

SHORT AND LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF INTIMATE PARTNER SEXUAL ASSAULT

©2008 Pandora's Project

By: Louise

Because of myths that state that only stranger rape is real rape, and that partner rape is less serious and harmful than other kinds of rape, you may think that there is something wrong with you for feeling distress about it. Be assured you're experiencing a normal response to abnormal behaviour. Studies reveal that partner rape carries longer and graver effects than stranger rape. The effect of rape by partners has been compared to the effect on people who have been hostages. (Finkelhor, D. and Yllo, K., *License to Rape: Sexual Abuse of Wives*, The Free Press, New York 1985; Russell, Diana E.H., *Rape in Marriage*, Indiana University Press, USA 1990). As well survivors of partner rape experience the highest degree of physical injury and are likely to have been raped multiple times (Myhill & Allen, *Rape and Sexual Assault of Women: Findings from the British Crime Survey* <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/r159.pdf>).

This is not an exhaustive list of effects - there are as many ways to feel about partner rape as there are survivors - but it is what is generally known about the effects of partner rape. If you're troubled by any of the effects below or others, please, do get support from a counsellor and/or other survivors who understand.

COMMON RESPONSES FOLLOWING PARTNER RAPE

Raquel Bergen (Wife Rape: Understanding the Response of Survivors and Service Providers, Sage Publications, California, 1996) found several ways that women respond to partner rape. They are ways of dealing with the shock or the fear of it happening again. Some of them are forms of denial, and they might involve:

- *Denial*: "That didn't happen"; "It's only rape if it's a stranger," "He wouldn't really hurt me."
- *Rationalizing*: 'it was just a one-off aberration and won't happen again' (especially if the man isn't habitually violent). Self-blame is also a form of rationalization, eg: "I

should be a better wife and then it wouldn't happen," or "it was my fault because I led him on".

- *Minimizing*: "It's not that bad really"; "At least he didn't beat me up."
- *Disassociation*: "I refuse to think about this"; "I have no feeling about it".
- *Compartmentalizing*: Some women find that they try hard to focus on the good parts of the relationship, or that they preserve an image of the partners as "good" even if it means making themselves the bad one.
- Women who are unable to leave might employ strategies to avoid being raped again; some become fearful and placating, trying to stay out of a partner's way if they sense danger. They may submit to certain acts in order to avoid further physical degradation or injury (Wife Rape: Understanding the Response of Survivors and Service Providers, Sage Publications, California, 1996).

A strategy I employed was what I call 'normalizing' -I would do repetitious housework because it was something boringly normal that restored my sanity. Some women might also employ self-soothing strategies like showers, a cigarette, or getting lost in a television program. Self numbing through drugs and alcohol can also happen and this can present a whole other set of problems.

SHORT- AND LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF PARTNER RAPE

Research has found the following affects in marital rape survivors:

- Betrayal and shock that somebody they loved or felt safe with could hurt them that way.
- Humiliation and a sense of being "dirty" - they felt that if somebody who professed love could do that to them, they must be bad, or have deserved it somehow.
- Anger and Guilt: women felt that if they had been better partners or at other aspects of the relationship, it would not have happened.
- Inability to trust men - Hardly surprising when rape comes from somebody who's supposed to love you!
- Inability to feel comfortable with sex or intimacy

- Fear- victims of rape by their partners had a tendency to fear being assaulted again for a long time. This is hardly surprising either; if you can be raped by somebody who says he loves you, where is it safe?

(Source: Finkelhor, D and Yllo, K, *License to Rape: Sexual Abuse of Wives*, The Free Press, New York 1985)

PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF PARTNER RAPE

Researchers have found the following physical effects in women raped by their partners:

- Nausea and vomiting (This is also something I have experienced with the unfolding of memory and feeling over the years.)
- Injuries - Women subjected to chronic or very violent rape might experience damage to their genitals and rectum
- Pregnancy - Men may rape partners with the intent of impregnating them, to get them to stay in the relationship, or to return to it (Pregnancy may also, of course, be incidental to the rape.
- Vaginismus & Dyspareunia - Ongoing problems may be Vaginismus, a condition where the vaginal muscles tighten so as to make penile penetration impossible or extremely painful, or Dyspareunia, which is painful sexual intercourse..

(Sources: Finkelhor, D and Yllo, K, *License to Rape: Sexual Abuse of Wives*, The Free Press, New York 1985; Bergen, R. *Wife Rape: Understanding the Response of Survivors and Service Providers*, Sage Publications, California, (1996).

EFFECTS ON TEENAGE SURVIVORS

K J Wilson writes about the effects of rape on teenage survivors being abused by boyfriends (When Violence Begins at Home: A Comprehensive Guide to Understanding and Ending Domestic Abuse, Hunter House Inc. Publishers, California, 1997):

- A sense of loss of personal integrity
- Sense of Loss of Control
- Damage to Emerging Sexual Identity

- Personality changes
- Lowered School performance
- Withdrawal from school or social activities.
- Flagrant promiscuous behaviour
- Drug and Alcohol abuse
- Eating Disorders
- Risk-taking and other self-destructive behaviour
- Alienation - a sense that nobody can understand.

People often assume that it's easy for teenage girls to just dump bad boyfriends - they underestimate the bonding that happens. Teenage girls are also subject to the dynamics of abuse that undermine their ability to leave. They may believe that forced or coercive sex is a normal part of a relationship, or that they deserve it. If you are a teenage girl reading this, it's really essential that you know there is a way out. Please, take one trusted adult into your confidence. If there's nobody you believe you can trust, why don't you start with a hotline? Teenage survivors are also most welcome here at Pandora's Aquarium. Trust me, this is wrong - you are a beautiful girl of worth and you don't deserve it.

PTSD AND RAPE TRAUMA SYNDROME

Additionally, you may have experienced a range of symptoms like flashbacks, nightmares that replicate aspects of the rape, always feeling guarded, panic attacks and depression. These are features of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Rape Trauma Syndrome is similar to PTSD but has some rape-specific symptoms. The symptoms can feel pretty terrible, but are manageable, and tend to alleviate as the trauma is processed. As a survivor of partner rape, you have been traumatized, and you deserve help. If you experience these symptoms, please speak to a counsellor. [Here](#) are some good links to information about PTSD and Rape Trauma Syndrome.

OTHER ABUSES IN YOUR LIFE?

If you have experienced earlier rape or child sexual abuse, the trauma caused by partner rape might be worsened, because earlier traumas tend to piggyback themselves on fresh ones. Don't be alarmed if, for example, childhood flashbacks are mixed in with later ones.

Be very gentle with yourself and get plenty of support. For support from other survivors of multiple instances of abuse, you're welcome to join and post in our community here at Pandy's.

This article is copyrighted and unauthorized reproduction is prohibited. If you wish to use this article online or in print, please contact admin@pandys.org to request permission. Visit www.PandorasProject.org for more information and articles.

