



SARSAS  
self help guide  
to rape and sexual abuse

# Contents

Self help guide	3
Introduction	4
What kind of reactions do people have to trauma?	6
Why do people have these reactions?	8
Thoughts	9
- Some ways you can deal with your thoughts	12
Feelings	15
Grounding	17
Body	20
Behaviour	23
Relationships	27
Key reactions: flashbacks	30
Key reactions: self-harm	32
Breaking it down	35
It's never too late to talk	37
Further resources	38

# Self help guide

This self help guide is for survivors of rape or sexual abuse who want to understand and process their own personal reactions to their experience. When you have suffered rape or sexual abuse it can affect how you think, how you feel, how you behave and how you see the world.

You don't have to do it alone.

It's ok to ask for and accept help from other people, and to offer and give help to other people who need it too. Survivors of sexual abuse can sometimes struggle to do things to care for themselves. Throughout this guide, we want to remind you that you deserve to take care of yourself and to live a fulfilling life. Recovery isn't an overnight thing so go easy on yourself, be patient and use this guide and other tools you find useful. You may choose to combine them with suggestions or advice you'll read in other places.

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. Be gentle and patient with yourself as you go through your feelings and reactions and find ways to feel safer. This takes time.

In each section of the guide some common reactions are explained followed by some self help suggestions. It can be helpful to write your own ideas next to these suggestions or to highlight suggestions you find useful. As you go through the guide, try to think about real situations.

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



# Introduction

Feeling well again is possible after sexual violence and abuse. It will require you not to expect or demand too much of yourself too soon and be kind to yourself.

Many reactions associated with rape, sexual assault or sexual abuse are natural safety mechanisms. Your body and mind are reacting to a life-threatening, traumatic situation:

- Fear and anger are protective feelings
- Caution and avoidance are protective actions
- Isolation and turning to alcohol or drugs are examples of some protective behaviours

These feelings or behaviours may be used long after the immediate danger or trauma has passed. This guide will encourage you to look at these reactions and think about which have been helpful ways to cope and which might be delaying healing now.

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

Choosing to start working on the healing process takes courage. Opening this guide is you already starting. Read it at your own pace. There's no race. Take breaks and don't think you've got to achieve everything or even anything quickly.



***Remind yourself...***

- *It was never your fault*
- *Whatever your reactions, they are normal*
- *Many people don't tell anybody for many years*
- *Most perpetrators of rape or abuse are known to their victims*
- *You are not alone and there is support available*



*This guide will use the word 'survivors'.*

*It may not feel like it, and right now you or those around now might feel you're finding things really tough but you have survived and you are now moving beyond surviving.*



# What kind of reactions do people have to trauma?

## What is trauma?

Trauma is emotional shock and pain caused by an experience that is overwhelming and can cause intense fear, confusion, helplessness, or horror. Some types of traumatic experiences involve:

- experiencing a serious injury to yourself or witnessing a serious 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.

When a person has experienced a shocking, unexpected or traumatic incident 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 (especially neck, shoulders or hands)
- Tiredness and exhaustion
- Insomnia
- Hyperactivity
- Diarrhoea
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)
- Dry mouth or problem with swallowing
- Sweating
- Headaches or migraines
- Dizzy spells
- Erratic breathing or hyperventilation
- Tightness in the chest
- Erratic heartbeat or palpitations
- Heartburn, indigestion or acid reflux
- Eczema or other dermatological complaints
- Other physical pains
- Memory loss

## Emotional

- Feelings of hopelessness
- Apathy
- Guilt
- Shame
- Anger
- Absent mindedness
- Inability to concentrate
- Depression
- Insecurity
- Irritability
- Short temperedness
- Anxiety
- Moodiness
- Panic attacks
- Nightmares
- Loss in self confidence

## Behavioural

- Increased smoking and/or drinking
- Workaholism, or not turning up to work
- Personal neglect
- Nail biting
- Impulsiveness
- Twitches, tapping fingers, etc.
- Non-stop talking or mutedness
- Changes in eating patterns



# Why do people have these reactions?

Your brain is what we call rational and instinctive. When you are exposed to danger or traumatic events, the intuitive side 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 to release defence hormones. This will trigger one of five instinctive reactions:

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

Your brain will choose the reaction 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 (Freeze, (be-)Friend and Flop) are very common as they expose the 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 motionless when you see a motor vehicle racing towards you before you think to get out the way (Freeze).

This all happens in a split second. A split second later, the amygdala begins the slower process of sending the threat signal to the rational part of your brain (the pre-frontal cortex). A few seconds later our brain rationalises the threat.

As the instinct for immediate survival overrides longer-term rational thought, fear can overwhelm rationality during trauma. 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.

# Thoughts



## Your mind's reactions

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

### **Blaming yourself. You may find yourself coming up with phrases such as:**

- I should have...
- I should not have...
- I deserved what happened to me because...

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

.....

### **Helplessness. You might hear yourself saying things like:**

- I cannot carry on like this...
- I'm not coping...

*By being here today and in reading this self help guide you are coping.*

.....

### **Concentration difficulties caused by:**

- Sleeplessness
- Nightmares
- Dissociation
- 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 out loud...
- Who's going to believe me?

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

## Fearful thoughts

- Fear of what people will say or think
- Fear that the perpetrator or abuser may target you again.
- Fear of not being believed or ridiculed
- Cyclical, panicky thoughts

*Rapists or abusers wield power when they 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.*

.....

## Angry thoughts

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

*Anger is to be expected after someone betrays your trust or sense of safety and anger can be healthy. Although it may seem desirable, seeking revenge may create more distress and long-term hurt.*

.....

## Self-loathing

- I'm dirty and disgusting
- Nobody will ever understand how I feel
- People will stop loving me and no one will love me again

*You are much more than what someone did to you. You have had to cope with something traumatic and you are still you.*

.....

## Feeling different

- Nobody understands
- Things will never be the same

*It is not your fault that someone has done this to you. Everybody is different. Everything that happens to us has the potential to make us stronger. Healing is possible.*

.....

## 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.



## The memory

Survivors are often distressed not only by the memory of what happened but also how they remember it. 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 an experience will decide how the incident is stored as a memory and how it is accessed later. Rape, sexual assault or 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 a matter it hasn't processed. It remains unresolved.
- **Fragmented** - bits and pieces are remembered.
- **Sensory** - the pictures, sounds, smells and feelings during a flashback are so clear that the event is remembered by all of, or a combination of some 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 aspects 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 ultra-vivid such as in flashbacks. This may make it difficult to accept.

SARSAS has lots of information on memory and there are people researching this. Please ask us for more information.

## Some ways that you can deal with your thoughts



**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 things that help you to keep managing. 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.



**Get creative.** Draw an image or make a collage that can help you when you feel gloomy or sad. Put the poster up where it can inspire you.



**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.



**Think about finding or making up your own 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 calm 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."

- “Be 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 supports or always supported and believed you? Keep a photograph or any symbol of this person with you always. Refer to it by looking at or touching it whenever when you require their presence.



**My best person-response.** Think about what your best person would say to you if you had an unhelpful thought or experience.



**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?
- What would my 'best person' say to tell me that it wasn't my fault?
- If a friend or a family member told you that this had happened to them would you blame them? Would you think they should have reacted differently? Would you think of them any differently?
- Try not to let the benefits of hindsight allow you to treat yourself cruelly. You have survived and you are healing.
- What would an organisation like SARSAS say?



**Relaxation.** People who have been subjected to traumatic experiences, including sexual assault, can find relaxation difficult. At one time, staying alert, constantly checking for danger might have been necessary in order 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 in the habit of being on guard to the extent that you hardly notice it.

So it can initially feel unsafe to drop your guard, and it can take practice and a bit of a risk to accept that there might be some places and times where you are actually safe from harm. There are significant health benefits when you can learn to stop being constantly tense and on guard.



**Distractions.** Make a list of 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
- Dance
- Make yourself a safe cocoon in bed with your duvet
- 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 (yours or someone else's)
- 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 and arrange to go and meet a representative



**Give yourself a calming sleep routine.** Loneliness or overthinking can become a real challenge when you are 'inactive'. Keeping a nightlight on and listening to the radio or calming music may help. Screens do not help with relaxation. Don't 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. Alcohol, caffeine, and cigarettes will stimulate you instead of relaxing you.

**"The future depends on what we do in the present"**

**Mohandas K Gandhi**

# Feelings

## Your emotional reactions

When dealing with trauma, you might feel:

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

Survivors may feel overwhelmed by many different feelings. They might feel them as a constriction in the throat or a sense of difficulty swallowing. In their stomach they may feel knottedness or cramping, upset stomach, have diarrhoea or constipation. They may experience a range of sensations 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 and explore your feelings individually:

**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 the survivor fear talking to people who could be supportive, and who could help them see that they do not deserve to feel ashamed.

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

**Emptiness.** The feelings are sometimes so overwhelming that, in order to cope, a survivor buries them all. These are called dissociated emotions. You may worry that other people will blame you, or you may have been told it was your fault. This is absolutely not true. Rape, sexual assault or sexual abuse is always the fault of the perpetrator or abuser.

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

## Some ways of dealing with emotional reactions

Set yourself manageable targets:

- Express your feelings in a safe environment
- Identify and name each one of your feelings
- Try to let them out in the open by writing, drawing or talking about them
- Accept that your feelings are allowed and are normal. Each of them has a cause and there's a reason you are feeling them
- 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 listen to and identify the closest sound you can hear. Repeat two times.

**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 practise 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. What would you like to do but currently cannot? Maybe learn to cook, speak a foreign language, paint or how to fix your car or bike.

**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 counselling or face-to-face support.** This can be a good way of helping to express and process feelings such as anxiety, fear, anger, depression, guilt, shame and low self-worth. Learning to share your feelings and experiences with a trained professional or non-judgemental trusted person can help you to feel understood, supported and to accept and value yourself.

# Grounding

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

## Guidelines

1. Grounding can be done anywhere, any place or any time and no one needs to know you are doing it.
2. Use grounding when you are experiencing a trigger, when you feel strong emotions, feel like using substances, harming yourself or feel yourself dissociating.
3. You can rate your mood before and after, on a 0-10 scale.
4. Keep your eyes open to stay in touch with the present.
5. Do not focus on the negative feelings. You want to divert away from this.
6. Focus on the here and now, not the past or future.
7. Grounding is more than just a relaxation strategy, it is used to distract and help extreme negative feelings. It is believed to be more effective for trauma than relaxation alone.

## How to do it

### Mental Grounding

1. **Have a good look around and describe your environment in detail**, e.g. 'I am on the train, I can see trees and a river....'
2. **Mental games**, e.g. go through the alphabet thinking of different things such as types of dogs, cities etc.
3. **Age progression**, if you have regressed you can slowly go back up eg: I am now 9, 10 etc. until you are back up to your current age.
4. **Describe an everyday activity in detail**, such as how to follow a recipe.
5. **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.
6. **Safety statements**, thinking 'I am safe now, I am in the present not the past, I am in this location and the date is.....'

7. **Use humour**, think of something or someone funny.
8. **Use concentration**, say the alphabet backwards, spell challenging words, do a Sudoku or practise some tricky sums.

### Physical Grounding

1. **Run warm or cool water over your hands.**
2. **Focus on your breathing**, notice each inhale and exhale, slow it down and repeat the phrase “I’m ok” on each inhale. Change it up with the use of ‘And relax’, ‘And calm’, ‘I’m safe’ or whatever phrase feels right for you.
3. **Grab as tightly as you can onto a chair, desk or table.**
4. **Touch different objects**, your pen, your keys. Tell yourself out loud what these are for.
5. **Dig your heels into the floor**; remind yourself that you are connected to the ground.
6. **Carry an object of personal value to you in your pocket**, a pebble from a visited beach, a piece of jewellery, a watch etc. that you can touch whenever you feel disturbed or panicky.
7. **Stretching**, extend your arms, fingers or legs as far as you can.
8. **Clench and release your fists.**
9. **Go outside, notice the weather, describe it. The change in temperature can help.**

### Soothing Grounding

1. **Say kind statements to yourself**, e.g you will get through this etc.
2. **Picture people you care about**, or, if possible, look at photos of them.
3. **Think of a safe place**, it could be real or imagined, for example the beach, mountains or somewhere you went or go now when you want to feel happy.
4. **Say coping statement** such as I can handle this, I have done it before etc.
5. **Plan a safe treat** such as a nice dinner, bubble bath etc.
6. **Think of things you are looking forward to**, like seeing a close friend.

## What if grounding doesn't work?

People who have used grounding say it does work but requires practice to make it as effective as possible. The more you practice it the better it will work. 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 could create a recording of a grounding message that you can play whenever you need it. If you don't want to use your own voice you could ask someone close to you to help. You can also teach family and friends about grounding so they can help if you become overwhelmed. Notice which method works best for you.



# Body

## Your body's reactions

Our bodies can hold the trauma from rape or sexual abuse. Every survivor 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 rape, sexual assault or abuse and why your body decides to react
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 impacts from rape or abuse are:

- Irritable Bowel Syndrome: indigestion or heartburn, acid reflux, stomach cramps, diarrhoea or constipation
- Pains
- Tensions
- Headaches
- Changes in body language
- Difficulties becoming sexually intimate

Becoming aware of changes and patterns in any bodily reactions are a good first step towards controlling them.

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, reflexology, and massage to strengthening exercises. A stronger body can help you deal with your system being overactive. 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 medicine, 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 are more comfortable with a male or female you may request to see a doctor of that gender.

## Some ways to look after your body

**Release positive chemicals through exercise.** Frequent and regular physical exercise boosts the immune system, improves mental health, helps prevent depression, and encourages positive 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.

Eat lots of fruit and vegetables

Take some long baths

Use a hot water bottle and / or something to comfort yourself



## Physiological reactions and sexuality

If at the time of the assault your body reacted or became aroused in some way, this physical response does not mean that you wanted to be sexually abused in any way. Some people who sexually abuse others will deliberately manipulate the person they are abusing to try to get their body to react.

We cannot always control how our body reacts, especially in stressful situations. Your body might react in an unwanted response to fear or physical stimulation. These physiological responses do not say anything about your desire or sexuality.

It is an unfortunate reality that an experience of sexual abuse can influence sexual intimacy. It can both make people hyper-interested in sex or particular sexual acts, and also make them feel overwhelmed or uncomfortable about sexual contact with a partner, whereby they start to avoid sex and isolate themselves.

If sexual thoughts, reactions or difficulties are distressing or bothering you, it is a good idea to talk to a trained counsellor who understands sexual assault to help you make sense of this.



# Behaviour

## Your actions

When someone has suffered any kind of rape or abuse it can affect their behaviour. There are very good reasons for a survivor to behave in certain ways. There will always be some thoughts or feelings behind our 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
- Endeavouring to 'keep the box shut' by distracting yourself
- Fear of seeing the abuser somewhere
- Fear of having an anxiety attack in front of others

In order to change your behaviour, you will need to believe it is important enough to make the change. You need the confidence in your ability to make this change. Identifying the thoughts and feelings behind the behaviour will help us to understand and work on our reactions as a whole. Some of these thoughts and feelings can help you to cope and to process what has happened safely. Others may cause you further distress or be harmful.

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 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. Others can tell you when your thoughts are unhelpful or self-destructive, and can help you to see that what happened wasn't your fault.

## 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, sexual assault 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 each side and you are equally in control. It's important your partner(s) understand and allows you to take it at your own pace.

## Hypersexuality

*...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 control back of your body. Sex is a healthy and natural thing, but be aware whether you are putting yourself in some risky situations. Make sure you are safe and think about how it makes you feel.

## Being very vigilant

*...I am constantly on edge.*

Feeling over-attentive and alert to every sound and movement is normal after trauma because your sense of risk can be intensified. As you work through the feelings and thoughts behind this vigilance this will become easier. In the short-term, try to find a safer place that is able to soothe you and go there once a day.

## Not wanting to go out

*...I don't want to see anyone. 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/using drugs 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, using, 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 use? And the pros and cons of changing your use of alcohol, drugs or smoking?

## 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. At what times of the day are you irritable? To whom?

## Reaching out to others, however difficult, can be really helpful

Isolation and secrecy often reflect how a survivor acted during or after rape or abuse. The perpetrator might have forced you to keep it a secret by making you scared of what would happen if people found out. You might have never told anybody for fear of what they might think or say or for fear of not being believed. However, being with others can both distract and comfort you.

Finding other people to talk to can help you to think about your own thoughts and reactions. Others can tell you when your thoughts are unhelpful or self-destructive, and can help you to see that what happened wasn't your fault.

## Tips for regaining control

Take things slowly and don't pressure yourself with unrealistic expectations. It usually takes time to restore some sense of normality.

Remember that all the feelings and physical sensations written about so far are common responses to a traumatic event. They are not a sign that you are 'going crazy'; you are processing an extremely distressing violation of your personal integrity.

Some people find the following things helpful:

- Exercising
- Studying
- Reading
- Working
- Drawing or painting
- Listening to music
- Playing sport
- Writing (writing can be particularly useful for getting stuff out of your head and organising your thoughts)

Others find counselling, helplines, meditation or spiritual practice and prayer to be sources of strength.

## 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.

Trying to work it all out can become overwhelming and frustrating. 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 what 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.

# Relationships

## Trust, intimacy and relationships

Gaining trust is often used 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 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 experience.

Some survivors have said they struggle with some of the following things, related to this betrayal of their trust:

- 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 for each partner(s). Many survivors feel frustrated that they just can't seem to get close to people, including their partner(s).



***It is important to remember: it is not trust that causes sexual abuse but the misuse of trust.***

Children need to trust adults in order to survive. You did not cause or deserve to be abused because you trusted someone. The abuse happened because someone abused that trust. Intimacy means more than (just) sexual intimacy. It is also about sharing special and important moments with close friends. 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 profoundly different to abuse. The dynamic of abuse is where one person's ideas and wishes are important and the other person's wishes are not considered at all. Intimacy is about developing mutuality, equality and negotiation. It can be helpful for you and your partner 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?

## Parenting

Becoming a parent can be a challenging time for anyone, and people 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. It might also be related to fears about your child's vulnerability to abuse.

Some survivors suffer anxiety about how to keep their children safe from abuse and some 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.

Remember that parenting is a challenging and sometimes overwhelming experience for most people. Despite the challenges, parents, including parents 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 ([see www.familylives.org.uk](http://www.familylives.org.uk)).

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

**Jean Shinoda Bolen**



# Key reactions: flashbacks

## What are flashbacks?

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

Though flashbacks are horrible and terrifying, they can show that a person is ready to deal with the traumatic event.

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 present. Look around and see the 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 get scared it is likely that you begin shallow breathing or stop breathing altogether. As a result your body could react to the lack of oxygen, causing panicky feelings, 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, a cushion or go to bed. Do anything to help you to feel protected.
7. **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.
8. **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.
9. **Bring your memories into the open:** Anyone who understands the effects of rape, sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse can be a valuable supporter for 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.
10. **Finally, know you are not crazy:** You are healing and you're dealing with the normal reactions to a traumatic event.

These facts and suggestions have been adapted from:

**Rape and Sexual Violence Project**  
[www.rsvporg.co.uk](http://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, sometimes using bleach
- Pulling hair out
- Repeatedly hitting the body

Other ways people self-harm are:

- 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, bulimia or compulsive eating
- working extremely hard, leading to exhaustion.

Many people who self-harm feel hopeless or worthless at the time. As a result they may ignore and/or deny their own needs. If their emotions seem impossible to understand or deal with then destroying those feelings might seem like the only answer.



## Who carries out self-harm?

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 you have low self-esteem or blame yourself 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

Many people who self-harm feel hopeless or worthless at the time. As a result they may ignore and/or deny their own needs. If their emotions seem impossible to understand or deal with then destroying those feelings might seem like the only answer.

## 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 going mad”**

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

### **“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 at the moment? 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 preparing for 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.

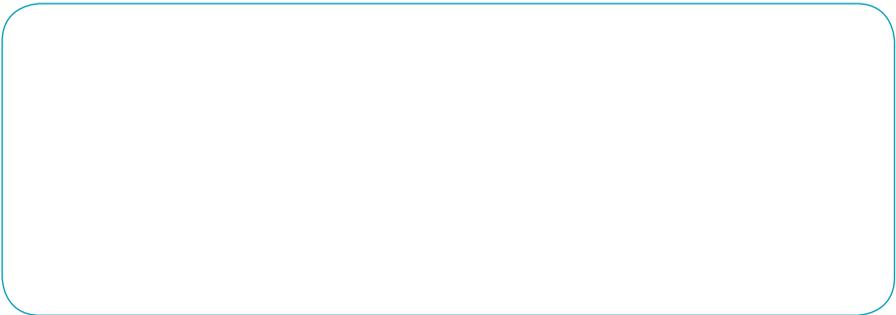
# Breaking it down

On these pages you can note down your favourite self-help suggestions from each section.

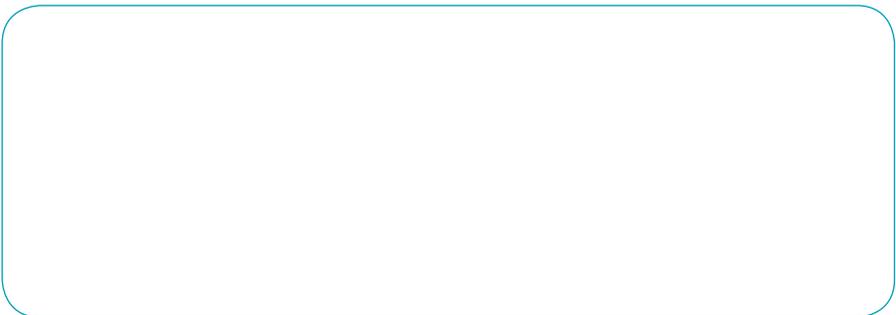
## Thoughts



## Feelings



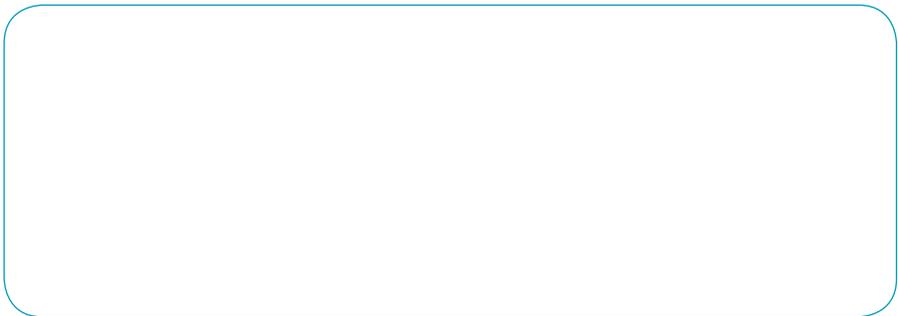
## Body



## Behaviour



## Relationships



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 survivors in the future.

[info@sarsas.org.uk](mailto:info@sarsas.org.uk)

0117 929 9556

# 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 control back. Many 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 and 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 survivors' groups and forums
- Sexual violence survivors' meetings/groups
- Learn 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

## Who could you talk to?

### **SARSAS provides:**

Women and girls helpline: [0808 801 0456](tel:08088010456)

Men and boys helpline: [0808 801 0464](tel:08088010464)

Email support service: [support@sarsas.org.uk](mailto:support@sarsas.org.uk)

The Bridge – Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC): [0117 342 6999](tel:01173426999)

- 24 hour phone line if you have been recently raped or assaulted
- Forensic Medical examinations
- Counselling from age 11 up

Safe Link: [www.safelinksupport.co.uk/](http://www.safelinksupport.co.uk/)

- Independent Sexual Violence Advocates
- Support around reporting and going to court

# Further resources

## **The Courage to Heal Workbook: For Women and Men Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse**

By Ellen Bass and Laura Davies

---

## **The Courage to be me**

By Nina Burrowes

[www.ninaburrowes.com/index.php/books/the-courage-to-be-me/](http://www.ninaburrowes.com/index.php/books/the-courage-to-be-me/)

---

## **Men's Health Forum**

---

## **NHS Bristol Little Book of WOW**

[www.happycity.org.uk/sites/default/files/WOW\\_A7.pdf%20FINAL.pdf](http://www.happycity.org.uk/sites/default/files/WOW_A7.pdf%20FINAL.pdf)

---

## **Pandora's Project**

Online support and resources for survivors

[www.pandys.org](http://www.pandys.org)

## **PODS**

For information on dissociation

[www.pods-online.org.uk](http://www.pods-online.org.uk)

---

## **Nightmares and sleep problems**

For information and self- help

[www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/workspace/publications/RCS\\_supportresources\\_nightmares.pdf](http://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/workspace/publications/RCS_supportresources_nightmares.pdf)

---

## **Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network**

Online network and information for survivors

[www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)

---

## **Mindfulness tracks on Youtube**

eg. Jon Kabat-Zin

# Acknowledgements

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**

by Gary Foster PhD and Cameron Boyd PhD, Living Well Australia.

---

## **The Green House, the Bridge, Safelink, The Southmead Project, Kinergy and Mike Buck from Avon & Somerset Police**

also contributed to this guide.

---

This guide was made possible by money from **Avon & Somerset Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner Community Action Fund.**



Somerset & Avon  
rape & sexual abuse support

**listening • believing • supporting**

B&NES Bristol North Somerset Somerset South Gloucestershire