



## sexual *assault*

*talk things through with wire*

Women and children of all ages and backgrounds experience sexual assault. It can happen to anyone, anywhere, at any time. And because sexual assault is usually perpetrated by people they know, many women and children don't report assaults due to fear, shame or the feeling that they will be blamed or not believed. Those who do, can have very negative experiences of the legal system and can also experience a lack of understanding from family and friends who are not sure how to best support them.

It's important to understand that sexual assault is not about sex, it's about power. Sexual assault is a crime that has far-reaching emotional, social, medical, political and legal consequences. It is a widespread problem that reflects how the basic human rights of women and children are undervalued in our society.

### What is sexual assault?

Sexual assault can take various forms, some of which are criminal offences. Sexual assault is any unwanted sexual behavior, whether from a man or a woman, that causes humiliation, pain, fear or intimidation. It includes rape, incest, child abuse, and unwanted or unwelcome kissing and touching. It also includes behaviour that does not involve actual touching. Forcing someone to watch pornography or masturbation, for example, constitutes sexual assault.

### What are the impacts of sexual assault?

Women or children who've been sexually assaulted, whether recently or in the past, will be affected in different ways. For example, depending on the community they live in, they could experience different levels of support and acceptance of their assault.

There is no 'correct' response to abuse. Experiencing or witnessing an assault, or supporting a friend or a member of the family who's been assaulted, can be emotionally traumatic and damaging.

While it's important to understand that everybody's response is different, it's quite common for women or children to experience immediate shock, fear and anger after an assault. Later, it is quite normal for them to feel guilty and depressed. Common responses include:

- Self blame
- Feeling numb, dirty or afraid
- Anger and outrage
- Thinking you're going mad
- Crying a lot
- Feeling alone and friendless
- Having disturbed sleep
- Experiencing anxiety and panic attacks
- Mistrust and fear of men
- Denial
- Having mixed emotions about the perpetrator
- Silence
- Confusion and a feeling of vagueness and unreality
- Thinking you should 'look after' everyone else



## If you've been assaulted

### Where can I go for assistance?

There are many groups and organisations throughout Victoria which provide help and support. Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASAs) are located throughout Victoria, and offer 24 hour crisis services, including counselling, support, advocacy and advice on medical and legal options. CASAs also offer support and information to adult survivors of childhood sexual assault and to people who are supporting someone who has been sexually assaulted. Help and support is given to children at the Gatehouse Centre.

### Do I have to report the assault to the police?

This is entirely up to you. If you are feeling unsure, it's a good idea to contact a CASA and discuss your options with one of their experienced and supportive workers. They are happy to listen to what you have to say, provide you with information, and will respect your needs and what you decide to do. If you have been the victim of a same sex assault you can ask to speak to a Victoria Police Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officer.

### Can I receive compensation if I've been sexually abused?

As the victim or as a person adversely affected by a violent crime or childhood sexual assault, you may be able to get financial assistance from the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal (VOCAT). This assistance can cover expenses such as counselling and medical expenses, loss of income and replacement clothing. You may even be entitled to special financial assistance for pain and suffering.

### You don't have to suffer in silence

You may feel that you will not be believed if you tell someone about your experience. You may have already had the experience of not being believed. As difficult as it may be, the first step to dealing with any form of sexual abuse is to confide in an experienced counsellor or someone you trust and who will really listen to you. It will also affirm that the abuse is not your fault and help establish support networks.

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## How can I best support someone who's been sexually abused?

Trying to support someone who has been sexually assaulted, whether recently or in the past, can be painful and confusing at times. It's often difficult to know how to act, and what to say. You may find it helpful to get professional advice. However these simple 'dos' and 'don'ts' may be useful as a guide.

### Do

- Believe her
- Listen to her
- Stay as calm and supportive as you can
- Be prepared to simply spend time with her
- Reassure her that you are happy to talk about what she wants to talk about
- Help with everyday tasks like cooking, cleaning, babysitting
- Provide reassurance by respecting her strength as a survivor
- Respect her decisions and allow her to make her own choices
- Understand that healing can take time, space and energy
- Respect her desire to be private, or silent
- Encourage her to seek counselling or other professional support

### Don't

- Blame her for what has happened
  - Try and take charge
  - Take angry outbursts personally
  - Ignore or try to smooth over the affects of rape
  - Sympathise or try to explain the actions of the person who committed the assault
  - Insist that she gives you details of the assault
  - Offer support you can't give
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## Commonly held myths

The many myths that surround sexual assault are actually very destructive. Such misconceptions help disguise how widespread sexual assault is and how traumatic the effects can be. By shifting the blame away from the perpetrator, these myths contribute greatly to women and children feeling isolated and bad about themselves. Here are just a few ...

- Sexual assault, especially rape, is an unusual occurrence – it can't happen to me
- Victims enjoy it
- Rapists aren't like normal men – they're sick and aren't responsible for their actions
- Men are naturally more aggressive than women and can't control their sexual desires
- Most rapes and sexual assaults are committed by strangers
- Only certain types of women and children are sexually assaulted, and only certain people commit sexual assault
- If you're married or living with someone, agree to go out with someone, or ask them to your place, you're obliged to have sex with them
- Women ask for it and bring it upon themselves by what they wear and how they behave
- Only bad children are sexually assaulted. Children can be seductive and lead men on
- Women often falsely accuse men of rape



## And the reality...

- One in three women will be sexually assaulted at some time in their lives
- Sexual assault is a humiliating, violent experience that no one wants or invites
- Rape is not about sex, it's about power
- Most perpetrators of sexual violence are ordinary men and are able to control themselves if they want to
- 80% of perpetrators are known to the victim
- Sexual assault occurs across all social classes, income levels, races and age groups
- Women have the right to refuse to have sex. This includes saying no to the person you go out with, have invited home, are married to, or are in a relationship with
- The person who commits the assault is to blame, not the person who's been assaulted
- 'False' reporting of rape represents only 2 - 7% of all reported assaults. These statistics also include statements withdrawn by victims/survivors due to fear of revenge and the impact of the legal system

## What are the steps to recovery?

Every woman's experience and reaction to abuse is different. And because of the powerful effects of emotions like shame, self blame, fear and hurt, the steps to recovery are not simple or straightforward. When women continue to blame themselves and take responsibility for the behaviour of others, the vicious cycle of hurt and fear continues.

Often the abuse and its impacts need to be understood before recovery can begin. For women and children who have been sexually abused, learning to respect and trust themselves and others is not easy, particularly where trusting relationships with family, partners or friends have been scarred by the abuse. All women will need support to deal with the abuse. This may include sharing the impacts of the abuse with a supportive listener, having counselling, or joining a support group.

## What is sexual harassment?

Behaviour of a sexual nature that is unwelcome, unasked for, and unreturned is illegal. It can be perpetrated by a man or a woman. It can be physical, verbal or written, and includes sexual requests or advances, comments about a person's sex life or appearance, suggestive behaviour like leering or ogling, displaying sexually offensive material, physical contact such as brushing up against someone, unwanted touching or fondling.

All people have the right to be free from sexual harassment. But as with all sexual abuse, women often feel isolated, and made to feel they're in the wrong if they assert this right. Taking action against sexual harassment can be difficult. So it helps to get support from people you trust to do this.

To find out more about the law and how to make a complaint you can contact the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission.

## Getting legal advice

For information about how to explore your legal options see the WIRE information sheet *Getting Legal Advice*.

## Where do I go for help?

- WIRE 1300 134 130
- Victorian Sexual Assault Crisis Line (after hours) 1800 806 292
- Centre Against Sexual Assault 1800 806 292 or 03 9635 3610 (24 hours)
- Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service (03) 8413 6800 or 1800 755 988 for country callers
- Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal [www.vocat.vic.gov.au](http://www.vocat.vic.gov.au) or call the Helpline 1800 819 817
- Victoria Police phone 000 for immediate attendance
- Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service of Victoria 03) 9898 3145
- The Gatehouse Centre (for children) 03) 9345 6391
- Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission [www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au](http://www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au) or call the Advice Line 03) 9281 7100
- Community health centres (Call WIRE for contact details in your area)

## Contact WIRE

For an up-to-date contact list of the services available:

**1300 134 130** ▶ For the cost of a local call.  
(Telephone Interpreter Service available)

**13 36 77** ▶ (TTY National Relay Service for hearing impaired women)

Drop in to the Women's Information Centre at:  
210 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne  
**EMAIL:** [inforequests@wire.org.au](mailto:inforequests@wire.org.au)  
**WEBSITE:** [www.wire.org.au](http://www.wire.org.au)

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The production of these sheets was made possible with a grant from the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation.

