

Health, Recovery & the impact of Social Support after Sexual Assault

A Norwegian Perspective

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Topic

- What are the potential health consequences of sexual assault?
- What role does social support play in the healing process?
- How to recover from the trauma of sexual assault?

Sexual assault in Norway

- It is estimated that 9,4% of women and 1,1% of men are victims of rape, and 1 in 3 women and 1 in 10 men will experience some form of sexual abuse during their lifetime.
- Nearly half of the women (49%) who report being raped experienced the assault before the age of 18.
- Only 11% of rape victims seek medical help immediately after the assault.
- Nearly one third (29%) never tell anyone about the assault.

Thoresen & Hjemdal (2014)

Mental health consequences

- Victims of violence and rape report a poorer state of mental health compared to non-victims.
- There is a clear link between the amount of violence categories victims were exposed to and level of mental health problems.
- Victims report higher levels of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and post traumatic stress reactions .

Thoresen & Hjemdal (2014)

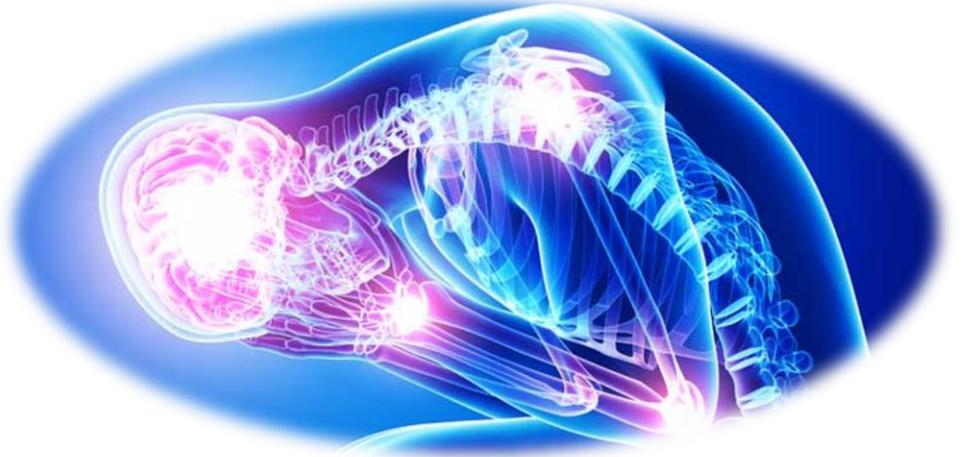
Studies show

Approximately half of rape victims meet the criteria for post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression six months after the assault

Tiihonen, 2015

Physical health problems

- Physical injuries
- Headache
- Nausea
- Back and neck pains
- Pelvic pains
- Digestion problems
- Sexually transmittable diseases



*Stein et.al. 2004;
Garcia-Moreno et.al.
2013*

Potential long term consequences

- Depression and anxiety
- PTSD
- Substance abuse
- Self harm
- Suicidal thoughts
- Eating disorders
- Drop out of school or absence from work
- Isolation and trust issues
- Violent or aggressive behavior
- Increased risk of revictimization



*Dyregov, 2008; Resnick et.al.
2012*

Prior research on health consequences

- Studies following victims over time have had a low response rate and high drop-out
- Although we know much about potential health consequences, we still know little about the occurrence of conditions other than PTSD.
- Little knowledge about whether help services actually meet the victims needs

Campbell, Sprauge & Sullivan (2011)

Friends & Family



Therapy



Local doctor

Help services and systems in Norway

HELP



Sexual Assault Center
(ER/Hospital)



Crisis Center



Support Center for Rape Victims



Police



Lawyer



Dismissal



Court



Restorative Justice



State Compensation

Social support

- Social support is one of the key factors in retrieving good health after sexual assault (*Brewin, Andrews og Valentine, 2000*)
- Victims receive mixed reactions from their social network (*Ullmann et.al.2010*)
- Lack of support can lead to isolation (*Aakvaag og Strøm, 2019*)
- Lack of support can create barriers to seeking professional help or reporting to police (*Aakvaag og Strøm, 2019; Østby og Stefansen, 2017*)
- Receiving negative reactions can be more harmful than not receiving any support at all (*Campbell, Ahrens, Sefl, Wasco og Barnes, 2001*)

In a recent study

Rape victims said:

- 1) They did not receive sufficient information about how and where to get help
- 2) That professional caregivers lacked knowledge about rape trauma reactions and effective therapeutic interventions
- 3) That their social network (friends and family) did not get any advice on how to support the victim

Arntzen (2019)

Recovery

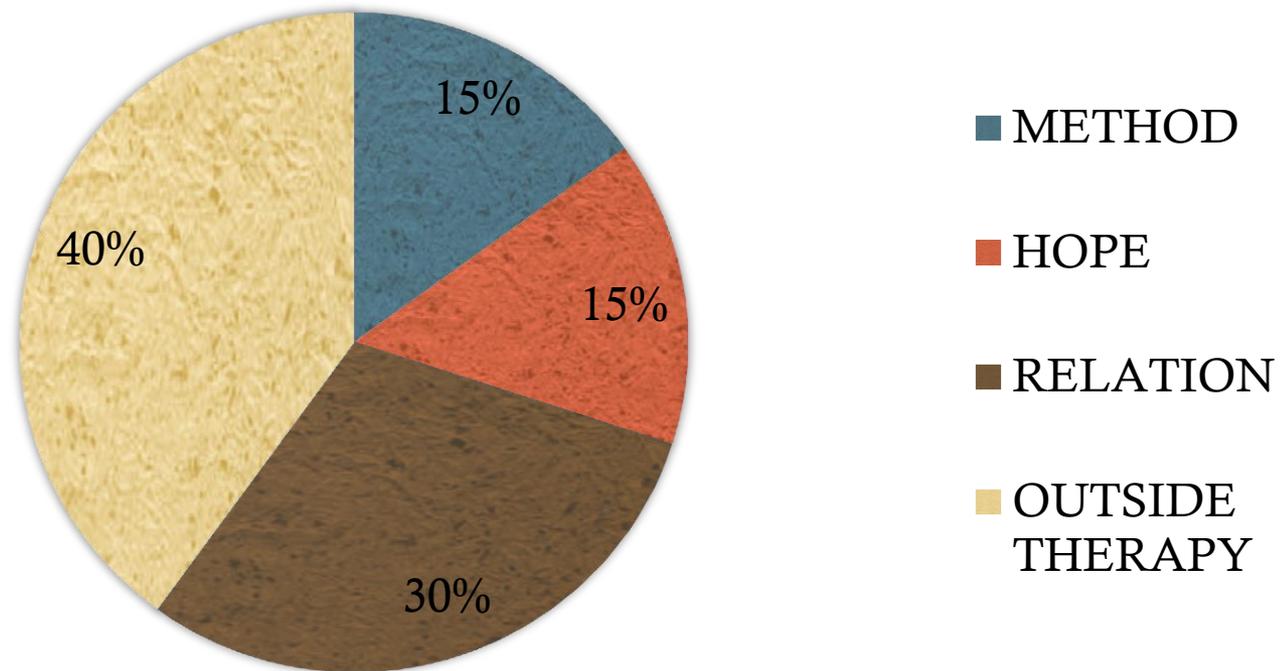


Therapeutic interventions

- Previous studies indicate that cognitive behavioral interventions, exposure interventions and eye movement desensitization (EMDR) are effective at improving mental health
- BUT statistical tests of comparative effectiveness did not demonstrate that one intervention was significantly more effective than another.
- "All treatment is better than no treatment"?
- More research is needed

Parcesepe et.al. 2015

Improvement? Factors in therapy



Lambert, 1992

How can helpers increase health prognosis?

- Create safe environments to increase chances that victims expose their experiences
- Let them know we believe and support them
- Educate ourselves on common reactions and latest research on therapeutic interventions
- Develop institutions so that they meet victims needs for help and support
- Increase public knowledge about help services
- Offer support and advice to the victims social network

Thank you for listening!

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