

Understanding and Recovering From Verbal and Physical Assault

Union of Saints

When someone verbally or physically assaults us, we may be left in a state of shock, confusion, fear, anger, or disbelief. Even after the incident has ended, we may find ourselves mentally returning to the place we occupied before the assault, trying to understand what happened and how our lives, relationships, or sense of security have changed. This is a human response to a distressing experience, and the time required to understand and cope with what happened varies from person to person.

How Long Does It Take to Recover From an Assault?

There is no single average time for fully understanding and emotionally recovering from an assault. Some people begin feeling better within days, while others require weeks, months, or longer to regain their sense of safety and confidence. The recovery period depends on the severity of the incident, whether the threat continues, the person's previous experiences, the support available to them, and the impact on their daily life.

Understanding what happened and emotionally recovering from what happened are two different processes. A person may immediately recognize that they were assaulted while continuing to struggle with fear, anger, disbelief, or the loss of trust. Emotional recovery often involves gradually accepting the reality of the experience and learning how to move forward without allowing the incident to continually overwhelm everyday life.

Common Recovery Timeframes

First hours to three days: A person may experience shock, disbelief, numbness, fear, anger, confusion, or repeated thoughts about the incident. They may struggle to understand why the assault occurred or why someone treated them that way.

First one to four weeks: The person may begin processing the experience, reviewing what happened, and attempting to return to ordinary routines. Emotional reactions may fluctuate, with periods of relative calm followed by renewed distress.

One to three months: Some people experience substantial improvements in emotional stability, confidence, and their ability to discuss or reflect on the event. Others may continue to experience distress, intrusive memories, anxiety, or difficulty trusting people.

Three to six months or longer: Some people continue processing the experience, particularly after serious physical violence, repeated abuse, ongoing threats, or a significant betrayal of trust. A longer recovery period does not mean that someone is failing to cope.

These timeframes are illustrative rather than established averages that apply to everyone. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs explains that many people begin feeling better within a few weeks after a traumatic event, although some experience symptoms for months or longer. When distress persists beyond a month and disrupts daily life, a professional assessment may be appropriate.

The Difference Between Verbal and Physical Assault

Verbal assault can involve insults, humiliation, intimidation, or threats. These experiences may leave someone replaying conversations, questioning their judgment, feeling angry, or anticipating another confrontation. The emotional impact depends on the severity of the incident, the circumstances, whether the behavior is repeated, and whether the person feels threatened.

Physical assault can involve additional concerns, including physical pain, fear for personal safety, heightened alertness, and distress when reminded of the incident. Serious or life threatening violence may produce more persistent trauma symptoms. When verbal or physical assaults are repeated, recovery can become more difficult because the person may continue to experience an ongoing threat.

Although verbal and physical assaults can have different consequences, both can affect a person's sense of security, trust, and ability to feel comfortable in their surroundings.

Why Do We Keep Returning to the Place We Were Before the Assault?

After a distressing experience, people sometimes attempt to restore their former sense of normality. They may continue behaving as though everything is the same, return to familiar routines, or mentally revisit the circumstances that existed before the incident. This can be part of an attempt to reconcile what they believed about a person or situation with what they have now experienced.

The mind may repeatedly review the event in search of an explanation. A person may wonder whether they misunderstood something, whether they could have prevented the incident, or how someone they trusted could have behaved in such a manner. These thoughts can occur even when the person understands that the assault was wrong.

Wanting life to return to normal is understandable. However, recovery sometimes requires accepting that our understanding of a person, relationship, or environment has changed. We can preserve the meaningful parts of our former lives while establishing new boundaries and making decisions that reflect what we have learned.

How to Work Through the Experience

- 1. Establish safety.** If the person who committed the assault continues to present a threat, prioritize physical safety, distance, and appropriate support. It is difficult to feel secure while a threat remains active.
- 2. Separate facts from unanswered questions.** Write down what happened, what you remember, what remains uncertain, and what you need to address. This can help distinguish observable facts from assumptions and reduce the pressure to find an immediate explanation for everything.
- 3. Restore ordinary routines.** Regular meals, consistent sleep, manageable daily tasks, gentle physical activity, and time in a peaceful environment can help rebuild stability. Grounding techniques, such as noticing your surroundings and feeling your feet on the floor, may help when distress increases.
- 4. Seek trustworthy support.** Speaking with someone who listens without judgment can help a person process the experience. A trauma informed counselor or other qualified professional may be helpful when distress continues to interfere with daily life.
- 5. Allow your understanding to develop.** You do not have to resolve every question immediately. You can acknowledge what happened, recognize its impact, and make decisions as your understanding becomes clearer.
- 6. Recognize progress without demanding perfection.** Recovery may include difficult days, reminders, or renewed feelings of anger and sadness. These experiences do not automatically mean that progress has been lost.

What Does Full Recovery Mean?

Fully coping with an assault does not necessarily mean forgetting the incident or never feeling upset about it again. It means being increasingly able to recognize what happened, understand its impact, regain a sense of safety, and make decisions without the experience continually overwhelming you.

One person may understand the assault within a day but need months to regain confidence. Another person may initially feel calm and experience emotional distress later. Recovery is individual, and neither response alone determines how well someone is coping.

The most useful measure is progress in everyday functioning rather than the amount of time that has passed. If symptoms persist, become more severe, or interfere with sleep, relationships, work, or personal safety, professional support is appropriate. Anyone experiencing immediate danger should seek emergency assistance.

Conclusion

Recovering from verbal or physical assault involves more than recognizing that an incident occurred. It may require time to process the experience, understand its consequences, restore a sense of safety, and adjust expectations about people or circumstances. There is no universal deadline for this process, and individuals should not be pressured to recover according to someone else's timetable.

The goal is to regain personal stability, confidence, and the ability to direct one's life. We can acknowledge the harm, learn from the experience, establish appropriate boundaries, and move forward without allowing the assault to define our future.

Reference: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for PTSD, information on traumatic stress reactions and recovery:

https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/what/trauma_reactions.asp