Self Help Guide

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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.

The experience of rape can be very different to that of child sexual abuse and different again to other forms of sexual violence. This self help guide is for people who have experienced any of these forms of abuse as the reactions and questions that follow can be similar. It is normal to feel confused, angry, upset, anxious, and a whole range of other emotions. But it does get better. Be gentle and patient with yourself as you go through your feelings and reactions and find ways to feel safer. This takes time.

Everyone's experience is different. Working out which parts of the guide work for you is a step towards understanding your self and your reactions.

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 our suggestions or to highlight suggestions you particularly like. As you go through the guide, try to think about real situations in which some of the ideas might work particularly well. The healthy ways of coping that you find for yourself are always the best.

Some additional information is included on a couple of the most common reactions to trauma. These are included after the sections on the four "parts of yourself".

Introduction

Healing is possible after any abuse. It can require courage and patience. Be kind to yourself, and don't demand too much too soon.

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

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

These mechanisms may be used long after the immediate danger has passed. This guide will encourage you to look at these reactions and think about which have been helpful ways to cope then, and which might delay 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 booklet is you already starting. Read it at your own pace: take breaks and try not to overwhelm your self.

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

What kind of reactions do people have to trauma?

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 very unique, personal and individual.

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

Physical

- Tension in the muscles
- Tiredness & 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
- Other physical pains

Emotional

- Feelings of hopelessness
- Guilt
- Depression
- Insecurity
- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Moodiness
- Panic attacks
- Nightmares
- Poor memory
- Loss in self confidence or concentration

Behavioural

- Increased smoking and/or drinking
- Over working, or not turning up to work
- Personal neglect
- Cutting or other self-harm
- Nail biting
- Impulsiveness
- Twitches, tapping fingers, etc.
- Non-stop talking
- Changes in eating patterns

This guide will use the word 'survivors'.

It may not feel like it, and you might think you have difficulty coping, but you have survived and you are surviving now.

Why do people have these reactions?

The human brain is rational and intuitive. 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 these five instinctive reactions:

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

Your mind 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 often aren't possible as they may lead to further physical or mental harm. The last three options are very common as they expose the survivor to the least immediate danger.

These responses have evolved over thousands of years. Think about how animals pretend they are dead to avoid predators (Flop) or how you may stand still when you see a car coming towards you before you think to get out the way (Freeze).

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 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 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, or to a feeling of numbness.

I cannot talk about it
If only I hadn't...
I'm not coping...
They should have protected me
Nobody understands
I have no control

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

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

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

Helplessness

- I cannot go on…
- I'm not coping…

By being here today you are coping.

Concentration difficulties caused by:

- Sleeplessness
- Nightmares
- Dissociation
- Confusion

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

Difficulty saying what happened

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

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

Fearful thoughts

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

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

Angry thoughts

- They should have protected me
- No man can be trusted

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

Self-loathing

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

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

Feeling different

- Nobody understands
- Things will never be the same

Everybody is different. Everything that happens to us has the potential to make us stronger.

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. See page 28 for much more detail about flashbacks.

The human spirit is stronger than anything that happens to it.

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 (see page 7) 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. Sexual abuse and rape are highly traumatic experiences. The memories can be:

- **Intrusive** (the memory keeps appearing because it is unfinished business, and you really wish you could somehow finish the experience)
- **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 which event happened first)
- **Non-verbal** (it is difficult to put into words)
- **Non-contextual** (the main aspects are remembered, but it's harder to remember where/when etc)
- **Buried** (it may not be remembered until years later, it may be revealed in a dreamlike quality, in snapshots, or ultra-vivid such as flashbacks. This may make it difficult to accept)

Some ways that you can deal with your thoughts

Bring your thoughts outside. Writing thoughts down shifts them from the inside to the outside. Now you can explore them and think about whether they are helpful.

Look at triggers. Can you figure out what, when, where and who can set off a flashback or anxious thought? A trigger record will help you to manage or avoid trigger-situations. It will also help you to prepare for them.

Think about what's important to you. Make a list of valuables that keep you going on the journey of life. 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 resources**

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.

Letters of my name. Write your name in big letters. Describe yourself by using the letters of your name. Every letter must represent something positive about you (abilities, likes, etc.). For example, Sam might be: Sympathetic, Affectionate and Musical. Make a name-poster or design a name-card.

Positive things diary. Note down three positive things that have happened each day before you go to bed, eg. I visited my favourite place, I finally did that pile of washing up, I got through a day without a flashback. Look back through this diary when you are feeling sad or can't sleep.

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

Audre Lorde (20th century American writer)

Find or make your mantra. A mantra is a personal power statement of hope and possibility. Tell it to yourself daily; use it to inspire or encourage yourself or to quiet negative thoughts. Here are some examples:

- The Metta prayer: "May all beings be peaceful. May all beings be happy. May all beings be safe. May all beings awaken to the light of their true nature. May all beings be free."
- "I can do this."
- "I am kind to myself."
- "(God) grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference."

My best person. Is there a person that you know (or used to know) who always supported and believed you? Keep a photograph or any symbol of this person with you always. Refer to it (touch, look at) when you need them.

My best person-response. Think about what your best person would say to you if you 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?

Distractions. Make a list of distractions.

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

Give yourself a calming sleep routine. 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. Electronic screens do not help with relaxation. Alcohol will stimulate you instead of relaxing you due to its sugar levels. Slow your breathing – count in for 4 and out for 7.

Don't blame yourself. If you find yourself thinking 'Why didn't I…', 'It was my fault', 'I should have…', ask yourself:

- What is the evidence?
- If someone told me the same story, who would I blame?
- Are there other ways to think about what happened?
- What are the positives and negatives of this way of thinking?
- What logical errors am I making?
- What would my 'best person' say to tell me that it wasn't my fault?
- What would an organisation like Survivors' Network say?

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.

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

Rainer Maria Rilke (20th Century German Poet)

Feelings

Your emotional reactions

When dealing with trauma, you can feel:

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

Survivors sometimes feel overwhelmed by many different feelings. They might feel them in their throat, or their tummy, or somewhere else. They may be experienced as a mass of feelings that are hard to describe.

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

Begin to look at your feelings individually and explore them:

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

Shame is one of the most destructive emotions. People usually feel shame because they feel they are not good enough or that something is wrong with them. Sadly, shame can make 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. Sexual abuse is always the fault of the abuser.

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

Some ways of dealing with emotional reactions

Set yourself small and manageable targets:

- Manage the levels of your feelings by grounding them with an object (see page 18)
- Express your feelings in a safe environment
- Identify and name each one of your feelings
- Try to let them out in the open, write or talk about them
- Accept that your feelings are allowed, and are normal. Each of them has a cause. Each of them belongs to you
- 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. This may include sounds from your own body like your breathing or your heartbeat. Repeat.

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.

Use power-quotes. Collect power-quotations. Display them. 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-judgmental trusted person can help you to feel understood and supported, and to accept and value yourself.

Grounding

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. Stop yourself from talking about negative feelings at this stage, you want to distract 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 make 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 funny.
8. **Use concentration**, say the alphabet backwards 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 word safe on each inhale.
3. **Grab tightly onto your chair as hard as you can.**
4. **Touch different objects**, your pen, your keys etc.
5. **Dig your heels into the floor**; remind yourself that you are connected to the ground.
6. **Carry a grounding object in your pocket**, a small rock etc. that you can touch whenever you feel triggered.
7. **Stretching**, extend your arms fingers or legs as far as you can.
8. **Clench and release your fists.**

Soothing Grounding

1. **Say kind statements to yourself**, e.g you will get through this.
2. **Picture people you care about**, look at photos of them.
3. **Think of a safe place**, it could be real or imagined, for example the beach, mountains etc.
4. **Say a 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 practise to make it as effective as possible. The more you practise it the better it will work, so try to do some every day. It will become automatic after a while. You don't have to use the methods listed above, you could think up your own method that works better for you. Try to start grounding as early as possible in a negative mood cycle, for example just after a flash back, 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, you can use the mood rating scale for this, and lastly, don't give up!

Body

Your body's reactions

Our bodies can hold the trauma from rape or sexual abuse. 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 abuse, and why your body decided to react in that way
3. Think/talk about if these reactions are helpful or not right now
4. Decide whether you are going to deal with the bodily reaction(s).

Some common bodily reactions to rape or abuse are:

- Irritable Bowel Syndrome
- Pains
- Tensions
- Headaches
- Changes in body language

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 yoga to massage to strengthening exercises. If you feel something isn't working for you, review it and try a different approach.

Some ways to look after your body

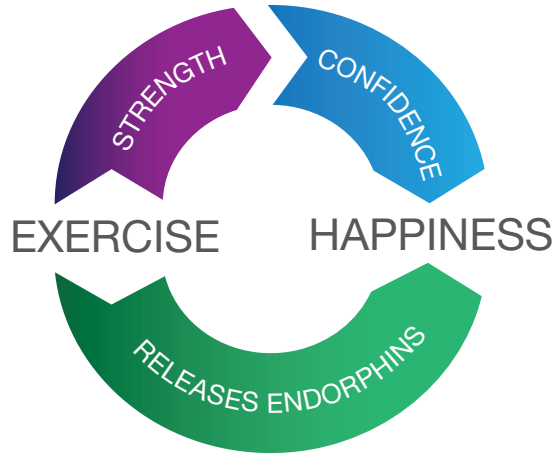
A stronger body can help you deal with your system being overactive.

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

If you are not comfortable seeing a male doctor you have the right to request a female doctor. Also you can refuse any examinations you are uncomfortable with. All professionals should ask your permission to examine you or touch you.

Some ways you can soothe your body:

Release positive chemicals through exercise. 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 your computer, TV or tablet off 45 minutes before sleeping helps to relax the mind and prepare it for sleep.

Laughter. Watch a favourite comedy. Laughter releases endorphins, which are our body's natural painkillers. When you laugh your whole body relaxes.

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

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

Behaviour

Your actions

When someone has suffered any kind of rape or abuse it can affect your 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
- Trying to block out memories
- Trying to 'keep the box shut' by distracting yourself
- Fear of seeing the abuser somewhere
- Fear of having an anxiety attack in front of others

In order to change your behaviours, you will need to believe it is important enough to make that change, and have confidence in your ability to make the change. Identifying the thoughts and feelings behind the behaviour will help you to understand and work on your reactions as a whole. Some of these thoughts and feelings can help survivors to cope and to process what has happened safely. Others may cause the survivor 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
- Think about how they, and the behaviours they are causing, are making you feel in the short and long-term.
- Evaluate them; are they helpful or unhelpful?

Pushing people away

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

Pushing people away can be an instinctive way to protect yourself from further harm. 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 to trust people again, but 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 or abuse. Take your time, do things as you are ready. What happened to you was not sex. Sex is different because you are in control. It's important your partner understands and allows you to take it at your own pace.

Hyper-sexuality

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

Some people find that they want to have lots of sex, sometimes with lots of different people. This can be a way to take back control of your body. Sex is a healthy and natural thing, but be aware of if 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 in that way you protect yourself against danger. As you work through the feelings and thoughts behind this vigilance, it will become easier. In the short-term, try to find a safe place that is able to soothe you and go there once a day.

Not wanting to go out

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

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

Drinking / smoking more

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

These are normal coping mechanisms in any stressful situation. In what situations are you drinking or smoking? How do you feel before and afterwards? Is it leading to any risky or challenging situations?

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?

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. You might have never told anybody for fear of what they might think or say or fear of not being believed. Being with others can distract you and comfort you.

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.

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

- *Call, write to, email or visit a friend or member of the family*
- *Give a genuine compliment*
- *Think about what your friends and family give or mean to you – and tell them*
- *Join a group (singing, craft, wellbeing)*
- *Do something nice for a stranger*
- *Donate to a worthy charity*
- *Create a mix CD, artwork or photo album for a friend*
- *Print out an inspirational poem and post it up in town*
- *Sign up as an organ donor*
- *Be kind to yourself*

‘If we change within, our outer life will change also’

Jean Shinoda Bolen

It's never too late to talk

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

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

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

- Talking to a trusted friend or family member. Choose this person carefully: do you trust them enough, will they show you kindness and try to understand you?
- Online 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?

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. 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 help yourself to cope with flashbacks:

1. **Tell yourself that you are having a flashback:** Learn to recognise what happens to your body when you are having a flashback. Recognise the clues your body gives you just before a flashback happens.

2. **Remind yourself that the worst is over:** The feelings and sensations you are experiencing now are memories of the past. The actual event took place in the past and you survived it.

3. **Get grounded and focus on the present:** Use all your senses to keep you focused on the here and now. Look around and notice different colours, objects around you. Listen to the different sounds - music, people or your own breathing. Feel your body, your clothes, the chair or the floor supporting you. Stamp your feet on the ground, so that you know where you are and that you are no longer trapped in a situation you cannot escape from.

4. **Breathe:** When you are scared it is likely that you may experience shallow breathing or stop breathing altogether. As a result your body could react to the lack of oxygen, causing panicky feelings, a pounding heart, pounding in the head, tightness, sweating, faintness and dizziness. If you breathe deeply some of this panic will stop. Put your hand on your stomach and breathe in so that your stomach pushes against your hand and then breathe out so that the stomach goes in.

5. **Compare then and now:** Remind yourself of where you were then and where you are now. 'I was in the sitting room then. Now I am in my bed'.

6. **Give yourself some boundaries:** Sometimes when you are having a flashback you might lose the sense of where you finish and where the world begins: as if you do not have skin. Wrap yourself in a blanket, hold a pillow or go to bed; do anything to help 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 resource to helping you heal. If you feel able, it can be helpful to write down the sights, sounds, smells, emotions and sensations from your flashback too. Putting it on paper can help to get it out of your mind.

10. **Finally, know that it is normal to feel this way.** 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

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

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, however it is okay to need attention and support.

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

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

Specialist resources around self-harm

Right Here offer support and information for people in distress about self-harm: **www.right-here-brightonandhove.org.uk/selfharm/**

Breaking it down

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

Thoughts

Feelings

Body

Behaviour

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.

admin@survivorsnetwork.org.uk
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Further resources

The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women 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/

Mosac

Online support and resources for non-abusing parents and carers of sexually abused children

www.mosac.org.uk

Pandora's Project

Online support and resources for survivors

www.pandys.org

PODS

For information on dissociation

www.pods-online.org.uk

Nightmares and sleep problems

For information and self help

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

Safety and Stabilisation

Guided stabilisation resource for survivors

http://tinyurl.com/safetyrecording

Survivors' Network has a library of books and leaflets. We are happy to help you find more information.

Survivors' Network

SUPPORTING SURVIVORS IN SUSSEX FOR 25 YEARS

Rape and Sexual Abuse Support for Sussex

Survivors' Network would like to offer thanks to the original authors of this booklet, SARSAS, who kindly gave permission for it to be reproduced.

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