

SARSAS

*Listen.
Believe.
Support.*

SELF-HELP GUIDE

for men and boys

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Self-help guide

This self-help guide is for men and boys who are victim-survivors of rape, sexual assault or sexual abuse and want to understand and process their own personal reactions to their experience.

It is for all men, including trans men.

We know that sexual violence can affect all parts of our lives and the impacts can be long lasting. It can get better and there are things that can help.

You don't have to do it alone.

It's ok to ask for and accept help from other people. Men who have experienced sexual abuse sometimes struggle to prioritise themselves.

Throughout this guide, we want to remind you that you deserve to take care of yourself and to live a fulfilling life. Healing isn't an overnight thing so go easy on yourself, be patient and use this guide and other tools you find useful.

As you read the guide it's possible that certain memories or feelings could come up for you and that might feel overwhelming. If you need to pause and take some time to look after yourself, that is ok. You can come back to it at another time when it feels right for you.



Everyone's experience is different. Working out which parts of this guide work for you is a positive move towards understanding yourself and your reactions.

In each section of this guide our trauma-informed experts have explained some common reactions, followed by some self-help suggestions.



The ways of coping, which you find yourself, are always the best ones. Those which appeal the most are the ones most likely to work.

A SARSAS counsellor

Throughout this guide, we use the term 'victim- survivors'. Not everyone will identify with this term. Some people may prefer to use the word 'victim' to reflect that a serious crime has been committed against them or 'survivor' to express that they have survived, and are surviving, trauma. Whatever words you choose are the right ones for you.

Introduction

Feeling well again is possible after sexual violence and abuse. The fact that you have picked this guide up is a big step and is a sign you're making progress.

Many reactions associated with rape and sexual abuse are natural safety mechanisms. Your body and mind are reacting to a dangerous situation:

- Fear and anger are protective feelings
- Mistrust and forgetfulness are protective thoughts
- Isolation and using alcohol and drugs are examples of some protective behaviours.

These are all ways of coping long after the immediate danger has passed. This guide will encourage you to look at these reactions and think about which have been helpful in the past and what might be helpful for your healing now.

Remember: what you are feeling is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.

Remind yourself

It was never my fault

**Whatever my reactions, they
are normal**

**Many people don't tell anybody
for many years**

**I am not alone and there is
support available**

What kind of reactions do people have to trauma?

What is Trauma?

When a person has experienced a shocking, unexpected, or traumatic event they are likely to develop deep emotional and physical shock or stress. These reactions are normal and will be unique, personal and individual. Some types of traumatic experiences involve:

- Experiencing a severe injury to yourself or witnessing a severe injury to or the death of someone else
- Facing imminent threats of serious injury or death to yourself or others
- Experiencing a physical violation
- Exposure to trauma can occur repeatedly over long periods of time.

Here are some typical reactions that people can experience after a trauma:

Physical

- Tension in the muscles (especially neck, shoulders or hands)
- Tiredness and exhaustion
- Insomnia
- Hyperactivity
- Diarrhoea
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)
- Dry mouth or a problem with swallowing
- Sweating
- Headaches or migraines
- Dizzy spells
- Unsteady breathing or hyperventilation
- Tightness in the chest
- Increased or rapid heartbeat
- Heartburn, indigestion or acid reflux
- Eczema or other dermatological complaints
- Other physical pains.

Emotional

- Feelings of hopelessness
- Guilt
- Shame
- Absent-mindedness
- Inability to concentrate
- Depression
- Insecurity
- Irritability
- Short-temperedness
- Anxiety
- Mood swings
- Panic attacks
- Nightmares
- Poor memory
- Loss of self-confidence
- Feeling jumpy/on edge
- Apathy (lack of interest).

Behavioural

- Increased smoking, drinking, and/or drug use
- Over working, or not turning up to work
- Personal neglect
- Nail biting
- Cutting or other deliberate self-harm
- Impulsiveness
- Twitches, tapping fingers
- Non-stop talking or unable to talk
- Changes in eating patterns
- Hypersexuality or lack of interest in intimacy.

Why do people have these reactions?

Your brain is both rational and instinctive. When you are exposed to danger or traumatic events, instinct takes over. It does what it needs to do to survive.

Your senses are constantly sending signals to a part of your brain called the amygdala. The amygdala searches through these signals for any threats. If it finds a threat, it tells your hypothalamus (the part of your brain that controls bodily functions) to release defence hormones. This will trigger one or more instinctive reactions:

Fight, Flight, Freeze, (be-)Friend and Flop

Your brain will react in the way that is most likely to lead to survival and the least harm. It doesn't think about how you will feel after. During rape or abuse, the first two options (Fight or Flight) often aren't possible as they may lead to further physical or mental harm. The last three options are very common as they expose the victim-survivor to the least immediate danger.

These responses have evolved over thousands of years. Think about how animals pretend they are dead to avoid predators (Flop) or how you may stand still when you see a car coming towards you before you think to get out the way (Freeze). Quickly prioritising the needs of others (be-Friend) is an attempt to feel a sense of safety and avoid conflict.

This all happens in a split-second. The instinct for immediate survival overrides longer-term rational thought. This is why the way that you reacted might not make sense to you later.

If there is a safe outcome (survival), the brain learns to use that reaction again. Sometimes, this response can be used repeatedly in less and less risky situations. This can lead to a heightened state of awareness of risk, hypervigilance, or to a feeling of numbness.

If only I
hadn't...

Nobody
understands

They
should have
protected
me

I cannot
talk
about it

I have no
control

I'm not
coping...

Thoughts



Your mind's reactions

It can be very hard to stop thinking about what happened. Trying to understand it can be confusing and can lead you to think things about yourself that aren't true.

Blaming yourself.

- I should have...
- I should not have...
- I deserved it because...

The person who assaulted you made the choices. You are not to blame. Your reactions were a normal response in an abnormal situation, and you survived.

Helplessness.

- I cannot go on...
- I'm not coping...

By being here today you are coping.

Concentration difficulties caused by:

- Sleeplessness
- Nightmares
- Dissociation (feeling disconnected from yourself and the world around you)
- Confusion
- Anger

These are normal reactions when your mind is processing trauma. Things will get easier and more manageable.

Difficulty saying what happened

- I cannot say what happened to me aloud
- Who's going to believe me?

It's normal to find talking about rape, sexual assault, or abuse difficult. Take your time. Say it in your own words and in your own way. It's never too late to talk to someone.

Angry thoughts

- Why did they choose me as a target?
- No one can be trusted
- I want revenge

Anger is to be expected after someone betrays your trust or sense of safety. It is healthy but try to consider who is really to blame.

Fearful thoughts

- Fear of what people will say or think
- Fear that the abuser may target you again
- Fear of being disbelieved or ridiculed
- Repetitive, panicky thoughts

Abusers instil a fear of speaking up in their target. You are safe now and there are people who will believe and support you if you decide you want to talk.

Self-loathing

- This doesn't happen to men
- I'm dirty and disgusting
- People will stop loving me and no one will love me again

Unfortunately, people from all walks of life are experience rape and sexual assault. This includes men and boys. You are much more than what someone did to you. You have had to cope with something traumatic and you are still you. You deserve support and care.

Feeling different

- Nobody understands
- Things will never be the same and my life is ruined

Everybody is different. Everyone responds in a way that is individual to them. Healing is possible. You are not alone.

Suicidal thoughts

If you're having thoughts about wanting to end your life, it's important to speak to someone like a GP, mental health or support worker, or you can call a 24/7 Helpline like Samaritans to talk about how to keep yourself safe.

Flashbacks

A flashback is a memory suddenly, unexpectedly, and vividly revisited. You feel as though the event is happening all over again. You can see, hear, feel and smell the same things.

It is also an unprocessed memory.

Memory

The impact of trauma on your memory can be distressing. The hormones released during the instinctive responses to trauma can also affect the part of your brain that is responsible for memory. It can 'blow the fuse' and stop you from being able to access memories or associate them with a time or a place.

The parts of the brain which are most active during a traumatic experience will decide how the incident is stored as a memory and how it is accessed later. Rape or sexual abuse are highly traumatic experiences. The memories can be:

- **Intrusive** - a memory of the incident that you recall without wanting to. The memory keeps appearing because the brain is dealing with something it hasn't processed. Your brain is trying to make sense of it
- **Fragmented** - bits and pieces are remembered, and some may be missing
- **Sensory** - the pictures, sounds, smells, and feelings during a flashback are so clear the event is remembered by all, or a combination of, your senses
- **Non-sequential** - you can't remember the order in which things happened
- **Non-verbal** - it is difficult to put into words
- **Non-contextual** - the main moments are remembered but it's harder to remember where or when
- **Buried** - it may not be remembered until years later. It may be revealed in a dreamlike quality, in snapshots or it may be ultra-vivid, as in flashbacks. This may make it difficult to accept.

SARSAS Trauma and Self-Care course

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sarsas.teachable.com/p/trauma-recovery

Some things that can help

- **Bring your thoughts outside of yourself.** Writing thoughts down shifts them from the inside. Now you can explore them and think about how helpful they are or otherwise
- **Look at triggers.** Can you figure out what, when, where and who can set off a flashback or anxious thought? A trigger record will help you to manage or avoid trigger-situations. It will also help you to prepare for them
- **Think about what's important to you.** Make a list of all the things you hold valuable to you and that keep you going through the day. It might include:
 - **inner resources** (e.g. good memories and experiences, previous successes, positive characteristics and strengths, spiritual/religious beliefs)
 - **outer resources** (e.g. people who love(d) and believe(d) in you, nature, animals, objects, a safe place, activities, aspirations)
 - **list your skills, expertise or talents**
- **Get active.** Go for a walk or a run
- **Gather evidence of times you achieved something positive.** Think of a time you supported someone
- **Positive things diary.** Note down three positive things that have happened each day before you go to bed, e.g. I visited my favourite place, I finally did that tidying up, I got through a day without a flashback. Look back through this diary when you are feeling sad, down or can't sleep



“

The art of living...is neither careless drifting nor fearful clinging to the past. It consists of being sensitive to each moment, in having the mind open and wholly receptive.

Alan W Watts (20th century British writer)

- **Find or make your mantra.** A mantra is a personal power statement of hope and possibility. Tell it to yourself daily. Use it to inspire or encourage yourself or to quiet negative thoughts. Here are some examples:
 - The Metta prayer: ‘May all beings be peaceful. May all beings be happy. May all beings be safe. May all beings awaken to the light of their true nature. May all beings be free.’
 - ‘I can do this.’
 - ‘I matter’
 - ‘(God) grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.’
- **My ‘best person’.** Is there a person that you know (or used to know) who supports or always supported and believed you? Keep a photograph or any symbol of this person with you. Refer to it (touch, look at) when you need them
- **My ‘best person’ response.** Think about what your ‘best person’ would say to you if you are judging or blaming yourself
- **What would I say?** If someone close to you said the same thing as you were thinking, what would you say to support them?
- **Don’t blame yourself.** If you find yourself thinking ‘Why didn’t I...,’ ‘It was my fault,’ ‘I should have...,’ ask yourself:
 - What is the evidence?
 - If someone told me the same story, who would I blame?
 - Are there other ways to think about what happened?
 - What are the positives and negatives of this way of thinking?

- What logical errors am I making? e.g. 'If I had stayed at home, this wouldn't have happened' – your actions didn't cause this
- What would my 'best person' say to tell me that it wasn't my fault?
- **Relaxation.** Men who have had traumatic experiences, including sexual abuse, can find relaxation difficult. In the past, staying alert and constantly checking for danger might have been necessary to keep safe and reduce harm.

The first challenge can be to consciously notice when you are tense - your body and mind might have got into the habit of being on guard to the extent that you hardly notice it.

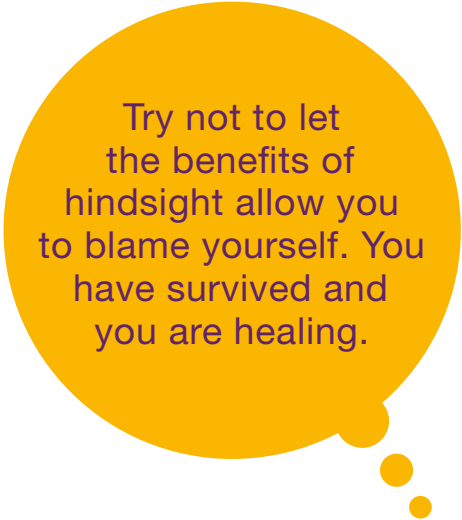
It can initially feel unsafe to relax or drop your guard, and takes practice to accept that there might be some places and times where you are safe from harm. There are significant health benefits in learning to stop being constantly tense and alert to potential danger.

- **Distractions.** Make a list of positive distractions.
 - Contact a friend
 - Be out in nature
 - Visit a place that makes you feel safer or at ease (such as a friend's house, a park or beauty spot, a museum/gallery, a cafe)
 - Watch a favourite film or TV programme
 - Do something creative
 - Play your favourite uplifting music and dance or sing along to it
 - Treat yourself to some relaxing time, perhaps a hot drink, a favourite book or boxset

- Spend time with a pet
- Do some volunteering (some find it comforting to help people, animals, or the environment during their own healing process). Look up the charities you can contact.
- **Give yourself a calming sleep routine.** Overthinking can become a challenge when you are 'inactive'. Keeping a nightlight on and listening to the radio or calming music or nature sounds may help.

Electric screens do not help with relaxation. Try not to look at your smartphone, tablet or computer for at least 45 minutes before you go to bed. The blue light that some devices emit prevents the natural process of sleepiness from happening.

Likewise, alcohol will stimulate instead of relaxing you due to its sugar levels. Finally, as you close your eyes, slow your breathing - count in for 4 and out for 7.'



Try not to let the benefits of hindsight allow you to blame yourself. You have survived and you are healing.



Feelings

Your emotional reactions

When dealing with trauma, you can feel:

- A huge mass of feelings that are difficult to separate, or
- A nothingness.

Victims-survivors sometimes feel overwhelmed by many different feelings. You might feel them as a constriction in your throat or a sense of difficulty swallowing. You may have an upset stomach or feel a knottiness or cramping. You may have diarrhoea or constipation. You may experience a range of feelings that are hard to describe.

When you look at this huge block of feelings, you will notice some individual ones. Often it is helpful to explore these feelings, identify each one and investigate what the thought behind it is.

Begin to look at your feelings individually and explore them:

Anger is not the enemy. Anger can show you that what is important to you is under threat. Anger protects you from future betrayal. It warns you that you must do something about the reason behind it. The **WAY** a person chooses to deal with anger can sometimes be a problem, but not the feeling itself.

Shame is one of the most destructive emotions. People usually feel shame because they feel they are not good enough or that something is wrong with them. Sadly, shame can make you fear talking to people who could be supportive, and who could help you see that you do not deserve to feel ashamed.

Loneliness. Many victim-survivors feel they are unable to trust anyone. You might be afraid of sharing with others and you might feel as though you are alone and that no-one could understand how you feel or what you went through.

Emptiness. The feelings are sometimes so overwhelming that, in order to cope, a victim-survivor buries them all. These are called dissociated emotions.

Self-blame. You may worry that other people will blame you, or you may have been told it was your fault. This is not true. Sexual abuse is always the fault of the abuser.

There are people who understand these feelings and want to support you.

Some ways of dealing with emotional reactions

Set yourself small and manageable targets:

- Manage the levels of your feelings by grounding them with an object
- Express your feelings in a safe environment
- Identify and name each one of your feelings
- Try to let them out in the open, write, draw or talk about them
- Accept that your feelings are allowed and are normal.
- Sort them as belonging to either the past or to the present
- Look at the thought that is behind each feeling.

Listen in and out. Close your eyes and identify the furthest sound you can hear. After 30 seconds bring your listening in and try to identify the closest sound you can hear. This may include sounds from your own body like your breathing or your heartbeat. Repeat for as long as you need to.

Take your feelings outside yourself. You can draw a map of your feelings with a colour representing each feeling. Think about the size of your feeling, and give it a similar amount of room on paper. Think about the thoughts behind the biggest feelings and where they've come from.

Use alone time to learn or practice a skill or hobby. If you don't feel ready or aren't always in the right mood to be around others, filling your time with hobbies can help ease feelings of loneliness. For example, learning a language, a craft or a musical skill are hobbies that can be practiced alone. YouTube videos can be good for this. What would you like to do but currently cannot?

Use power-quotes. Collect power-quotations. Display them on the fridge or anywhere you'll see them regularly. Create a poster. Read them aloud. Think about them. Believe them.

Try specialist support. This can be a good way of helping to express and process feelings. Learning to share your feelings and experiences with a trained professional or non-judgmental trusted person can help you to feel understood and supported, and to accept and value yourself.

Grounding

How does it work?

Grounding is a way for us to help calm ourselves and let our mind and body know that we are not in danger. Here are a few key things to remember:

- Grounding can be done anywhere, any place or any time and no one needs to know you are doing it
- Use grounding when you feel a strong emotion
- Keep your eyes open to stay in touch with the present
- Let go of negative feelings...you want to distract away from this
- Focus on the here and now, not the past or future
- Grounding is more than just a relaxation strategy, it is used to distract and help reduce extreme negative feelings.

How do I do it?

It's important to find ways that make sense to you. There are some examples of grounding techniques below that are around thinking and some are around touch. Try different ways to see what feels right to you.

Mental grounding

- Have a good look around and describe your environment in detail, e.g. 'I am on a train, I can see trees and a river...'
- Mental games, e.g. go through the alphabet thinking of different things such as types of dogs, different cities
- Describe an everyday activity in detail, such as how to make a specific recipe



- Imagery, for example imagining a stop sign in your head, gliding on skates away from the pain, changing the 'TV channel' in your head to a better 'show' or imagining a wall as a buffer between you and the pain
- Safety statements, thinking 'I am safe now, I am in the present not the past, I am in this location and the date is...'

Physical grounding

- Run cool water over your hands
- Focus on your breathing, notice each breath in and each breath out, slow it down and repeat the word 'safe' on each breath in
- Grab tightly onto your chair as hard as you can
- Touch different objects, your pen, your keys
- Dig your heels into the floor, remind yourself that you are connected to the ground.

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Soothing grounding

- Say kind statements to yourself, e.g. you will get through this
- Picture people you care about, look at photos of them
- Think of a safe place, it could be real or imagined, for example the beach, mountains
- Say coping statements such as I can handle this, I have done it before
- Plan a safe treat such as a nice dinner, bubble bath
- Think of things you are looking forward to, like seeing a close friend.

What if grounding doesn't work?

The more you practise it the better it will work, so try to do some every day. It will become automatic after a while.

You don't have to use the methods listed above, you could think up your own method, you may find that it works better for you.

Try to start grounding as early as possible in a negative mood cycle, for example just after a flashback, don't leave it until after.

You can also teach family and friends about grounding so they can help if you become overwhelmed. Notice which method works best for you, you can use the mood rating scale for this, and lastly, don't give up!

Body

Your body's reactions

Our bodies can hold the trauma from rape or sexual abuse. Everyone responds differently to what happened to them.

1. Look at your body's unique responses, and any responses that others have also had
2. Recognise which bodily reactions are related to the abuse and why your body might have reacted in that way
3. Think/talk about if these reactions are helpful or not right now
4. Decide whether and how you are going to deal with your body's reactions.

Some common bodily reactions to rape or abuse are:

- Irritable Bowel Syndrome
- Indigestion, heartburn or acid reflux
- Stomach cramps, diarrhoea or constipation
- Dermatological conditions e.g. eczema
- Other physical pains
- Tensions
- Headaches
- Changes in body language
- Difficulties being sexually intimate.

Becoming aware of changes and patterns in any bodily reactions is a good step.

Physiological reactions and sexuality

If at the time of the abuse you developed an erection, ejaculated or became aroused in some way, this may result in you feeling even more reluctant to speak about the rape or sexual abuse.

Physical responses like these do not mean that you wanted to be sexually abused. Some people who sexually abuse others will deliberately manipulate them to develop an erection, then use this as false evidence to say the abuse was 'wanted.'

We cannot always control how our body reacts, especially in stressful situations. An erection might develop as an unwanted response to fear or physical stimulation. These physiological responses do not say anything about someone's desire or sexuality.

Physical arousal can cause a great deal of confusion for people. Some people feel aroused when they recall the abuse and worry about what this means.

An experience of sexual abuse can impact sexual intimacy. It may result in someone becoming hyper-interested in sex or particular sexual acts. You may feel overwhelmed or uncomfortable about sexual contact with a partner, start to avoid sex and isolate yourself.

If sexual thoughts, reactions or difficulties are distressing or bothering you, you may find it helpful to speak to a trained trauma-informed counsellor who understands sexual abuse and sexuality to help you make sense of this.

Don't expect too much of yourself at once. There are many different ways to work on your body - anything from swimming, cycling, gym exercises, yoga, Pilates and massage to strengthening exercises.

If you feel something isn't working for you review it and try a different approach or something entirely different.

Where in your body do you feel the most pain?

Is there anything you can do to soothe it, either with the aid of over-the-counter or prescription medication, advice from a healthcare professional (for example your GP, NHS Direct, a walk-in clinic), or things you can do at home?

You can refuse any examinations that you are uncomfortable with.

All professionals should ask your permission to examine you or touch you.

If you would be more comfortable with a doctor of a particular gender, you have the right to request that.



Everybody's journey is individual.

James Baldwin (20th century American writer)

Some ways to look after your body

Release positive, natural chemicals through exercise.

Exercise boosts the immune system, improves mental health, and can help encourage self-esteem. Exercise is also good for sleep.

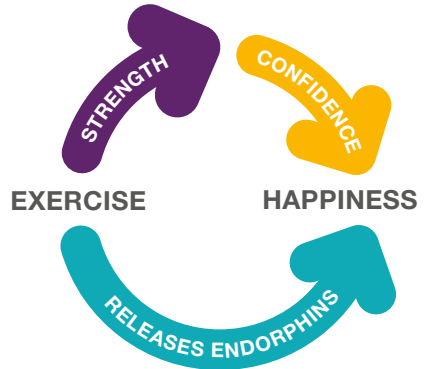
Strength training. Being stronger helps us feel more in control of our bodies and environments.

Give yourself time to mend: sleep. Turning off your computer, TV or putting away your smartphone or tablet 45 minutes before sleeping helps to relax the mind and prepare it for sleep.

Laughter. Watch a favourite comedy. Laughter releases endorphins which are our body's natural painkillers. When you laugh your whole body relaxes. Find as many opportunities as you can to make yourself smile or laugh.

Think about how you could cut down on alcohol, caffeine, sugar or cigarettes. These things can make you feel good for a short time and finding things that make you feel good is healthy and normal. Identifying things that might make us feel worse in the long run and reducing them can be good for your body and mind.

Relaxation techniques may not always help with trauma symptoms. If trying to relax is making you more anxious; you could try exercise that helps you release energy and build strength.





Behaviour

Your actions

When someone has experienced rape or abuse it can affect their behaviour. There are very good reasons for a victim-survivor to behave in certain ways. There will always be some thoughts or feelings behind behaviour.

Self-protective thoughts or feelings behind your behaviour:

- Fear that this secret, which is often or always on your mind, might slip out
- Thoughts that others may reject you
- Fear of being questioned
- A feeling that you can trust nobody
- Trying to control anxiety or exposure to triggers
- Attempts to block out memories
- Trying to 'keep the box shut' by distracting yourself
- Fear of seeing the abuser somewhere
- Fear of having an anxiety attack in front of others.

If you want to change your behaviour, you will need to believe it is important enough to make the change, and have confidence in your ability to make the change. Identifying the thoughts and feelings behind the behaviour will help you to understand and work on your reactions. Some of these thoughts and feelings can help you to cope and to process what has happened safely. Others may cause further distress.

Write down some of the behaviours that you find yourself doing. Ask yourself what the reasons behind those behaviours are, try to think about how they, and the behaviours they are causing are making you feel in the short, mid, and long-term.

Pushing people away

...When I push people away I feel more in control but more alone.

Pushing people away can be an instinctive way to protect yourself from further harm. Isolation can often reflect how a victim-survivor acted during or after rape or abuse. The perpetrator might have forced you to keep it a secret by making threats or telling you it's normal or that nobody will believe you. It's normal to be cautious about trusting people again. Finding other people to talk to can help you to think about your own thoughts and reactions.

Not wanting to be intimate

...How will I ever trust anyone again? I feel like my body isn't my own.

A lot of people fear intimacy after rape or abuse. Take your time, do things as you are ready. What happened to you was not sex. Sex is different because it involves consent on both sides, and you are equally in control. It's important your partner understands and allows you to take it at your own pace.

Hyper-sexuality

...I want to have control back over my body. Sometimes, I don't feel how I expected to afterwards.

Some people find that they want to have lots of sex, sometimes with lots of different people. This can be a way to take back control of your body. Sex is a healthy and natural thing but try to take precautions to keep yourself and your body feeling safe. If you can, try to think about how the experience made you feel afterwards.



Being hypervigilant

...I am constantly on edge.

Feeling over-attentive and alert to every sound and movement is normal after trauma that's the natural way you protect yourself against danger. As you work through the feelings and thoughts behind this hypervigilance, it will become easier.

In the short-term, try to find a safe place that can soothe you, even if this is somewhere that you create in your mind

Not wanting to go out

...I don't want to see them, or anyone else. I don't have the energy to go out anyway.

Your home can be a therapeutic place where you may feel your safest. In the short-term, it might enable you to get through the day. Try to think about what you are compromising on in the long-term. Are there any other ways of achieving these things in small, manageable, and safe ways?

Drinking / smoking more

...It makes me calmer, helps me to be sociable.

These are normal coping mechanisms in any stressful situation. In what situations are you drinking or smoking? How do you feel before and afterwards? Is it leading to any risky or challenging situations? Have you looked at the pros and cons of your relationship with drugs, alcohol or smoking and the pros and cons of changing that relationship?

Being more irritable

...I keep snapping at people. It's not their fault and I'm pushing them away.

Everybody is irritable sometimes. Extreme irritability can come as a result from of a lack of sleep, feelings of isolation or lack of control, amongst other things. It doesn't make you less deserving of support and understanding.

Reaching out to others, however difficult, can be helpful

Isolation and secrecy often reflect how someone acted during or after an experience of abuse. You might have never told anybody for fear of what they might think, or say or fear of not being believed. Being with others can distract you and comfort you.

Tips for regaining control

Take things slowly and don't pressure yourself with unrealistic expectations. It can take time to start feeling like you are regaining control of things.

Remember that all the feelings and physical sensations you may be experiencing are common responses to a traumatic event. They are not a sign that you are 'going crazy.' It can feel like everything in your life is beyond your control.

At times like this it can be helpful to try and focus on something you can control - it might be your breathing or the food you are going to eat tonight. These might seem like small decisions but they are important.

Making change happen requires focus, effort and repetition.

Expectations and making changes

For some people, reading this guide might be a sign that you are ready for big changes in your life. You might have a sense that this isn't going to be easy and may be a struggle sometimes.

At the same time, it might feel like things are a struggle already and it's time for things to change as soon as possible. You may feel a sense of 'I'm ready, let's get on with it!' It's important to try and stay realistic about how much can change and how quickly.

You can make changes for the better in your life one step at a time.



If we change within, our outer life will change also.

Jean Shinoda Bolen (American psychiatrist)

Relationships

Trust, intimacy and relationships

Many people who have experienced rape or sexual abuse may struggle with issues around intimacy and relationships.

Trust is often misused as a tactic of abuse, especially child sexual abuse. Such a profound betrayal of trust can lead to the conclusion that trusting people or getting close to others is dangerous. This conclusion is not 'wrong' because it is a sensible conclusion to draw from your experience.

Whilst being careful and not trusting people can be important in some circumstances, it can get in the way of intimate, close relationships with people you really care for. If you want to feel closer to the people you care for, it might take time and feel like a slow process, but it is possible. The first thing to realise is that you can't build intimacy by yourself - it is a shared project.

You may find that you struggle with:

- Reluctance to trust someone or let anyone get close
- Perceiving any expression of care or attention as a sign of sexual interest, or an attempt to get something from them
- Feeling vulnerable
- Wariness about sharing personal information
- Feeling uncomfortable with gentle touch or touch without prior specific agreement
- Difficulties with any sexual intimacy.

These issues can make for unsatisfying relationships. Many men feel frustrated that they can't seem to get close to people, including their partner.

It is important to remember: it is not trust that causes sexual abuse, but the misuse of trust. You did not cause or deserve to be abused. The abuse happened because someone abused your trust.

Intimacy means more than (just) sexual intimacy. It is also about sharing special and important moments with another person. Intimacy can develop through connections you make with a friend or partner: spending time, playing together, discussing ideas, including disagreeing, shared parenting experiences, supporting family members, enhancing spirituality.

This way of relating is completely different to abuse which results in one person's ideas and wishes being forced on the other person whose wishes are not considered at all. Intimacy is about developing shared connections that are based on equality and consent.

It can be helpful for you and your partner or friend to talk about some of the things that bring you together, to work out what ideas you share about your relationship and what differences can be appreciated and respected, as well as what areas could do with some extra work and time being put into them.

You could take some quiet time to consider:

- What kind of relationship would you like?
- What brings you closer to people, what pushes you away?
- Are you aware of your friend's or partner's likes or dislikes?
- What builds connections in your relationship with them?
- How close a relationship do you/they want?
- What time and energy are you willing to put in to developing intimacy in this relationship?
- How might you start to do this?

Separating sexuality from sexual abuse

There are many factors that may stop some men from speaking about being sexually abused. This could include internalised homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia. If the man who was abused has been questioning his sexuality or gender, this can cause extra distress or confusion in an already traumatic situation.

Here are some potential concerns that men might have:

- If a man is abused by another man, he might worry that people will make assumptions about his sexuality, or discriminate against him
- If a gay or bisexual man is abused, he might worry people will think he ‘deserved’ it. He might worry people will think that his abuse ‘caused’ his sexuality
- If a man is abused by another man, he might worry that people will hear this, and decide that gay sexuality is inherently abusive – he might even start to think that himself

No sexuality is abusive in itself. There is no evidence to suggest that being sexually assaulted changes your sexuality. You have the right to choose your own sexual partners.

- If a man is abused by a woman, he might worry that people won’t believe him, or take him seriously

If someone has any kind of sexual contact with you that you did not consent to, that is sexual assault.

Sexual violence is an abusive act of power. It is not about sexuality or masculinity. Sexual abuse is not caused by the sexuality (or any other characteristic) of the person being abused.

Like any other act of violence, sexual abuse is caused by the decisions and actions of the person committing the violence.

Parenting

Becoming a parent can be a challenging time for anyone, and men who were subjected to sexual abuse as children commonly face some added pressures.

Key times that can trigger difficult thoughts and feelings can include finding out about the pregnancy, the birth of the child, and when the child approaches the age that you were when the abuse was happening. Difficulties might be related to memories of the abuse itself, about your abilities as a parent, or both. You may also worry about your child's vulnerability to abuse.

Some men worry they will hurt or abuse their children and limit their involvement, especially with tasks that require close physical contact such as bathing and nappy changing. This can lead to men missing important parts of their child's development and life.

Remember that parenting is a challenging and sometimes overwhelming experience for most people. Despite the challenges, many men, including men who have experienced sexual abuse, find ways to be caring, protective, and nurturing parents and grandparents.

Take time to work out your own thoughts about the kind of parent you want to be. We are not born with parenting skills; there is information available to support you in becoming a parent.

Please visit www.familylives.org.uk for more information

Key reactions: flashbacks



What are flashbacks?

It is common to experience vivid images of the rape or sexual abuse, making you feel as though the event is happening all over again. This can be very scary. These vivid images are known as flashbacks and are active memories of a past traumatic event. Flashbacks can occur at any time, are out of a person's control and difficult to get rid of.

Some ways you can help yourself to cope with flashbacks:

- 1. Tell yourself that you are having a flashback:** Learn to recognise what happens to your body when you are having a flashback. Recognise the clues your body gives you just before a flashback happens.
- 2. Remind yourself that the worst is over:** The feelings and sensations you are experiencing now are memories of the past. The actual event took place in the past and you survived it.

- 3. Get grounded and focus on the present:** Use all your senses to keep you focused on the here and now. Look around and notice different colours, objects around you. Listen to the different sounds - music, people, or your own breathing. Feel your body, your clothes, the chair, or the floor supporting you. Stamp your feet on the ground, so that you know where you are and that you are no longer trapped in a situation you cannot escape from.
- 4. Breathe:** When you are scared it is likely that your breathing may feel short or restricted. As a result, your body could react to the lack of oxygen, causing panicky feelings, a fast heart rate, pounding in the head, tightness, sweating, faintness, and dizziness. If you breathe deeply some of this panic will stop. Put your hand on your stomach and breathe in so that your stomach pushes against your hand and then breathe out so that the stomach goes in.
- 5. Compare then and now:** Remind yourself of where you were then and where you are now. 'I was in the sitting room then. Now I am in my bed'.
- 6. Give yourself some boundaries:** Sometimes when you are having a flashback you might lose the sense of where you finish and where the world begins: as if you do not have skin. Wrap yourself in a blanket, hold a pillow or go to bed; do anything to help yourself feel protected. Some people find a weighted 'gravity' blanket reassuring.
- 7. Cross brain actions:** When we do things that involve both sides of our brain, we can start to process memories and emotions more effectively and begin to think better. Give yourself a 'butterfly hug' by crossing both arms across your chest, squeeze each arm with your hands, tap each arm/shoulder, or place your hands on your thighs and tap one thigh then the other.

- 8. Tell your friends, partner, or relatives about flashbacks:** It's important that the people around you know about flashbacks so that they know how to help you. You may want someone to be with you during or just after a flashback, or you may prefer to be alone. Decide what you find most helpful and let others know.
- 9. Take time to recover:** Flashbacks are very powerful, so give yourself some time afterwards. Don't expect yourself to jump into activities right away. Take a nap, have a warm bath, or take some quiet time. Show yourself kindness, gentleness, and patience, allow your body some comfort.
- 10. Bring your memories into the open:** Anyone who understands the effects of rape, sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse can be a valuable resource to helping you heal. If you feel able, it can be helpful to write down the sights, sounds, smells, emotions and sensations from your flashback too. Putting it on paper can help to get it out of your mind.
- 11. Finally, know that your thoughts, feelings and behaviours are all normal:** You are healing and you're dealing with your mind and body's reactions to a traumatic event.

This information has been adapted from:

Rape and Sexual Violence Project
www.rsvporg.co.uk

Key reactions: self-harm

What is self-harm?

Self-harm is a broad term that describes the act of hurting yourself on purpose. It is also known as self-injury.

Self-harm could include any of the following behaviours:

- Cutting, burning, or slashing the skin
- Obsessive cleaning of the skin
- Pulling hair out
- Repeatedly hitting the body.

People can also harm themselves by drinking alcohol, smoking, or taking drugs (all of which could lead to addiction), eating too much/too little (which could lead to eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia), or working extremely hard, (leading to exhaustion).

Who carries out self-harm?

Self-harm can be carried out by anyone; there is no typical person who self-harms and people of all ages, genders, backgrounds, and cultures can self-harm.

Why do people self-harm?

Self-harm can be a way to:

- Express, cope with or numb painful feelings
- Get some control over painful and often confusing feelings
- Punish yourself; this can be particularly true if a person has low self-esteem or blames themselves for the original trauma
- Provide comfort at a difficult time by doing something that is familiar. This can help when new and confusing feelings appear.

Myths about self-harm:

“It is a failed suicide attempt”

Self-harm is much more about attempting to cope with life rather than wanting to die. Injuries can be life threatening but are rarely so.

“Self-harm is attention seeking behaviour”

Many people try as hard as they can to hide any evidence of their self-harm. People do not hurt themselves to gain attention.

“Self-harm is a sign of someone who is mentally ill”

Self-harm is a sign of deep distress – not mental illness.

“People who self-harm are a danger to others”

People who self-harm are directing the hurt at themselves and not at other people. In fact, most people who self-harm would be appalled at the idea of harming anyone else.

What can help?

Beginning to understand the reasons for and the meaning of your self-harm will be useful. Keep a diary and ask yourself the following questions:

How do you feel before and after the self-harm? Asking yourself this question might help you understand the feelings you are trying to cope with. It may be easier to find another way to deal with those feelings once you have identified them.

What does self-harm mean to you? What do the feelings signify, in your past or your life now? When did you first start to self-harm? Identifying these meanings can help you to understand what it gives you.

Why do you want to stop hurting yourself? Is it due to pressure from others, a desire to reduce your feelings of shame and guilt about the self-harm or have you decided that self-harm doesn't work for you anymore?

What resources do you have to support you if you stop or reduce your self-harming? Have you got people around you who know about the self-harm and want to support you? Think about what you need from these people and how they help you.

When do you normally self-harm? Is there a pattern? For example, you always self-harm in the evening or you always self-harm when you are left alone in the house. Changing a ritual or thinking ahead about certain situations might have an effect on the self-harm in general.

Replacement and distraction are useful tools. Can you make a list of things that you can do instead of self-harm? For example, call a friend or do something physical (e.g. exercise) to release the feelings you have inside.

Specialist resources around self-harm

Self Injury Support offer support and information about self-harm and support www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk

It's never too late to talk

Understanding your reactions to the abnormal situation you have been in is the first step towards starting to take back control and finding someone to talk to. Many victim-survivors do not feel they can talk to their family or friends about what happened or how it has affected their thoughts, but this does not mean you are alone.

Having a supportive network around you, finding someone to talk to who you trust and will listen will help the healing.

Other support networks. Where else could you go for help if you wanted to? Other ways to get support could be:

- Talking to a trusted friend or family member. Choose this person carefully: do you trust them enough; will they show you kindness and try to understand you?
- Online victim-survivors' groups and forums
- Sexual violence victim-survivors' meetings/groups
- Learning a new skill in a new environment
- Counselling, through the NHS via your GP, or via a specialist service
- Medication such as anti-depressants - consult your GP

SARSAS services are available to all victim-survivors of sexual violence in B&NES, Bristol, North Somerset, Somerset and South Gloucestershire. We provide support to people aged 13+ of all genders, including trans, non-binary and intersex people.

Support may be in person in our main Bristol or Taunton hubs and regional locations, or remote via telephone and video call.



Which parts of the self-help guide have you found particularly useful?

Do you have any other ideas that aren't mentioned?

We'd really like to know your opinions and tips so that we can share ideas that work with victim-survivors in the future.

info@sarsas.org.uk

If you would like a copy of this Self-help Guide in another language or format, please ask.

This guide was written by SARSAS with valuable assistance from The Green House and National Crime Agency Trainer & Consultant Jonathan Charlesworth M.Ed.

Additional assistance was provided by Banardos BASE, The Bridge, Mike Buck from Avon & Somerset Police, Kinergy, Safelink and The Southmead Project.

SARSAS is very grateful to Living Well who gave us permission to use some of their material from: A Self-help Guide for Males Who Have Been Sexually Abused - written by Gary Foster PhD and Cameron Boyd PhD, Living Well Australia.

The guide was funded by the Avon & Somerset Police and Crime Commissioner's Community Action Fund, awarded by the Police Community Trust.

Printed copies were initially funded by Bristol City Council Public Health Department.

About us

Somerset and Avon Rape and Sexual Abuse Support (SARSAS) services are available to all victim-survivors of sexual violence in B&NES, Bristol, North Somerset, Somerset and South Gloucestershire.

We provide support to people aged 13+ of all genders, including trans, non-binary and intersex people.

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www.sarsas.org.uk

Further Resources

Galop

Confidential and independent advice and support for LGBT+ people who have experienced sexual assault, abuse or violence.

www.galop.org.uk

National Association for People Abused in Childhood NAPAC

National support line for adult survivors of child abuse, free from UK landlines or mobiles: **0808 801 0331**

www.napac.org.uk

Survivors UK

Information and resources for survivors, professionals and anyone else who wants to support survivors.

www.survivorsuk.org

Safeline

A helpline for men who have experienced rape or sexual abuse.

0808 800 5005

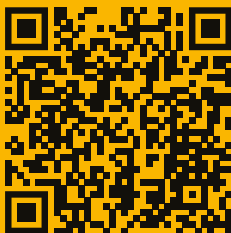
The Survivor Pathway

For more information about any sexual violence services across Avon and Somerset please visit: **survivorpathway.org.uk**

Notes

SARSAS

*Listen.
Believe.
Support.*



Read our guide online