

SELF HELP BOOK



INTRODUCTION

This self help guide is for victims and survivors of sexual violence and sexual abuse, who want to understand and process their own personal reactions to their experience. Some responses to being abused or raped can include anger, fear, shame, sadness, shock, numbness, horror, feeling sick, feeling dirty, self-blame, guilt and confusion. However, if you were abused or raped by someone you believed you were in a relationship with or loved you, you might not have felt any of these emotions or responses.

Before reading this guide, there are a few things to consider:

- Be patient with yourself and kind to yourself. It takes time to work through thoughts, feelings and reactions to trauma and in particular sexual violence – but it does get better.
- Everyone's experience is different – there is no right or wrong way to respond to rape and sexual assault.
- If you find the material triggering or distressing, please talk to someone you trust. If you don't feel there is anyone you can talk to there is support available.



What do we mean by sexual violence?

Sexual violence means any sexual activity or act that happened without consent. It includes rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment.

Sexual violence is any kind of sexual activity or act (including online) that was unwanted or involved one or more of the following:

- pressure
- manipulation
- bullying
- intimidation
- threats
- deception
- force

In other words, any kind of sexual activity or act that took place without consent. There are lots of different types of sexual violence, including child sexual abuse, rape and sexual assault.

No-one ever deserves or asks for sexual violence to happen – not even a little bit. 100% of the blame lies with the perpetrator or perpetrators.

REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

When someone is being sexually assaulted, abused, raped or harmed in some way everyone has different ways of reacting, coping or responding to that trauma in the moment it happens and in the days, weeks and months afterwards. Abuse and violence occurs in lots of different contexts and is perpetrated by lots of different people. These factors can influence how we respond and how we feel about the abuse or violence.

There really isn't a right or wrong way of responding to being subjected to sexual violence.

It is common for people to question their responses and to wonder why they might have responded in a particular way. The most common question people ask is 'Why didn't I stop them?' or 'Why didn't I fight them off?'

We all believe if subjected to sexual violence we would fight off perpetrator, run to police and report the crime and it will be all done and dusted. However, most of us will never do this and often investigations can take a long time.

Often people will put pressure on themselves and feel guilty or ashamed about different trauma responses. Sometimes people will measure themselves against what society says you are 'supposed' to do. When we compare ourselves or experiences to other myths or what we feel we should do, it can impact our ability to process the event.

How do people respond or react to sexual violence when it is happening to them?

Everyone is different. People do not react or respond how they think they will to trauma. When the brain is threatened with serious danger (such as sexual violence) it will respond in a split second.

One or more of 5 predictable ways of responding to threat can occur:

Fight, flight, and freeze are well documented and flop were added later. Not everyone will experience them. Not everyone will have one set trauma response either. In fact, most of us will be able to recall times when we have responded to different traumas in different ways.



*You have survived the attack
or abuse you will survive this*

THE FIVE F'S OF TRAUMA

1

Fight - This trauma response is where we try to argue, fight, shout, push, kick, punch, swear, bite or any other response to being sexually abused or raped. It is a very rare form of trauma response in interpersonal violence. However, it is still seen by many as the 'first' trauma response - and so we are expected by society to have fought our attackers. Unfortunately, many of us have also been socialised to believe this myth too, which means we can often feel guilty or confused when we cannot explain or understand why we did not fight back.

2

Flight - This trauma response is where we try to avoid, escape or get away from the abuser or the abuse. We may try to do this in many different ways and does not mean we have to 'run' to have a flight response. Some people have flight responses they cannot act on, such as thoughts and feelings that tell you to 'get out' or 'leave', when you become aware you are in danger. Similar to 'fight', this response to trauma is rare. Most people do not escape a sexual assault or rape.

3

Freeze - This trauma response is the most common for rape and sexual assault. A freeze response is one in which we feel as though we cannot move, cannot talk, cannot fight the person off or do anything to protect ourselves. People who freeze often do so to limit further harm from the perpetrator. However, this trauma response often induces feelings of guilt because people feel as though they should have fought back.

4

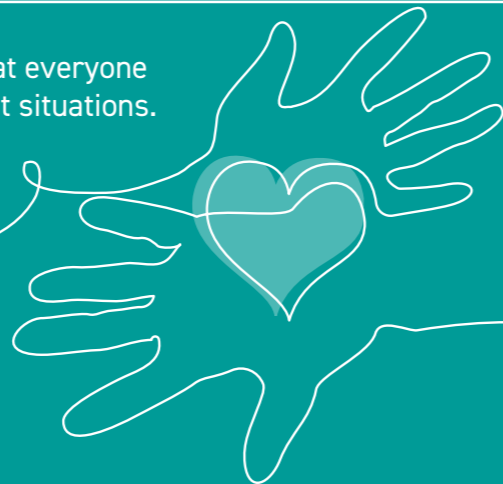
Friend - This trauma response is where we try to talk to, or appease, the abuser. Lots of us use this approach, especially those of us in long term abusive situations with parents, carers, partners, or ex-partners. It is common for people who have a friend response to trauma to try to bargain with the abuser, to calm them down, to agree to one sex act but to ask not to be hurt, or to agree to something to protect someone else (including kids or family members).

5

Flop - This trauma response is argued to be a reaction to such high levels of cortisol (stress hormone) in the blood that our body shuts down non-essential muscles and body parts to keep us alive. This causes us to sort of 'flop', which some people describe as feeling like going limp, fainting, passing out or feeling like 'a rag doll'.

Whilst this list of trauma responses is helpful - remember that everyone is an individual and we were all abused or harmed in different situations.

Recovery is your best revenge



Common responses to trauma:

Because reminders of a trauma can be so distressing, it is common for trauma survivors to use avoidance to control these reactions.

Avoidance and numbing responses include:

- Efforts to avoid thoughts about the trauma.
- Efforts to avoid things that remind one about the trauma.
- Inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma.
- Reduced interest in significant activities.
- Feelings of detachment from others.
- Restricted range of affect (e.g. unable to have loving feelings).
- Sense of foreshortened future.
- Dissociation which may manifest in the person appearing dazed, apathetic, and vacant as if they are not there.

Hyperarousal includes:

Reactivity, or a feeling of being on edge, may begin or worsen after experiencing a trauma. This category includes a broad range of physical and psychological symptoms.

- Difficulty falling or staying asleep.
- Irritability or outbursts of anger.
- Abrupt mood swings.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Hyper-vigilance.
- Exaggerated startle response.
- High states of anxiety, irritability, panic, horror, terror, and fear.
- Reacting in an extreme fashion to events that resemble original trauma.
- Shock reactions including feeling numb and feelings of being in a fog.
- Feelings of being paralyzed, immobile and or/frozen.
- Feelings of isolation, hopelessness and/or helplessness.
- Depression.
- Feelings of guilt.
- Impulsiveness.
- Feeling in constant danger.



Re-experiencing includes:

Trauma survivors may re-experience their trauma through thoughts, feelings, memories, and other means. Re-experiencing a trauma can be very distressing, and may trigger uncomfortable emotions such as fear, anger, or sadness.

- Recurrent recollections of the event.
- Recurrent distressing dreams or thoughts of the event.
- Feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring.
- Intense distress at exposure to cues that resemble an aspect of the event.
- Physiological reactivity upon exposure to cues that resemble an aspect of the traumatic event.
- Nightmares, Flashbacks.

COPING MECHANISMS

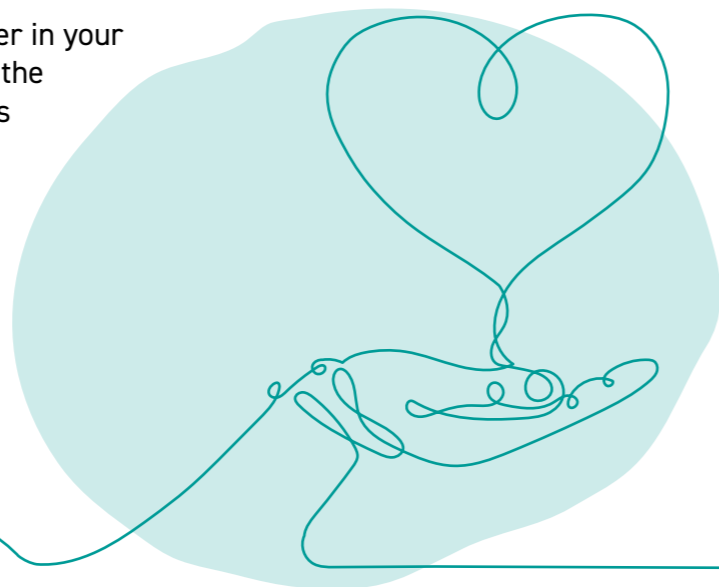
Perceiving and processing our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours as either trauma responses or coping mechanisms for the trauma is a key part of adopting a trauma-informed approach to understanding ourselves. Coping mechanisms mean something. They perform a protective role for us, either physically or psychologically. Coping mechanisms are not because we are crazy, disordered or abnormal - they always serve an important purpose.

Often, coping mechanisms develop during the abuse or sexual traumas and can continue for many months or years after you escape abuse. For example, if you were abused for a long time by an unpredictable, aggressive person, one of your coping mechanisms may have been to become compliant, quiet, and submissive. This may have worked many times to protect you from further violence or abuse, and then may become one of your coping mechanisms going forward. You may notice that you revert to this behaviour when people are being argumentative, confrontational or are becoming aggressive or loud around you.

Therefore, exploring where our coping mechanisms come from and when we first started using them can give us important insight into our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours now. For example:

1. What coping mechanisms do you have? Is there just one or a few different ones?
2. What do your coping mechanisms help with? Do they make you feel better or worse? What are they protecting you from?
3. Did your coping mechanism help at the time (of abuse) and does it still help you now?
4. Can you think of a time where you do not need this coping mechanism, or anyone, or a place that makes you feel safe?

Using these questions in your own time, whether in your diary or in your head - may help you to explore the meaning and purpose of your trauma responses and coping mechanisms. They may help you to think differently about coping mechanisms such as panic attacks, triggers, thoughts, and feelings.



What you are feeling is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation

COMMON THOUGHTS AND REACTIONS TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE.



“I have to keep busy”

Being active may help you to cope. But overactivity can be a problem, if you overtake yourself or your behaviour feels out of control.

“I feel numb”

Sometimes the event may seem unreal, like a dream, something that hasn't really happened. Sometimes you might feel spaced out, or the event seems disoriented. This can be the mind's way of trying to shut out the experience.

“I don't want to see anyone”

You may feel like being alone or staying away from places that remind you of the assault. You might stop going out or answering the telephone. It can help to get some emotional support from others, but this may be difficult if you have upsetting or complicated feelings about what has happened. However, being alone might also feel hard or frightening. Are there other small, manageable things to help you feel safe again?

“It feels like it's happening again”

Sometimes people get flashbacks, or vivid memories or moments when they feel the assault is happening again. This may come out the blue or be triggered by a particular thought or feeling, or even a smell or a noise. It is important to remember that these are normal effects of an abnormal experience, and are the mind's attempts to process what happened. It doesn't mean you're going mad. Although it can be frightening when it happens, it is important to remember you are safe now.

“I just want to run away”

You may feel like running away from it all. This may mean avoiding thinking and talking about what happened or using alcohol, drugs, limiting/overuse of medication or self-harming to help cope. Although this may make you feel better in the short term, it may lead to more difficulties in the long term. How do you feel before and after?

“I feel irritable and jumpy and snapping at everyone”

You may feel extra sensitive to noises, sudden movements, people (strangers and friends or family) or even feelings in your own body, or you could feel as if you are always 'wound up' and can't sit still. Lack of sleep, feelings of isolation and lack of control can create irritability. At what times of day are you more irritable?



GROUNDING AND SELF SOOTHING

Grounding is a self-soothing skill to use when you are having a bad day or dealing with a lot of stress, overwhelming feelings, and/or intense anxiety. Grounding can be done anywhere, any place or any time and no one needs to know you are doing it.

Grounding can be useful when you are experiencing a trigger, strong emotions, feel like using substances, self-harm or feel yourself dissociating. You can keep your eyes open to stay in touch with the present, or some people (if they feel safe) choose to shut their eyes to focus inward. Grounding can help distract you away from negative feelings and to help you focus on the here and now.

Grounding Exercises

- Carry a grounding object in your pocket (e.g fidget toy or rock) Something that you can touch whenever you feel triggered.
- Connect to the ground – dig your heels in or take off your socks and shoes and feel the ground underneath your feet.
- Think of a safe place – this could be real or made up, but somewhere you feel able to connect (by water, nature etc)
- Drink an ice-cold glass of water – or run cold water over your hands.
- Have a look around your environment. Name 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, 1 thing you can taste.
- Safety Statements, or coping statements can help ground you to the present “I am safe, I can do this, I am strong”

Sometimes grounding may not work for everyone, however it is important to know that it can require practice to make it effective. Some of the things listed above are some ideas, however you can come up with your own. What works for one person might not work for another and that is absolutely ok.

Grounding can be useful when starting at the beginning of negative thoughts or feelings (i.e after a flashback). You can then log this as ‘evidence’ to use for next time you may feel triggered as something that work for you. It is important to recognise your triggers too, so you can maybe ask friends and family to help when you become overwhelmed.

Some ways to look after yourself

Our bodies can hold trauma from sexual violence and abuse, so it is important to be able to look after our bodies when required. Being aware of what is going on within your body can be scary for some, but is an important part of recovering from sexual trauma.

- Eating healthily
- Exercising (Whatever works for you)
- Sleep
- Laughter
- Cutting out alcohol, caffeine, sugar, or tobacco.
- Staying connected (with people or close friends).
Remembering that you are not alone!



FLASHBACKS

A flashback is a vivid experience in which you relive some aspects of a traumatic event like rape or sexual abuse and can feel as if it is happening right now.

This can sometimes be like watching a video of what happened, but flashbacks do not necessarily involve seeing images, or reliving events from start to finish. Flashbacks can occur at any time and are out of a person's control.

You might experience any of the following:

- seeing full or partial images of what happened
- noticing sounds, smells or tastes connected to the trauma
- feeling physical sensations, such as pain or pressure
- experiencing emotions that you felt during the trauma



Healing is not an overnight process

Some ways to help cope with flashbacks:

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.

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.

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 and 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 you know where you are and that you are no longer trapped in a situation you cannot escape from.

Breathe

When you are scared it is likely that you may experience shallow breathing or stop breathing all together. 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.

Compare then and now

Remind yourself of where you were then and where you are now. Remember you are safe.

Give yourself some boundaries

Sometimes when you are having a flashback you might lose the sense of where you are and the world. Sometimes creating a boundary by wrapping yourself in a blanket or holding a pillow can help you feel safe and connected to now.

Tell your friends, partner, or family about the 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.

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.

Bring your memories into the open

Anyone who understands the effect 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 what you remember from your flashbacks, such as sights or sounds. Putting it on paper can get it out of your mind. You can then rip up the paper, hide it somewhere, or some people even set it alight, which can help give control back.

Remember- you are not crazy. You are healing.



REACHING OUT FOR SUPPORT

“Safety is not the absence of threat.
It is the presence of connection”

Gabor Mate

It can feel that you are on your own, and that no one will understand how you feel. But support is there when you feel ready. You won't be pushed to talk about anything you don't want to talk about.

Reaching out to others can be really difficult, however it can also be really helpful. Isolation and secrecy often reflect how survivors have felt or acted during or after sexual violence and abuse. You might not have told anybody for fear of what they might think, or say, or a fear of being believed. Being with others can distract you and comfort you.

Finding other people to talk to can help you think about your own thoughts and feelings, and at times help you understand when these things may be unhelpful or self-destructive.

Talking to others about what has happened can also help you see that what happened wasn't your fault.

Support Networks can be different for everyone. Some people feel they cannot talk to their family or friends about what has happened or how it has affected their thoughts, but this doesn't mean you are alone.

Other ways to get support could be:

- Online support groups and forums
- Sexual violence survivors' groups
- Counselling, via GP or via a specialist service
- Medication
- Trusted Friends or family, or work colleagues

You are not what happened to you



Further Resources

ARCH Teesside:
01642 822331
www.archteesside.org

Rape Crisis England and Wales rapecrisis.org.uk
24/7 Rape Crisis Support Line 247sexualabusesupport.org.uk
Survivors UK www.survivorsuk.org
NAPAC www.napac.org.uk
Carolyn Spring www.carolynspring.com