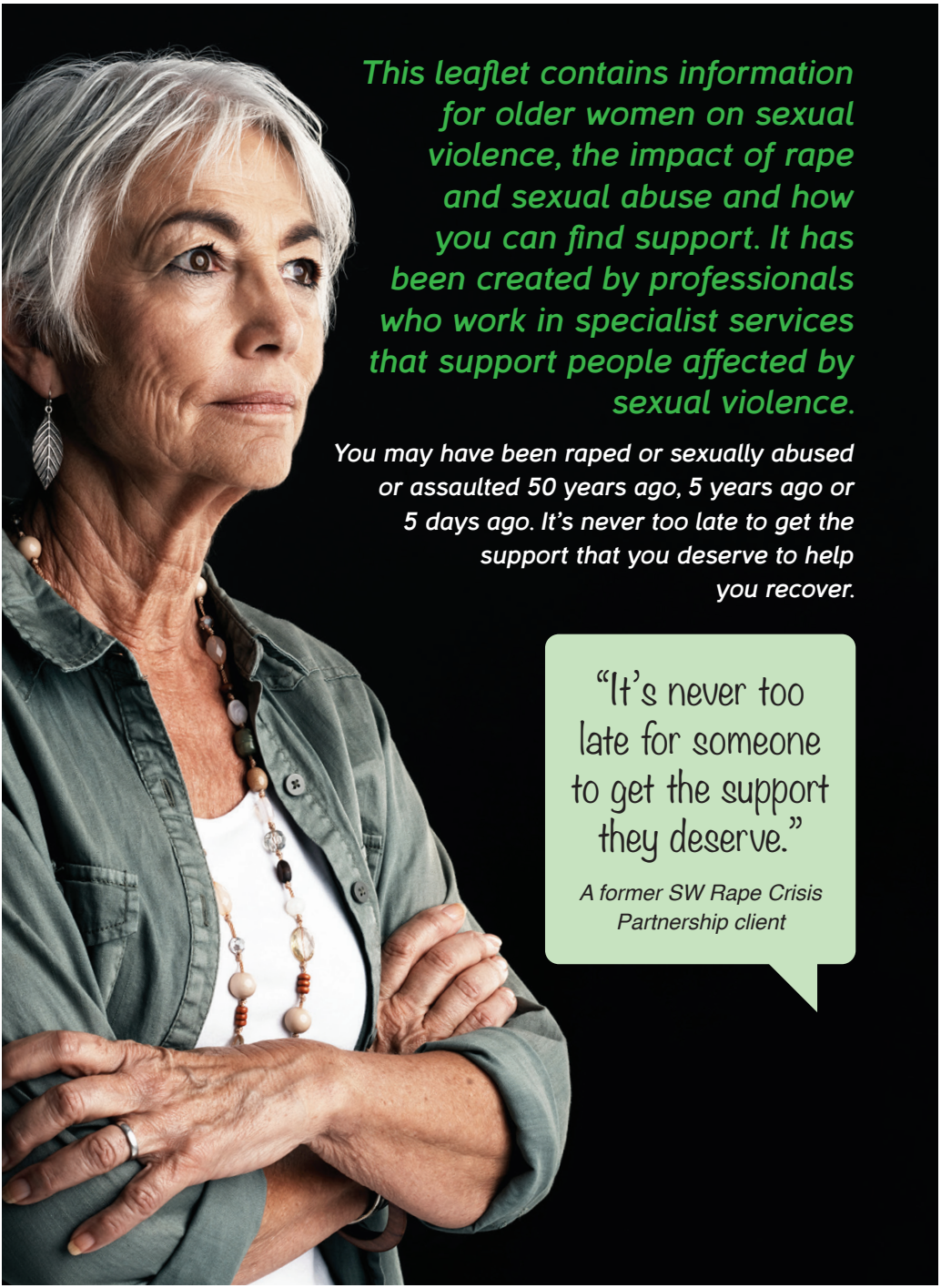


Sexual violence and abuse

Information for older women



This leaflet contains information for older women on sexual violence, the impact of rape and sexual abuse and how you can find support. It has been created by professionals who work in specialist services that support people affected by sexual violence.

You may have been raped or sexually abused or assaulted 50 years ago, 5 years ago or 5 days ago. It's never too late to get the support that you deserve to help you recover.

"It's never too late for someone to get the support they deserve."

A former SW Rape Crisis Partnership client

The Facts

- Sexual violence is a term used to describe any kind of unwanted sexual act or activity. Rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment and unwanted touching are all forms of sexual violence. Any behaviour of a sexual nature that causes you distress is considered to be sexual violence.
- 1 in 5 women in the UK will experience sexual violence in their lifetime.
- Most women are assaulted by someone they know. This can include acquaintances, a partner/ex-partner or spouse, a family member or somebody who provides you with care.
- There is a general belief that older women are not at risk from sexual violence. However, women of all ages and from all walks of life can be affected by rape or sexual abuse.
- The impact of sexual violence can be devastating but there is support to help you recover and rebuild your life.

How you might be feeling if you have experienced sexual violence

Rape, sexual abuse and sexual assault are all traumatic events or experiences. When someone has gone through something traumatic, they can experience strong physical, emotional and behavioural reactions or feelings. Some of these are listed below:

- Panic attacks and flashbacks
- Nightmares
- Increased smoking/drug or alcohol use
- Eating disorders
- Self-harm
- Depression and anxiety
- Dissociation from present surroundings
- Anger, fear and self-blame
- Low self-esteem and loss of confidence
- Tiredness or hyperactivity
- Muscle tension, sweating and headaches
- Unsteady breathing or tightness in the chest

You may hear these reactions referred to as trauma symptoms or PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). These reactions are a normal way of responding to disturbing events and will vary for everyone. There is support available to reduce or even stop these trauma symptoms.

Some older women have found that the menopause has a significant impact on their trauma reactions. Others have found that some menopausal symptoms have been worsened by their trauma. If you have experienced this, there are organisations that can support you. You can also talk to your GP about medical support for this.

Questions and worries you might have

If I want support do I need to prove it happened? What if no-one believes me?

Your local Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre will always believe and support you. You will never have to prove anything to them.

I'm too embarrassed to talk about it

You will never have to tell your support centre more than you are comfortable with. They will support you and never judge you.

Was what happened to me serious enough? There are people who need it more than me

No matter what happened you deserve support and will be taken seriously.

I'm worried that I have developed 'unhealthy' ways of coping with what happened to me such as using drugs or alcohol

Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centres offer non-judgmental support and understand that people have different ways of managing the impact of their experiences. They can help you explore other ways of coping, if that is what you want.

My memories of what happened are very mixed-up

Memories of traumatic events are often disjointed, broken up or suppressed for a long time. This is a normal response to the trauma you have experienced.

Was it my fault?

No. Nobody deserves to be abused. Wherever it happened or however you reacted, it is not your fault and you have a right to access support.

I'm worried someone will find out

Anything you share is completely confidential. Confidentiality will only be broken if there is a concern that somebody is at immediate risk from harm.

It happened so long ago. I should be over it by now

The impact of sexual violence can be devastating and life-long. Some women will have experienced sexual violence as a child or younger woman and may have lived with the trauma for many years before telling someone or seeking support. You need and deserve support as much as anybody else.

"After 60 years, it was good to talk to someone kind and helpful. It gave me peace of mind."

A SW Rape Crisis Partnership client

IF YOU HAVE BEEN RAPED OR SEXUALLY ASSAULTED in the last 7-10 days

- **In an emergency, dial 999** and ask for the police and/or the ambulance service.
- **You may want to report to the police** which you can do by calling 999 or 101. Reporting to the police is a personal choice and you do not have to do it if you don't want to. You can do this at any time after the assault has taken place, even if it was many years ago.
- **You may want to go to your local Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC)** where you can get specialist medical attention and a Forensic Medical Exam. SARCS also offer a range of other services, including practical and emotional support. You can visit your SARC whether or not you report to the police. Find your local SARC here: **www.survivorpathway.org.uk**
- **Keep any items of clothing and other personal items** you had at the time you were raped or sexually assaulted safe (if you can) and do not wash them, or your body, as this may result in forensic evidence being lost. However, do not worry if you have already bathed or washed your clothes.



Support and recovery services

- **Local Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centres** provide a range of services such as emotional support, advocacy and specialist trauma counselling to help you cope with and recover from what has happened.
- **Your local Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA) service** can provide support and guidance if you are thinking about reporting or are going through the criminal justice process. This independent service is not connected to the police and there is no requirement to report.

These services are free and confidential.
Find your local service here: **www.survivorpathway.org.uk**

Useful contacts and services

Regional Rape Crisis Centres

Devon Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Services

www.devonrapecrisis.org.uk

01392 204174

Gloucestershire Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre

www.glosrasac.org

01452 305421

Somerset and Avon Rape and Sexual Abuse Support

www.sarsas.org.uk

0808 801 0456

The Women's Centre Cornwall

www.womenscentrecornwall.org.uk

01208 77099

The Survivor Pathway

A guide to the specialist services in the South West of England

www.survivorpathway.org.uk

SARSAS Self-help guides

www.sarsas.org.uk/self-help-guides

National Services

Rape Crisis

Rape Crisis England and Wales, Rape Crisis Scotland and Rape Crisis Northern Ireland provide a range of specialist services to support survivors of sexual violence. To find your local centre visit:

www.rapecrisis.org.uk
(England and Wales)
www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk
(Scotland)
www.rapecrisishelp.ie
(Northern Ireland)

Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs) provide support following a rape, including interviews, examinations and storage of forensic evidence. To find out more, or for information on the nearest SARC, you can search on the NHS website:
www.nhs.uk/live-well/sexual-health/help-after-rape-and-sexual-assault
or ***www.therowan.net***

Specialist Services for Men

SurvivorsUK

www.survivorsuk.org

Safeline runs the National Male Survivors Helpline

https://www.safeline.org.uk/what-we-do/helpline-and-online-support-service/

Other Specialist Services

Age UK

Age UK centres provide a range of advice, information, activities and support for older people and over in their local communities. To find your nearest Age UK centre visit ***www.ageuk.org.uk***

0800 169 8787

Galop

Galop provides hate crime, domestic abuse and sexual violence support to lesbian, gay bisexual and trans victim-survivors by telephone, email, text and WhatsApp. Visit ***www.galop.org.uk***

0800 999 5428

Hourglass

Hourglass is a national charity dedicated to ending harm, abuse and exploitation of older people in the UK. They offer support for older people who have experienced, or at risk of, any kind of harm, abuse or exploitation.

www.wearehourglass.org

0808 808 8141

Refuge

Refuge provide the National Domestic Abuse Helpline.

www.refuge.org.uk/get-help-now/phone-the-helpline

0808 2000 247

Respond

Respond is a national charity providing therapeutic support services to people with learning disabilities, autism or both who have experienced abuse, violence or trauma.

www.respond.org.uk

020 7383 0700



This leaflet has been produced by professionals who work in the sexual violence sector and is based on the work of the South West Rape Crisis Partnership (Devon Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Services, Gloucestershire Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre, Somerset and Avon Rape and Sexual Abuse Support and The Women's Centre Cornwall).

The partnership would like to thank all of the women affected by sexual violence involved in this project for sharing their experiences and invaluable insights.