Sexual assault survivor needs help with intimate relationships [1]

Alice,

I was raped by my best friend a few years ago. I was a virgin then, and still, years later, I can't seem to "go all the way" with anyone. How can I stop freaking out and messing up relationships?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Being too hard on yourself for “messing up relationships” can inhibit your ability to give yourself the time you need to heal — traumatic experiences, such as rape, often have long-term emotional impacts. Further, being in an emotionally or sexually intimate relationship following a traumatic event can be difficult. It’s not uncommon for survivors to know the perpetrator, and experiencing violence perpetrated by your best friend can make this experience even more challenging. The loss of trust and betrayal that often accompanies these events can also make it difficult to be intimate with others. If you feel ready, it might be helpful to talk with a mental health professional to develop some strategies to help your healing process. That way, you'll be able to take steps towards being intimate with your future partner(s) when it’s right for you.

It's unclear what you mean by "freaking out" and "messing up," but successful relationships require the cooperation of both partners, so try not to be too hard on yourself about past relationships. Healthy sexual relationships rely on clear and mutual communication and respect. In terms of messing up relationships, keep in mind that one partner requiring sex from the other isn’t part of a healthy relationship. They’re based on each partner feeling comfortable with how the relationship is progressing. Some days your comfort level may be at holding hands; some days you may be comfortable with more. And still, other days, you may not want any physical contact at all. Whatever relationship you’re in, it’s key that your partner respects these choices and boundaries. Feeling pressure from your partner may be a sign of an unhealthy relationship.

If you find that you’re putting undue pressure on yourself to move faster, try to be patient and kind to yourself. Although it may feel like a challenge, taking steps to acknowledge what you do or don't feel ready for may help you quell that inner critic. Even if you really care about the
person, want to be intimate with them, feel like you “should” be ready, you may not be yet. And that is completely okay. Everybody’s experience after sexual assault looks different, and there is no one typical timeline or period after sexual assault at which people are ready to become intimate with others. It may be helpful to be as open and honest as you feel comfortable sharing with any future partners about your concerns and readiness.

Although you've mentioned it's been a few years, the path towards healing may take a while and you may find that you need more time before you’re ready to become intimate with another person. Sex and rape aren't the same, but it can take some time for the body and mind to process how each feel and how these experiences can differ. That being said, sexual pleasure in the future is possible; it may just take some patience to work through your past experiences. With that in mind, it may be beneficial to further process your past trauma with a mental health professional (if you haven't or aren't already). Doing so may help you figure out in what ways it and other factors may be impacting the intimacy in your relationships. They may be able to help you feel more comfortable and prepared to take the next step (whatever it may be for you) when you’re ready. If you're not ready to process your experience with a mental health professional or would like to consider other options for support or assistance, there are also a number of organizations that can provide support and resources:

- National Domestic Violence Hotline [2]
- Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) [3]
- Safe Horizon [4]
- 1in6[5]

No matter how you choose to move forward, it's key to know that you have the right to be in a relationship with someone who will respect your boundaries and healing process. You also have the right to have the space and time to process the rape you've experienced and move towards the type of intimacy you wish to have with someone in the future, be it physical, emotional, or otherwise on your own terms, according to the timeline that's right for you.

Alice!
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Resources

Sexual Violence Response & Rape Crisis/Anti-Violence Support Center [12]
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [13]
Mental Health Services (CUIMC) [14]
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