know how to do that, scan the QR code to download the tool.

Talk to support groups
It can be really good to contact people who have been through the same experience you have. Victim Support Netherlands offers anonymous access to closed and open online support groups for people who have been through the same experience. For more information, go to: www.slachtofferwijzer.nl. You can also contact Victim Support Netherlands for face-to-face support groups. Go to: www.slachtofferhulp.nl or call: 0900-0101.
Think about it...
When you have experienced sexual violence, you can feel incredibly dirty. You may even be disgusted by your own body because the perpetrator touched you there. But did you know that the cells in our bodies regenerate every month? So, in fact, the body the perpetrator touched doesn’t exist anymore. Your body is clean. If you suffer with feelings of disgust, try to imagine that (just like a snake) you shred your skin step by step and a new beautiful, clean skin emerges.
(Source: ‘Walging en symptomen van PTSS’, Peter de Jong and Jannetta Bos)

Find distractions
Your head may be all over the place but try and find things to distract yourself. Learn a new skill, play sport, listen to music, meditate, go to see friends, play games. And pick up your normal life as far as possible. Go to school, to work, do chores and meet up with friends.

Take good care of yourself
It is important to take good care of yourself after an intense experience. Eat healthy food and try to stick to a normal day-night rhythm. Be very careful with drink and drugs. It is understandable that you want to temporarily blot out your feelings, but alcohol and drugs
do not solve the problem. If you drink and use drugs it could even be harder to treat the problems and you run the risk of addiction.

**Sleep well**
If you are having trouble sleeping, make a sleep plan for yourself. Arrange the hours before going to bed so that you feel warm, comfortable and safe. Work towards the night with calm music, a hot shower, a nice cup of tea, meditation exercises and nice memories, for example. Avoid screens, bright light and loud noises. Go through your own ritual each evening, so that your body and mind know it is time to go to sleep.

**Challenge your senses**
Going through a traumatic sexual experience could make your body and mind feel numb – as if you are living in a haze. That can still be the case years after experiencing sexual assault. It was your body’s response to protect you during the sexual assault. But you no longer need to be numb. It can help if you activate your senses. See, smell, taste, listen and feel. For example, search for red objects in your room, take a bite of a lemon, smell strong perfume, listen to the birds in the park or hold an ice cube.
(Source: ‘Verlamd van angst’, Agnes van Minnen)
Where can you go?

The Sexual Assault Center
For help and advice after sexual violence. The Sexual Assault Center is located in all regions of the Netherlands. So there is always help near you.

Need immediate help? Call or chat with us.
www.chatmetcsg.nl
0800 0188
Available 24/7, free (and anonymous)
Other important help organisations

**Fier**
For help and information after all forms of violence (sexual or otherwise). Call: 0800-2080000 or chat via www.chatmetfier.nl.

**Helpwanted.nl**
For information and advice with online abuse. Call: 020-261 5275 or go to www.helpwanted.nl.

**LANGZS**
For legal support after violent and sexual offences. Go to: www.langzs.nl.

**113**
If you are having suicidal thoughts. Call: 0800-0113 or chat via www.113.nl.

**Police**
Call: 0900-8844 and ask for the sexual offences unit near you. You can chat anonymously with the police via www.vraaghetdepolitie.nl.

**Victim Support Netherlands**
For emotional support, help with the criminal process and support to get compensation for damages. Call: 0900-0101 or go to: www.slachtofferhulp.nl.
Recovery

You can recover
I am going to show you
I will be better than I was
I give myself more than I deserve
Because I deserve the world
And can cope with the world
I have learnt to fall
And then get back up again

Charlie Keyzer

As a child and teenager, Charlie experienced sexual violence several times. She describes her experiences and feelings in her poems. She has collated these poems in the booklet ‘A Message of Hope’.
Centrum **Seksueel Geweld**

www.centrumseksueelgeweld.nl

www.chatmetcsg.nl

0800 0188

*Available 24/7, free (and anonymous)*