

SARSAS

*Listen.
Believe.
Support.*

SELF-HELP GUIDE

for women and girls

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Self-help guide



This self-help guide is for women and girls who are victim-survivors of rape or sexual abuse and want to understand and process their own personal reactions to their experience. It is for all women, including trans women.

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.

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. It can be helpful to write your own ideas next to our suggestions or to highlight suggestions you find useful.



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, will be the right ones for you.

Introduction

Healing is possible after any abuse. The fact that you have picked this guide up is a big step and is a sign that you are 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, forming extra identities 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?



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.

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

Physical

- Tension in the muscles
- Tiredness and exhaustion
- Diarrhoea
- Chronic pain
- Hyperactivity
- Vaginismus
- Insomnia
- Dry mouth
- Sweating
- Headaches

- Dizzy spells
- Unsteady breathing
- Tightness in the chest
- Increased, rapid heartbeat
- Heartburn, indigestion or acid reflux
- Eczema or other dermatological complaints
- Other physical pains.

Emotional

- Feelings of hopelessness
- Guilt and shame
- Depression
- Insecurity
- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Apathy
- Mood swings
- Panic attacks
- Nightmares
- Poor memory
- Loss in self-confidence
- Feeling jumpy/on edge
- Absent-mindedness
- Inability to concentrate
- Feeling suicidal.

Behavioural

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

Why do people have these reactions?

The human 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 of these five 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 did that to 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 can get easier and more manageable.

Difficulty saying what happened

- I cannot say that word...
- Nobody will believe me...

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

Angry thoughts

- They should have protected me
- Nobody can be trusted

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

Fearful thoughts

- Fear of what people will say
- Fear if the abuser is still around
- Fear of not being believed
- Repetitive, panicky thoughts

Abusers instil a fear of speaking up in their victim. There are people who will believe and support you if you decide you want to talk.

Self-loathing

- I'm dirty and disgusting
- Nobody will ever love me

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 respect and safety.

Feeling different

- Nobody understands
- Things will never be the same

Everybody is different. Healing is possible and things can get better. 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 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. Sexual abuse and rape 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. Our brain is trying to make sense of it
- **Fragmented** - some bits and pieces are remembered and some are missing
- **Sensory** - the pictures, sounds, smells and feelings during a flashback are so clear that the event is remembered by all, or a combination of, your senses
- **Non-sequential** - you can't remember which event happened first
- **Non-verbal** - it is difficult to put into words
- **Non-contextual** - the main moments are remembered, but it's harder to remember where/when
- **Buried** - it may not be remembered until years later, it may be revealed in a dreamlike quality, in snapshots, or ultra-vivid such as flashbacks. This may make it difficult to accept.

SARSAS Trauma and Self-Care course

You can find videos on trauma and the brain and memory in our free online course.

Sign up here:

sarsas.teachable.com/p/trauma-recovery

Some things that can help

- **Bring your thoughts outside.** Writing thoughts down shifts them from the inside to the outside. Now you can explore them and think about whether they are helpful
- **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 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**
- **Draw an image or make a collage.** that can help you when you feel low. Put the poster up where it can inspire you
- **Letters of my name.** Write your name in big letters. Describe yourself by using the letters of your name. Every letter must represent something positive about you (abilities, likes). For example, Sam might be: Sympathetic, Affectionate, and Musical. Make a name-poster or design a name-card



“

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? There are so many silences to be broken.

Audre Lorde (20th century American writer)

- **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 pile of washing up, I got through a day without a flashback. Look back through this diary when you are feeling sad or can't sleep
- **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 am kind to myself.”
 - “(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 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?

- **Distractions.** Make a list of distractions.
 - Contact a friend
 - Watch a favourite film or TV programme
 - Do something creative
 - Dance
 - Make yourself a safe cocoon in bed with your duvet
 - Visit a place that makes you feel safe (such as a friend or a loved one's house, a park or beauty spot, a museum/gallery, a cafe)
 - Cuddle or play with a pet
 - Do some volunteering (some find it comforting to help people, animals or the environment during their own healing process)

- **Give yourself a calming sleep routine.** Overthinking can become a real challenge when you are 'trying to sleep'. Keeping a nightlight on and listening to the radio, calming music or nature sounds may help. Electronic screens do not help with relaxation. 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

- **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 hadn't of worn a short skirt, it 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?
- What would an organisation like SARSAS say?



Be attentive to what is arising within you, and place that above everything else...What is happening in your innermost self is worthy of your entire love: somehow you must find a way to work at it.

Rainer Maria Rilke (20th Century German Poet)

A large yellow speech bubble with a tail pointing towards the bottom right. Inside the bubble is text in a dark purple font. There are three smaller yellow circles of decreasing size at the end of the tail.

Try not to let the benefits of hindsight allow you to treat yourself cruelly. 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.

Victim-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 see that you do not deserve to feel ashamed.

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

Emptiness. The feelings are sometimes so overwhelming that - 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 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 the 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 practised alone. YouTube videos can be good for this.

Use power-quotes. Collect power-quotations. Display them. 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 later.

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 reacted in that way
3. Think/talk about whether these reactions are helpful or not right now
4. Think about what would help with these 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
- 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.

Don't expect too much of yourself at once. There are many ways to work on your body – anything from yoga to massage to strengthening exercises. If you feel something isn't working for you, review it and try a different approach.

Some ways to look after your body

A stronger body can help you deal with your system being overactive.

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

You have the right to request a doctor that you feel comfortable with. You can refuse any examinations you are uncomfortable with. All professionals should ask your permission to examine you or touch you.

Some ways you can soothe your body

Release positive chemicals through exercise. Exercise boosts the immune system, improves mental health, and can increase 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 your smartphone, computer, TV or tablet off 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.

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 our 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
- Trying 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 behaviours, you will need to believe it is important enough, 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, think about how they, and the behaviours they are causing, are making you feel in the short and long-term.

Evaluate them; are they helpful or unhelpful?

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 no-one 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 because 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 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 alcohol, drugs 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 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 a survivor acted during or after rape or 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.

Expectations and making changes

For some people, picking up 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 might 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. There can be a real 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.

As well as identifying the behaviours that are associated with healing, and thoughts and feelings behind them, creating new positive and therapeutic behaviours can be helpful. Here are some ideas:

- Call, write to, email or visit a friend or member of the family
- Give a genuine compliment
- Think about what your friends and family give or mean to you – and tell them
- Join a group (singing, craft, wellbeing)
- Carry out a random act of kindness
- Donate to or volunteer for a charity
- Create a playlist, artwork, or photo album for a friend
- Print out an inspirational poem or post it online
- Be kind to yourself.



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

Jean Shinoda Bolen

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.

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 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 or too little (which could lead to anorexia, bulimia) or working extremely hard, (leading to exhaustion).

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.

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 www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk

Trauma and women's health

For many victim-survivors of rape and sexual abuse, past trauma can impact on experiences of menstruation, menopause, pregnancy and childbirth, affecting both physical and mental health.

We acknowledge that not everyone who menstruates, undergoes menopause, pregnancy and childbirth identifies as a woman and not all women experience them in the same way or at all.

Menstruation

For some victim-survivors the care and attention needed to manage periods can be more difficult after sexual abuse.

The blood, cramps, and use of menstrual products can be triggering and the hormonal changes that occur just before periods can increase flashbacks, anxiety and low mood.

There are some practical things you can try which may help:

- Try using non-intrusive methods to manage the bleeding. Period pants or pads/towels may be the most comfortable way to manage your period
- Allow yourself to slow down and take care of your body, for example, treat yourself to a favourite food or drink and take extra rest
- Be kind to yourself - make choices that put yourself first where you can
- If you are feeling overwhelmed with the impact of trauma and menstruation, you are not alone. Be open with those you trust or speak with a specialist sexual violence helpline
- Talk to your GP if you need support around managing your menstrual cycle.

Cervical screening

Cervical screening can be distressing for those who have experienced rape and sexual abuse but there are things that can help:

- Try and understand what the process will be before the appointment so that, as much as possible, you know what to expect
- See someone who is aware of your needs and anxiety in this area and request a specialist or a professional who knows your history, ask to see the same person regularly
- You can ask for the smallest speculum or ask if you can insert it yourself
- You can ask if you can do a home test for the HPV virus first before proceeding with the full smear test. If you do not have the HPV virus, they do not need to check your cervix
- If you notice your body going into a fight, flight, freeze, flop response, it's ok to ask the professional to stop and try again another day. You do not have to force your body to go through it in silence
- If talking whilst distressed is difficult, discuss with the professional before they begin how they can tell if you are not ok.

Your health is important and your body matters. Cervical screening is a part of our self-care, but it is important that we find ways to have this done that don't make us feel unsafe. If in doubt, you can always ask to stop and try again another time.



Pregnancy and birth

Pregnancy and birth can be difficult for victim-survivors for different reasons:

- Being pregnant might make you feel unsafe
- Feeling unhappy about having to 'share' your body or feeling out of control
- Having to think about certain areas of your body that you associate to your experience of abuse can be triggering
- Thinking about the birth ahead and motherhood itself feel scary - the parts of your body which are active in birth may be the same as those that were abused in the past
- Perhaps you didn't even want to be pregnant in the first place.

You might find that you experience unusual sensations and thoughts such as:

- Disassociation or feeling hyper-alert
- Feeling disinterested or even 'out of your body' during visits with maternity health care providers (especially during physical examinations)
- Upset, confused, angry and exhausted after your appointments
- The thought of strangers being around you during such an intimate time can be very uncomfortable
- Anxiety that your experiences of abuse may affect your relationship with your new baby
- Finding the idea of breastfeeding challenging.

These are all normal responses for victim-survivors.

Things that might help

- Take a friend with you to your clinical visits
- Make a list of things you want to ask before you get to any appointments
- Create a birth plan which includes some ways in which you might feel safer and more comfortable
- Let your midwives know about your history (only if it feels right to do so) so that they can support you and then make sure that this information is passed on to all your labour ward / homebirth teams, by asking for a note to be added to maternity papers. You might find it easier to write it down on a card or piece of paper to share with different people, so you avoid having to re-tell your experience to every new person that hasn't been made aware of it
- If you are hoping to breastfeed, find out who your local breastfeeding peer supporters and breastfeeding support groups are, ahead of time
- Choose someone you really trust and ask them to be your birth partner
- You might also benefit from a Doula. A Doula is trained to support you during pregnancy, birth and in new parenthood, but is not a medical or clinical professional
- Speak to your local specialist sexual violence service who will understand and support you.

Menopause and perimenopause

For some women who have experienced rape or sexual abuse, coping with the impact of menopause can be particularly difficult.

- You may notice an increase in trauma symptoms as you start to experience perimenopause
- Some perimenopause symptoms (such as sweating and insomnia) may be more severe
- You may find it difficult to differentiate between symptoms caused by the trauma and symptoms caused by perimenopause
- It might feel difficult to talk about the symptoms you are experiencing due to a lack of understanding in both society and the medical profession.

If you are experiencing this, your local specialist sexual violence service will understand and support you. You can also speak to your GP about help with managing symptoms of the menopause.

Medical and dental appointments can be challenging for many victim-survivors. If you find medical appointments hard and struggle to talk to your medical practitioners about your trauma, you could try using this support information letter to take with you.

I am a victim-survivor of sexual assault/rape. I feel very anxious about our appointment today and felt it would be easier to show you this. (I would prefer it if you did not ask me about my experiences).

I am prone to _____ or

I feel that I may react by _____. I

may be triggered by _____ and

it would help if _____

If I do react in any of these ways, a grounding technique (techniques which help ground us back to the present moment/calm down more) which you can remind me of/talk through with me would be and may be helpful

I would find it helpful if you did everything slowly, regularly checking in with me on how I am doing as well as talking me through what you will be doing next so I feel more in control.

It may also help, if I do get very anxious, to remind me that we can stop at any time.

Thank you for being understanding. I appreciate your time reading this/helping me through this.

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.

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

www.sarsas.org.uk

Further Resources

National Support Services

24/7 Rape & Sexual Abuse Support Line **0808 500 2222** or
online chat www.247sexualabusesupport.org.uk

The Survivors Trust

www.thesurvivorstrust.org
0808 801 0818

Carolyn Spring

For information on trauma and dissociation
www.CarolynSpring.com

Rape Crisis England and Wales

www.rapecrisis.org.uk

The Survivor Pathway

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

SARSAS

*Listen.
Believe.
Support.*



Read our guide online