

The SARSAS guide  
to supporting the  
person you care about

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# The SARSAS guide for family and friends

This guide is for family and friends supporting a person of any gender or sexual orientation, over the age of fourteen, who has been affected by sexual violence; recently or over a year ago.

This includes: rape, sexual assault, childhood sexual abuse, incest, sexual domestic violence, trafficking and sexual exploitation, online sexual bullying, female genital mutilation, ritual abuse, forced marriage, so-called ‘honour’-based violence, sexual intimidation, coercion or harassment, whether physical or verbal.

When a person has been raped or sexually abused it can affect how they think, feel, behave and see the world and those around them. This guide explains some common behaviours, emotions, thoughts and physical reactions that a survivor might be experiencing. Survivors can fear the impact that their disclosure will have on their life and on those closest to them; that they will be ignored, judged or not believed. Some of these responses can change the relationship that family and friends have with the person they are supporting. Family and friends can experience many confusing feelings of sadness, frustration, guilt, loneliness, helplessness and/or shock. By providing information and practical suggestions this guide aims to empower family and friends to support the person they care about.

# Introduction

You have picked up this guide because someone you care about has been affected by rape or sexual abuse.

You may be feeling anxious, angry, sad or distant from your friend or relation. These are very normal responses to seeing someone you care about hurting. You may wish that they would open up to you more and that you understood them better at this time. Healing is possible after any type of abuse. It can require courage and patience from the survivor and you will play an important role in the success of that process.

Many of the survivor's reactions associated with the trauma of rape and sexual abuse are natural safety mechanisms. The body and mind are reacting to a dangerous situation:

- **Fear and anger** are protective feelings
- **Mistrust and forgetfulness** are protective thoughts
- **Isolation and forming extra identities** are protective behaviours

These mechanisms may be used by the survivor long after the immediate danger has passed. However, many of these defence responses can lead to the survivor isolating themselves and make it more difficult for you to support the person you care about. This guide will offer suggestions for you to support them more effectively at this difficult time.



## *The most important things that you can do are:*

- *Listen to them*
- *Believe them*
- *Continue to offer unconditional support and love*
- *Be patient with them*
- *Encourage them*
- *Reassure them that their feelings are normal*
- *Give them choices*

It is important that you look after yourself during this time. Supporting the person you care about following the impacts of rape or sexual abuse can be emotionally challenging. This guide will explore in the section 'Caring for yourself when caring for others', more detailed ways of keeping yourself emotionally and physically strong whilst you are being there for someone else.





# The impact of rape or sexual abuse on the person you care about

When a person has experienced a traumatic incident it is likely that they will experience deep **physical, emotional** and **behavioural** reactions to this trauma. These reactions are normal and will be different for each individual.

**A survivor is experiencing normal reactions to an abnormal situation.**

The next few pages will list some common examples of **reactions to trauma**:

## Behavioural reactions

- Panic attacks
- Nightmares
- Flashbacks
- Increased smoking and/or drinking and/or drug use
- Isolating themselves from others
- Overworking or not turning up to work
- Personal neglect
- Cutting or self-harm
- Nail biting
- Impulsiveness
- Twitches, tapping fingers etc.
- Non-stop talking
- Not wanting to talk
- Changes in eating patterns

When someone has suffered any kind of rape or sexual abuse it can affect their behaviour. There are always **reasons, emotions** or **thoughts** behind why a survivor behaves in this way.

### Emotional reactions

It can be hard for a survivor to stop thinking about their experience. There can be lots of mixed emotions for the person affected. Trying to understand it can be confusing and different common emotions can lead to the person you care about thinking things about themselves that aren't true. Here are some examples of the feelings a survivor can have and the thoughts attached to these feelings:

- **Mistrust** - 'I can't trust anyone'
- **Anger** - 'Why me?'
- **Insecurity** - 'People won't want to be with me/What will people think of me?'
- **Hopelessness** - 'I will never be the same'
- **Fear** - 'I am scared about seeing the abuser again'
- **Guilt** - 'It was my fault/If only I hadn't'
- **Depression** - 'I can't cope'
- **Irritability** - 'Nobody understands me'
- **Anxiety** - 'I can't tell anyone/Nobody will believe me'
- **Self loathing** - 'I'm dirty and disgusting'
- **Loss in self confidence** - 'I am unable to do this'

### Physical reactions

- Tension in the muscles
- Tiredness and exhaustion
- Diarrhoea
- Little desire to do anything
- Hyperactivity
- Dry mouth
- Sweating
- Headaches
- Dizzy spells/funny turns
- Unsteady breathing
- Tightness in the chest
- Increased rapid heartbeat
- Poor memory
- Other physical pains
- Vaginismus



# A survivor's survival instincts

The human brain is rational and intuitive. When we are exposed to danger or traumatic events the intuitive side takes over. It does what it needs to do to survive.

Our senses are constantly sending signals to a part of the brain called the amygdala. The amygdala searches through these signals for any threats. If it finds a threat it tells our hypothalamus to release defence hormones. This will trigger one of these five instinctive reactions to danger:

## Fight, flight, freeze, friend and flop

Our mind will choose the reaction that is most likely to lead to survival and least harm. It doesn't think about how we will feel after. During rape or abuse the first two options aren't possible as they may lead to further physical or mental harm. The last three options 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 we may stand still when we see a car coming towards us before we think to get out of the way (freeze).

The abuse the person you care about is dealing with may have happened recently or over a year ago. The perpetrator may be unknown or very well known to the survivor. Some perpetrators can convince a child or vulnerable person that the abuse is normal behaviour. When abuse has been normalised by the perpetrator over a long period of time, it can take a long time for the survivor to acknowledge and finally disclose their experience. A survivor will often have used the survival instincts of friend, freeze or flop at the time to protect them. This is why survivors can often feel frustrated that they did not fight back or run away at the time.



Our survival instincts react in a split second. Immediately after, the amygdala begins the slower process of sending the threat signal to the rational part of our brain (the cortex or hippocampus). It is a few seconds later that we manage to think rationally about the threat. As the instinct for immediate survival overrides longer-term rational thought, fear can overwhelm rationality about the threat. If there is a safe outcome (survival), the brain learns to use that reaction again (fear). This is how abuse can occur over a long period of time or many times for some survivors.



# Why survivors don't talk about it

The decision for a survivor to discuss rape or sexual abuse, even with someone close to them can be a difficult one.

Disclosing for the first time is often a painful part of the healing process. Sometimes it can be even more difficult to discuss the rape or abuse with a friend or family member if the perpetrator is known to them. It can take a long time and lots of courage for a survivor to disclose what has happened to them. Here are some of the very common and real reasons that people do not find it easy to talk about what has happened.



**Fear**  
that they  
will not be  
believed

**Fear**  
that they will feel  
even more hurt if  
the person that they  
disclose to does not  
listen, believe or reacts  
negatively to  
them

**Discomfort**  
about having to  
discuss very intimate  
and personal  
information

**Hopelessness**  
that if they say  
anything it will be  
their word against  
the perpetrator's

**Concern**  
that talking about  
things before they are  
ready to will be even  
more traumatising

**Confusion**  
if they love or care for  
the person who has  
abused them. They can  
worry that they do not  
want to get someone  
who they care for  
into trouble

**Anxiety**  
that they will be  
forced to make a  
report and to have  
to re-live painful  
experiences

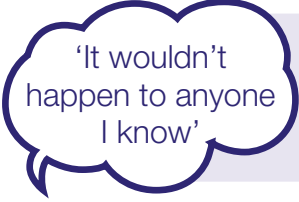
# Challenging false ideas about rape and sexual abuse

Here are some of the unhelpful untruths that people can think and survivors themselves can end up believing. Alongside these comments are some useful ways you can challenge them and help slowly eliminate these taboos and false ideas.



'Why didn't they run away?'

Just because a survivor didn't run away, does not mean they asked for it. Our natural responses to threats are not only fight or flight, but also to freeze, be-friend or flop.




'It wouldn't happen to anyone I know'

Rape and sexual abuse can happen to anyone. It crosses all socio-economic, race and class barriers. It happens in both rural and urban environments.



'It only happens to women'

People of all genders and sexual orientation can be affected by rape and sexual abuse.



'People make these things up'

People rarely lie about sexual abuse. Making a disclosure can in itself be a painful and deeply personal experience. False allegations of rape or sexual abuse are the same as any other type of crime i.e. 2% (Lonsway and Fitzgerald, 1994).

'Rape is usually carried out by strangers'

Over 80% of people are abused by someone they know i.e. family members, relatives, close friends and/or someone they come into regular contact with. The people likely to abuse children and those that are vulnerable are those who have the most opportunity and access to them.

'But she didn't say no'

Consent is defined as an agreement by choice. The person must have had the freedom and capacity to make that choice. If someone threatens another's safety or if that person is unable to consent because of drink, drugs or being asleep, this is not consent.

'She was wearing a short skirt'

Nobody deserves rape or sexual abuse, EVER. Reports show that there is a great diversity in the way targeted women act or dress. Attractiveness has little significance and rapists rarely target women based on their physical appearance. Rapists are cowards who will rape or sexually abuse in situations where they think they are most likely to get away with it.



*You are reading this guide because you are willing and open to understanding an issue that can often make people feel uncomfortable. By doing this you are helping to prevent the taboos that exist around sexual violence and that can allow it to keep happening. By talking to the person you care about, you will let them know that it is not their fault and your love for them is unconditional.*

# 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-inflicted violence, self-injury or self-mutilation.

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

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

## Who carries out self-harm?

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



## Why do people self-harm?

Self-harm can be a way to:

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

## Myths about self-harm:

### **'It is a failed suicide attempt'**

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

### **'Self-harm is attention seeking behaviour'**

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

### **'Self-harm is a sign of someone 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.



# Key reactions: flashbacks

## What are flashbacks?

It is common for a survivor to experience vivid images of the rape or sexual abuse, making them 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. Flashbacks can occur at any time, are out of a person's control and difficult to get rid of.

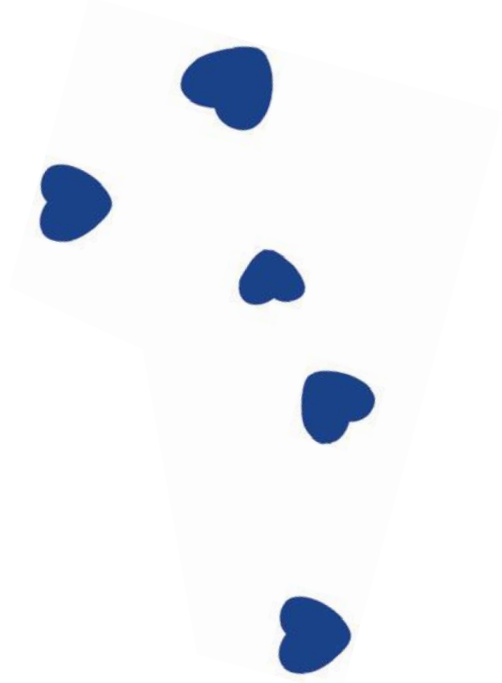
Though flashbacks are horrible and terrifying, they can show that a person is ready to deal with the traumatic event.

Some ways you can support someone having flashbacks are:

- **Help the person you care about to acknowledge their flashbacks**, what can trigger them and to recognise if there are any usual signs or cues before one starts
- **Remind them that the worst is over**. The feelings they are experiencing are now memories of events in the past that they have already survived
- **Help them to focus on the present** by using some of the grounding techniques in the next section. Help them to concentrate on their own senses; observing their surroundings, listening to sounds around them, remind them of their own physical presence, encourage them to breathe in the air around them. This can help someone to remain in the here and now
- **Support them to breathe through it**. When people are scared it is likely they may experience shallow breathing or hold their breath. As a result the body can react to the lack of oxygen, causing panicky feelings, a pounding heart, pounding head, tightness, sweating, fainting and dizziness. By getting someone to breathe deeply some of this panic will stop



- **Give the person you care about time to recover.** Flashbacks are very powerful and so they will need time to recover afterwards by taking a nap, a warm bath or just allowing themselves some quiet time. Support them to be patient, kind and gentle to themselves by allowing their body some comfort and nurturing
- **Remind them that you are there and willing to talk about the flashback.** Remember that they may want you to be around or even prefer to be alone. Be sensitive to their personal needs at this time. Ask them what they would like you to do to support them with their flashbacks
- **Remind them that it is a normal reaction.** They are healing and the flashbacks are the body's way of dealing with an abnormal or traumatic event



# How you can feel when someone you care about is affected by rape or sexual abuse

'S\*\*t how is this going to affect her'

'How could he have done this. I trusted him totally. I am so confused'

'I felt a mix of emotions. Complete and utter guilt. I kept on asking myself what I did wrong'

'How can I help when they don't want to talk to me?'

'I felt an overwhelming sense of sadness and guilt and wondering how I could have let this happen'

'Who and what am I supposed to believe? I feel so torn'

'How am I going to tell everyone about this?'

'Our family life is never going to be the same'

'I got so angry. Why did this have to happen to someone I love'

'Who do I turn to now? It all seems such a mess'

'I am relieved she has told me and this now explains some of her behaviour over the last few years'

'I should have protected her'

'I just wanted to fix things quickly'

'How are people going to judge her and our family?'

# What can you do to help?

The most important and simple thing you can do to help the person you care about is to listen and believe.

Here are some more guidelines:

- ***Listen and let them say what they need to in their own words and in their own time.*** This can be one of the most important but hardest things to do when you want the person you care about to heal as quickly as possible
- ***Believe what they tell you.*** Survivors very rarely lie about sexual violence but often fear other people won't believe them. If the person you care about ever seems to contradict themselves or add new facts, this doesn't mean they're making things up. It is very common for trauma to affect the way in which we recall memories
- ***Offer unconditional support.*** If, in your opinion, your friend or relative is not taking the best care of themselves, or making the 'right' decisions (e.g. about reporting), do not judge them. People react in different ways to rape and sexual abuse
- ***Remain patient.*** A lot of survivors blame themselves for what was done to them. It's normal after something traumatic to think 'If only I hadn't...' Remind them that you don't think that's true, but bear in mind that arguing with them probably won't persuade them. Don't be frustrated if they believe this for some time
- ***If they feel guilty about something,*** e.g. not putting up a fight, affirm the fact that they used their survival skills to stay alive, and that compliance is not consent. Most people do not put up a fight in order to survive and minimise further harm
- ***Explore their options with them.*** If they face difficult decisions, help them to make their own choices

- **Encourage them to do things for themselves;** try to affirm their own capabilities and power by not doing things for them that they can do themselves
- **Take them seriously** and treat all their feelings equally seriously
- **Dealing with the effects** of sexual violence is ultimately something a survivor does for themselves. Survivors are experts in their own healing, and so encourage and empower them to help themselves
- **Explore and challenge your own views** about sexual violence
- **Take every opportunity to reassure them** that you love them for who they are, and that they are still the person they were before anything happened to them. All their reactions are normal reactions to an abnormal situation
- **Take your needs seriously and seek your own support.** Accept that there is going to be serious disruption in their life, and that this will probably affect you. Remember that you need to be physically and emotionally strong if you are supporting someone else so it is important that you look after yourself



***Remember, you are not a miracle-worker. The best you can do is let them know that you care about them and will be there if they want to talk.***



***Do you need a care break? Make sure you make time for yourself.***



# Exploring grounding techniques with the person you care about

Grounding can be a useful technique for people dealing with self-harm, flashbacks, panic attacks and any kind of stressful situation. It is a way of keeping people in the here and now by focusing on the present. They may like you to go through this with them or prefer to practice these techniques completely on their own.



*Here are some guidelines that you can use as a resource when supporting the person you care about:*

- *Grounding can be done anywhere, anyplace, anytime and nobody needs to know that a person is doing it*
- *Grounding can be used as soon as someone experiences a trigger, feels like harming themselves, using a substance or disassociating with others and their surroundings*
- *Sometimes it can help if a person rates their mood on a scale of 1-10 before and after*
- *It is best to keep eyes open whilst practicing grounding*
- *It should be done whilst focusing on the present, not the past or future*
- *Grounding is more than just a relaxation strategy. It can be used to distract and help a person to deal with extreme negative feelings. It is believed to be more effective for trauma than relaxation techniques alone*

Remember that the following suggestions will not work for everyone. Grounding techniques are very personal and it can take time for a person to develop the techniques that work for them. Whilst grounding takes practice it is also key that the person you care about does it in their own time. Explore these suggestions together and ask the person you care about if there are techniques that they would like you or others close to them to practice with them when they are having a flashback, panic attack or feeling like self-harming.

## Exploring mental grounding with the person you care about

- **Observing surroundings.** Encourage them to look around at their surroundings and describe their environment in detail
- **Mental games.** Suggest games such as going through the alphabet and thinking of types of dogs, names of cities etc.
- **Age progression.** If they have regressed during flashbacks and panic attacks, it can be useful for them to slowly count back up, e.g., I am now 9, 10, 11 etc. until they reach their current age
- **Encourage them to describe an everyday activity in detail.**  
For instance their breakfast or bedtime routine
- **Imagery.** Encourage them to explore their own ways of visualising themselves moving away from the pain. It could be flying or skating away from it or changing a 'TV channel' in their head to a better channel
- **Safety statements.** Encourage them to remind themselves that they are safe now. Remind them to think of where they are, the date, time and to stay in the present
- **Use concentration.** Explore practicing concentration techniques such as saying the alphabet backwards or practicing tricky sums



## Exploring useful physical grounding techniques

- **Running warm or cool water over hands**
- **Breathing through.** Encourage them to focus on breathing deeply and slowly, concentrating on inhaling and exhaling
- **Touching physical objects** around them, a pen, keys etc.
- **Clenching and releasing fists**
- **Stamping feet or digging heels** into the ground to remind them of their own physicality
- **Grabbing** their chair as tightly as possible
- **Stretching** by extending their arms and legs as far as they can

## Exploring soothing grounding techniques

- **Saying kind statements to themselves** e.g. 'you will get through this'
- **Picturing people they care about**
- **Thinking of a safe place.** It could be imagined or real, e.g. a beach or beautiful mountains
- **Saying coping statements.** This could be 'I can handle this' or 'I have handled this before'
- **Planning a safe treat.** Encourage them to think of a nice dinner that they are going to have, a bubble bath or a long walk
- **Thinking of things they are looking forward to.** This could be seeing a close friend or going out for dinner



## Information if you are a partner of a survivor

As a partner, you can be a very important source of support to the person you care about as they begin to deal with the effects of sexual violence.

Rape and sexual abuse can impact on intimacy within a loving relationship and can challenge both of your thoughts around gender and sexuality.

- **Impacts on intimacy for partners** - It is possible that the sexual aspect of your relationship can be affected while your partner is trying to heal from abuse that might have happened either recently or over a year ago. Be sensitive to their needs in this area, and never ever persuade or cajole them into any contact that they are not enthusiastic about. By rejecting intimacy your partner is not rejecting you, even though it may feel like it; the associated memories around sexual behaviour, or even touch, may make it too difficult for them to even contemplate this. If this is the case, reassure your partner that you understand how important that is and that you will give them all the patience and time they need
- **Impacts on you** - If the abuse is recent, you may feel a sense of helplessness or guilt. Some partners can feel they were unable to fulfil their role as 'protector' and prevent it happening to someone they love. They may feel a great anger towards the perpetrator and consider revenge. They may share their partner's pain so that they

experience some of the same reactions as them: nightmares, sadness, disillusionment with the world. Just as your partner may need to get support with how they are feeling, so too, do you. It can be easy to adopt the role of the strong partner, supporting a partner with no apparent hurt to yourself. It is very important that you acknowledge these feelings and get support, so that any issues you are dealing with don't end up affecting your partner's recovery

- ***Impacts on same sex relationships*** - If you are in a same sex relationship there may also be additional questions that arise about your partner's sexuality or relationship dynamics and intimacy. You may think that seeking help may be more difficult if either of you is not 'out'. All the support services are available to you whether you are out or not.





## How supporting someone affected by rape or sexual abuse can affect **you**

Caring family members, partners, friends and children of survivors are very often affected by rape and sexual abuse and its aftermath.

The knowledge of the exposure of a loved one to a traumatic event can be traumatizing in itself. Supporting a person you care about at this time can mean you often experience the effects of trauma as well, sometimes with similar symptoms to those of survivors listed in the section 'The impact of rape and sexual abuse'. Here are some examples of common behavioural, emotional and physical impacts that family and friends can experience:

### Behavioral impacts

- Self-neglect
- Drinking/smoking more often
- Staying away from friends
- Not going out
- Bad moods
- Nightmares
- Panic attacks

## Emotional impacts

- Shock or panic
- Helplessness
- Feelings of violation
- Sense of devaluation and shame
- Rage or anger
- Isolation and estrangement from others
- Lost sense of community and belonging
- Guilt and self-blame
- Resentment
- Denial
- Frustration
- Confusion
- Thinking about it all the time
- Poor concentration

## Physical impacts

- Stress and anxiety
- Poor sleep
- Weight loss/gain
- Headaches
- Memory loss

# Caring for yourself when caring for others

Taking care of yourself and your feelings is essential. You should not feel guilty about looking after yourself. Practicing good self-care helps you to better care for others.

- **Maintain your hobbies and interests** - If you normally enjoy going out with friends, gardening, cooking or any other hobby, keep doing it. Continuing to do the things that make you happy is a good way of keeping you emotionally strong when you are dealing with the effects of rape and sexual abuse
- **Keep up exercise** - Finding a form of exercise that you enjoy can help you deal with anxiety and stress. Exercising also releases happy hormones or endorphins which will help you to keep positive and stay strong at this time
- **Talk to someone you trust** - Supporting a survivor to heal can often be a difficult and slow process. Chat with someone who understands your situation and can empathise with you
- **Get informed** - Contact some of the specialist agencies and organisations in the 'Further resources' section of this guide for more information. By finding out more about trauma responses, coping strategies and how people re-build their lives you will feel more empowered and better equipped to support yourself and the person you care about
- **Talk to a professional** - Talking to someone who is trained professionally like a counsellor, doctor or specialist helpline worker can help you to deal with your thoughts and feelings

- **Grounding techniques** - These can be useful for families and friends as well as survivors. Explore techniques that work for you and practicing using them if you are suffering from panic attacks, anxiety or stress
- **Take a break** - Make plans that give you a break from talking or thinking about the abuse. This could be going for a long walk, having dinner with friends or watching a film
- **Take time to relax** - Relaxation looks different for everyone. You may enjoy listening to music, meditation, taking a bath or reading. Writing a diary can also help you to peacefully deal with your thoughts and feelings. It is important to take time each day to help your body to unwind and relax
- **Bedtime routine** - If you are struggling to sleep, try and establish a good bedtime routine to help you unwind; have a bath, make yourself a hot milky drink (avoiding caffeine) or read a book. Try to keep your pattern the same each evening to get your body into a rhythm



*It may not feel like it now but it will get easier.*







# Protecting the person you care about and others

It is important that everyone, organisations and individuals alike, help to protect children (those under 18 years old) and vulnerable adults from all forms of abuse. This may be abuse that has happened or is likely to happen.

You may have heard this referred to as 'safeguarding'. By looking out for the signs of rape and sexual abuse in friends and family members we can all help to prevent it.

## What can you do to help?

- **Tell someone** - Inform an individual or an organisation, who can help to stop the abuse. You can find useful numbers in the 'Further resources' section of this guide
- **Ask for more information** - Sarah's Law allows parents to ask the police to tell them if they think someone has a criminal record for child sexual offences
- **Report it** - Contact the police (you can do this anonymously) if you feel there is a child or vulnerable adult who has been abused or is at risk of abuse

At SARSAS, if a person is under 18 years old and gives us their name and address, we may have to break their confidentiality and get some advice from other organisations who can help stop the abuse happening to them and others.



## Reporting rape and sexual abuse to the police

Whether to report a rape or sexual abuse to the police is a choice that only the survivor can make.\*

It is important to support the person you care about to do what feels right for them. Some survivors find reporting helps them to feel that they have taken positive action to prevent the crime being repeated. Others may not be ready to take this step. If a survivor does decide to make a report, there are various people involved in the process who are there to help them from the reporting through to the final court stages.

- **Police or Specially Trained Officers (STOs)** - Throughout the country there are officers who are trained specifically to work with survivors of rape and sexual abuse. If your friend or relative decides to make a report they might want your support to go to the police station. When they arrive, they can request a female or male officer to talk to. The specialist police person will do their very best to make the survivor feel as comfortable as possible, try to help the survivor to stay in control of the situation and remind them to request a break whenever they need one
- **SARC (Sexual Assault Referral Centre)** - A SARC is a nationwide walk in service that is open 24/7. It is a place where a survivor can go following recent or historic abuse to get practical and emotional support. The SARC offers pregnancy and STD tests and forensic

medical examinations from trained medical staff as well as crisis workers who will be able to support the survivor through these processes and keep them informed of their choices. The SARC also offers a counselling service to survivors of rape and sexual abuse. The SARC explores their options with the survivor, whether that is making a statement to the police, reporting anonymously or retaining forensic evidence to report at a later date. A SARC can take forensic evidence from a survivor up to 8 days after the assault and can keep evidence indefinitely, so that a survivor can report at a later date. If the assault has just happened and the survivor chooses to have a forensic medical examination to gather evidence, survivors will be asked to ideally keep the clothes they were wearing at the time of the assault unwashed in a paper bag. Do not worry if you have already washed them. It is a survivor's decision to make a report or not and it is important for others to respect this choice and a survivors reasons for making it

- **ISVAs (*Independent Sexual Violence Advisers*)** - An ISVA service is available nationwide to provide specialist practical and emotional support to the survivor from the moment of report through to the court stages. An ISVA can help to liaise between police, SARCs, counsellors and support workers to ensure the court process runs as smoothly as possible for a survivor
- **Counsellors** - professional counsellors are available through organisations such as SARSAS, Bristol SARC - The Bridge, The Green House, The Southmead Project or Womankind. Counselling helps people to identify and explore thought patterns, experiences, and patterns of behaviour which may be affecting their life

\*Unless they are under 18 or a vulnerable adult

## Anonymous reporting

Some survivors choose to report a crime anonymously without giving any of their personal details. This allows them to let the police know about the crime that has happened without the police or perpetrator knowing who has made the allegation. Anonymous intelligence can still be used to help police catch the perpetrator and prevent them offending again. By taking details of the crime, the police may be able to successfully match the anonymous information to another similar crime or perpetrator on their database. If the police successfully match the crime to a previous one the survivor will then be asked if they would like to make a formal report but this is only if the survivor gives their consent. SARSAS and the SARC can support survivors to complete a form that the police will require for an anonymous report.

## If the person you care about does not feel ready to report

Reporting can be a very difficult step for a survivor to make; re-living painful memories, discussing intimate details and often feeling afraid of what the perpetrator will do or what others will say. It is important that the person you care for feels supported no matter what their decision. The majority of survivors of rape or sexual abuse do not choose to report what has happened to them to the police. It can also take a long time to feel in the right place to report. Equally, it may never feel right and sometimes survivors can find peace of mind in other ways.

# A glossary of useful terms

**CAHMS** - Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

**CBT** - Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

**CPS** - Crown prosecution Service

**DID** - Dissociative Identity Disorder

**DV** - Domestic Violence

**ISVA** - Independent Sexual Violence Adviser

**PTSD** - Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

**SARC** - Sexual Assault Referral Centre

**STDs** - Sexually Transmitted Diseases

**STO** - Specially Trained Officer

**SV** - Sexual Violence

# Further resources

National and International online support for survivors, families and friends of rape and sexual abuse

**Rape Crisis England and Wales** - provides information about rape and sexual abuse.

[rapecrisis.org.uk](http://rapecrisis.org.uk) • 0808 8029999

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**5 Million Men** - a helpline for men who have experienced rape or sexual abuse.

[safeline.org.uk](http://safeline.org.uk) • 0808 8005005

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**Mosac** - offer a national helpline for parents and carers or children who have been sexually abused.

[mosac.org.uk](http://mosac.org.uk) • 0800 9801958

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**BACP (British Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists)** - provides a list of registered counsellors nationally.

[bacp.co.uk](http://bacp.co.uk)

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**Havoca** - offers help for adult victims of child abuse.

[havoca.org](http://havoca.org)

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**Pandy's** - offers information and online support for survivors, families and friends.

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

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Local support for survivors



Somerset & Avon  
rape & sexual abuse support

**SARSAS** - provides a telephone support line, 121 support, counselling and group sessions for survivors of rape and sexual abuse.

[sarsas.org.uk](http://sarsas.org.uk) • 0808 8010456

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**The Bridge (SARC- Sexual Assault Referral Centre)** - provides forensic medical support and information about reporting to the police and the judicial process. Separate friends and family service.

[turntothebridge.org](http://turntothebridge.org) • 0117 3426999

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**Safe Link** - provides confidential advice and advocacy for male and female survivors of sexual violence around reporting and going to court through their ISVA service.

[safelinksupport.co.uk](http://safelinksupport.co.uk) • 0117 9250680

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**STTY** - male rape information line. Open Fridays 5 - 7pm.

0117 9743773

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**Broken Rainbow** - LGBT helpline providing information, advice and support particularly around domestic violence.

[brokenrainbow.org.uk](http://brokenrainbow.org.uk) • 0300 9995428

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**Survivor Pathway** - provides information for anybody wanting to know more about specialist sexual violence services across Bristol, Bath, North East Somerset, North Somerset, Somerset and South Gloucestershire  
[survivorpathway.org.uk](http://survivorpathway.org.uk)

**Safeguarding telephone advice**  
- see Survivor's Pathway for your local safeguarding advice line

## Feedback

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

If there is any part of this guide that you feel has particularly helped you, please let us know. Equally, if you feel there is something that we could improve or information that we could have included, please also let us know. We are always striving to listen to our service user's feedback and improve our services.

### How can we support other friends and family members better?

We'd really like your thoughts, experiences and tips so that we can anonymously share ideas with other family and friends of survivors in the future. If you feel that there are any other services that would be useful for yourself or others who are supporting someone affected by rape or sexual abuse, please let us know.

**Email: [feedback@sarsas.org.uk](mailto:feedback@sarsas.org.uk)**

**Tel: 0808 801 0456**



Somerset & Avon  
**rape & sexual abuse support**

**listening • believing • supporting**

B&NES Bristol North Somerset Somerset South Gloucestershire