



Self-help resource guide



**LONDON
SURVIVORS
GATEWAY**





Women and Girls Network (WGN) was established in 1987. Our overall aim is to promote, preserve and restore the mental health and well-being of women and girls, to empower them to make a total and sustainable recovery from their experiences of gendered violence.

Women and Girls Network run the West London Rape Crisis Centre, which provides services include counselling, advocacy, body therapies, group work, a sexual violence helpline and the London Survivors Gateway.

“ Healing doesn't mean the pain never existed. It means the pain no longer controls your life. ”

Contents

Using the guide	5
Section 1: Introduction	6
What is sexual violence?	8
Resourcing yourself: emergency self-care exercises	10
Section 2: Reactions to sexual violence	17
Section 3: Understanding how I react and how to cope	20
What is the cause of my reactions?	20
Flashbacks and intrusive memories	23
My feelings	24
Memories and thoughts	26
My body	28
My behaviour	30
Self-harm	32
Eating distress	34
Nightmares and sleep hygiene	35
Section 4: Counselling	36
Section 5: How to support someone you know	38

“**HOPE:**
Hold On Pain Ends”

As each individual's experience and reaction to sexual violence is unique, this guide offers an opportunity for you to explore what works for you at a pace that is right for you.

Self-care tip

Keep a notebook, or use the spaces in this guide, to write down what you are thinking and feeling. It can be a helpful way to make sense of your thoughts.

What is in this guide

- A) Understanding the link between sexual violence and trauma**
 - Common reactions to sexual violence
 - Identify ways to cope that work for you
 - Creating support
 - Gaining control
- B) Exercises that might help**
 - Reducing feelings and responses that are painful to you
 - Easing physical symptoms
- C) Self-reflection**
 - Space to reflect
 - Becoming aware of your feelings
- D) Self-care tools and tips**
 - Taking care of yourself
- E) Affirmations and inspiration**
 - Find strength and hope from others
 - Create your own affirmation

SECTION 1:

Introduction

The self-help guide is written to support those accessing the London Survivors Gateway Service. The Gateway Service offers a specialist first response to victims and survivors of rape and sexual abuse (age 13 or above). A team of trained Navigators works with survivors over the phone to understand their support needs, explain the options available and link the survivor with appropriate support services in London.

As you come into contact with this service there may be many mixed feelings and questions, not only about what help is available to you, but also in-terms of understanding and making sense of your response and reactions to the sexual violence you have experienced.

Each survivor who experiences sexual violence will react in the aftermath in his or her own unique way. This guide offers some useful information, tools and exercises to help you to support yourself, as you come to understand your feelings and responses. The exercises and tools offered in this guide are ones used successfully by survivors in their recovery from sexual violence. They draw from a body of resources used by survivors and therapists within the Women and Girls Network. You are invited to use those that are helpful for you.

“My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humour, and some style.”

Maya Angelou

“Survivor” – In this guide, the term survivor is used to refer to an individual who has experienced and survived any form of sexual violence and abuse. This includes rape, child sexual abuse, sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, forced marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), ‘honour based violence’, ‘ritual/faith based abuse’, child sexual exploitation, or other forms of commercial sexual exploitation (trafficking, pornography, prostitution).

Sexual violence is a crime that disproportionately affects women and girls. However, men, boys and all sections of society, including those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer or intersex (LGBTQI), able/disabled bodied, elders and those from Black and minority ethnic (BME) and traveller communities, also experience it. In this guide we recognise that gender as well as the above identity characteristics can affect the way in which an individual

experiences sexual violence and how they are able to access support. We recognise that for those who may identify with more than one of these identities (e.g. a Black LGBTQI disabled woman), the experience of sexual violence can be even more challenging and complex in terms of the additional barriers and pressures that the individual needs to navigate.

In the guide, we are speaking to the common experience of sexual violence as a trauma and how we can support the recovery from such an experience. If you identify as BME, LGBTQI, Disabled and/or Traveller and you require some additional support for your specific needs to compliment this guide, you can speak with the Gateway on **0808 801 0860** about what specialist services and resources are available. You may also wish to look at the service map on our website www.survivorsgateway.london

What is sexual violence?

Sexual violence is a term used to describe any act of a sexual nature that a person did not consent to. This can include a range of experiences from unwanted touching or kissing to being forced to perform sexual acts. A lack of consent means that you did not want or choose to take part in a sexual act or series of acts. It can also mean that at the time it took place you did not have the freedom or capacity to make a proper choice.

Things that might stop you from being able to make a choice to consent are:

- Being drunk or under the influence of drugs
- Being unconscious or asleep
- Being under age - the legal age of consent is 16
- Health or mental health problems or disabilities that limited your choices at the time

Things that can stop you from having the freedom to make a choice include:

- Being threatened with violence against you or someone else
- Being forced, pestered or coerced
- Being blackmailed
- If there is a power imbalance between you – for example they were a teacher or carer

Understanding consent

It's as Simple as Tea. You may find this short video helpful, which you can access via the link below:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQbei5JGiT8

Sexual violence happens regardless of age, race, religion, gender identity, class, sexuality, whether able bodied or disabled.

If you are unsure about whether or not what you experienced was abusive, you may find it useful to access confidential and anonymous helplines to explore your thoughts and feelings.

- **Women and Girls Network's sexual violence helpline**, for women and girls who have experienced sexual violence at any point in their lifetime – **0808 801 0770**
- **SurvivorsUK web chat**, for male survivors who want to explore their difficulties in a confidential space
- **The Rape Crisis National helpline**, for women and girls who have experienced sexual violence at any point in their lifetime – **0808 802 9999**
- **Galop's National LGBT+ domestic abuse helpline** – **0800 999 5428**

“You survived the abuse. You’re going to survive the recovery.”

Remember:

- It was not your fault, the responsibility lies with the attacker, not you.
- It is normal to feel angry, fearful, confused. Whatever your reactions are, they are normal.
- You are not alone, there is support available.

Resourcing yourself

Before you start

Facing the feelings and reactions to sexual violence can be a challenge. To make this challenge more manageable we can equip ourselves with resources that empower us to feel able and ready to move ahead on this courageous journey.

Self-care tip

Choose a couple of exercises that work for you and practice, practice, practice... it may take time.

Emergency self-care exercises

These are quick exercises that you can learn and practice if you are feeling overwhelmed. These exercises are often called 'Grounding Techniques' as they can help with intense feelings of anxiety or distress, maybe a painful memory or flashback. Grounding exercises can help to ground you back in the present.



Grounding exercises

I am feeling overwhelmed, what can I do?

1. Sensory grounding exercise 5,4,3,2,1

- Describe 5 things you can see in the room.
- Name 4 things you can feel (“my feet on the floor” or “the air in my nose”).
- Name 3 things you hear right now (“traffic outside”).
- Name 2 things you can smell right now (or 2 smells you like).
- Name 1 good thing about yourself.

You should feel calmer and more at ease by the end of the exercise. Repeat the 5 steps more than once if needed. Try out the technique in different situations.

2. Physical grounding technique

- Place both feet flat on the floor.
- Lean back into your chair, and make note of the feeling of the chair under you and against your back.
- Cross your arms over your chest.
- Gently tap your shoulders, alternating one side at a time.

Alternatively, you can place your hands on your thighs if you are in public, tapping one leg at a time. Although not as effective as shoulder tapping, this technique can still calm you down.

3. Use the breath

Put a hand over your heart and a hand over your belly and breathe deeply, following the breath into your belly, focusing on the connections of your hands with your body and the gentle rise and fall of the movement as the breath comes in and out.

4. Walk, or stomp if it helps!

If you can, go outside and walk barefoot, or with shoes on, taking in each step to feel your feet make contact with the ground. If it is difficult to make connection, stomp around and really push your feet down.

5: Use an object

Touch something that you enjoy the sensation of, a stone that is smooth, a crystal, a piece of wood – anything that feels solid and that you can use to remember where you are and that you are safe – you can carry this around with you all day and every time you feel nervous just throw your hands into your pocket to remember you are here and safe right now.

6. Water

Wash your hands or take a shower. Feel the sensation of the water on your skin. Alternatively, drink some water or another beverage. Slowly drink it, feeling the sensation of the water in your mouth, tongue and stomach.

7. Make a list

Think of a category and list all the things in this category; the dogs I like, musicians beginning with the name A or types of vegetables. Concentrating on this list will mean that you are not able to think about all of the things that are making you feel overwhelmed. Alternatively, count to ten or say the alphabet very slowly.

8. Physical grounding

Stand against a wall. Physically push against it. Feel your feet rooting into the ground and your hands against the wall. Then feel your muscles. What does it feel like when they tense, what is the sensation of relaxing your muscles?

Self-care tools and tips

Find a smell that you love, such as an aromatherapy essential oil, incense or a scented candle and diffuse the smell. If you need to access this quickly you can put the essential oil on some cotton wool and gently breathe in.

Affirmation

Have a list of self-soothing statements that you would say to someone who was scared or afraid like “things are very difficult for you right now and I know that, just hang in there, it does get better” or “you are a good person and something really bad has happened to you, this is not your fault”.

Creating a comfort kit

Think of this as emotional first aid. This can be a small bag or box you can fill with items that are soothing for you when you might be feelings anxious or overwhelmed.

Below are some things you may want to have in your comfort kit. It may be helpful to have an item for each of the five senses:

- An essential oil or **smell** that appeals to you. This can be calming if you are feeling anxious. Spray the smell onto a cotton pad so you have it to hand.
- A comforting or soft material, such as a feather for **touch** or even a stress ball.
- A way to feel grounded and soothed is through **taste**, including a sweet, fruit or mint teabag.
- Create a playlist or add in an item that creates a **sound** you find comforting.
- Keep a notebook or collection of pictures of family and friends, positive quotes and affirmations for **sight**.

Self-care tip

Create a comfort kit that reflects who you are. It can be playful, bold, brimming with things that are of significance to you and above all, something you feel comforted by.

Relaxation Techniques

Learning and practicing relaxation techniques can have a positive effect on enhancing a sense of well-being. Here are a few exercises that may help.

Before you start

- Find a quiet place where you can practice uninterrupted.
- Get comfortable.
- Relaxation exercises can be done at any time of the day.
- It might help to record lengthier exercises to play back and practice.
- Remember that trying something new can take time, use the ones that work best for you.

Short exercises

- Focus on breathing from the abdomen. Breathe in fully, hold briefly and gently exhale. As you exhale, feel any tension you hold go with it.
- Try a deep sigh.
- Stretching and flexing muscles can help to release tension. This can be a whole body stretch or just the arms and hands.

Creating a safe space in your mind

(It may be helpful to voice record this visualisation and then play it back to yourself)

- Sit or lie down in a comfortable, safe space where you can completely relax.
- If you want to, put on soft soothing music
- Now let yourself travel in your mind's eye to a favourite place, a healing place. It could be somewhere you have visited or would like to visit.
- When you think of this place make sure you feel peaceful, happy and safe. Now in your mind's eye, look around. What does this place look like?
- You can adjust this place to suit your needs. Are you alone? Are there other people? Are there creatures, trees, plants or flowers? Maybe you are near water or high on a hill with a beautiful view? Take it in. What is the air temperature? Are you sitting, standing or lying down? Feel the safe ground underneath you, supporting you.
- Choose your favourite weather.
- Listen for all sounds around you, just notice the sounds.

Continued...

SECTION 2:

Reactions to sexual violence

- Are there any smells you associate with your safe place? The smell of the sea or can you smell flowers?
- What are the sensations on your body in the safe place? Are you relaxed in a comfortable chair or can you feel the sun warm on your body?
- And as you are there, drink in the safety of this place, this place of your creation.
- Nobody can go there without your permission.
- There are no demands in this place, only nurturance and peace.
- Feel this safety deep within your being. Know that wherever you go in the outside world this peaceful place always lies within you and you can return again and again. Now when you are ready, gently allow your consciousness to return to this body, the external world, maybe wiggling fingers and toes when you are ready. Good.
- Feel the effects in your body as you return from your safe place.

Self-care tip

There are a number of apps that are free to download that focus on relaxation techniques.

Exercise adapted from the Trauma Toolkit

“ I started off feeling confused, anxious and blaming myself for the abuse that was inflicted onto me, but now I have come to understand and accept that it was not my fault and I still have a bright future that I have control over and have the right to feel happy and safe.”

Quote from a survivor

Sexual violence affects everyone differently; there is no right or wrong way to feel.

Try to think of yourself and seek the help and support you need. Below is a list of some of the common reactions that may be experienced because of sexual violence.

Physical reactions	X	Emotional reactions	X	Psychological/ cognitive reactions	X	In my behaviour	X	In my relationships	X
Sweating		Depression		Loss of concentration		Feeling irritable		Difficulties trusting other people	
Having tense muscles		Sadness		Blaming yourself		Having disturbed sleep		Expecting rejection from other people	
Hyperactivity		Hopelessness		Loss of memory/ getting confused about things		Self-harming (page 32)		Having difficulties relating to others	
Tired and exhausted		Anger		Making impulsive decisions		Risky/hyper sexual behaviour		Avoiding emotional and physical intimacy	
Migraines or headaches		Aggression		Loss of self-confidence		Impulsive/ aggressive behaviour		Difficulties around power	
Physical aches and pains		Guilt and shame		Nightmares		Being vigilant or on edge		Being withdrawn and isolating yourself from others	
Body dysmorphia		Shock and numbness		Dissociation (page 21)		Not wanting to go out		Having difficulties setting healthy boundaries in your relationships	
Hyperactivity		Fear		Self-loathing		Drinking/smoking		Pushing people away who would like to help	
Dry mouth		Anxiety		Flashbacks (page 23)		Eating more/less (page 34)		Testing other people's loyalties	
Diarrhea/ constipation/ irritable bowels (IBS)		Alienation/ isolation		Lack of interest or enthusiasm		Gambling			
		Suicidal ideation (page 26)		Problems with decision-making		Taking prescription drugs			
				Feelings of grief and loss					

Are there any other reactions you are experiencing that are not listed? Write them down.

You may find it useful to write all these reactions down in your notebook. Building a picture of your response and reactions can show you how you are being affected and what you can do to support yourself in each area.

Feelings that are difficult for me:

Struggling to find the words? You may want to try these exercises:

If my feelings were a colour it would be:

If my feelings had sound or music it would be:

Self-reflection exercise

Difficult thoughts and feelings are an understandable response. Remember to take care of yourself during this time, use your comfort kit or reach out for support, there are many organisations that can help.

Use your notebook: Make a list of people or places that help and inspire you.

Affirmation

Write your own power affirmation to counter any negative thoughts you are thinking.

Self-care tip

Be compassionate towards yourself.

SECTION 3:

Understanding how I react and how to cope

“Getting over a painful experience is much like crossing monkey bars. You have to let go at some point in order to move forward.”

What is the cause of my reactions?

It can be useful to understand what happens within our brains and bodies at the time of an assault to understand our responses. Our brain is a complex system that keeps us safe in the face of danger. Once our personal safety is threatened, it starts in motion a system whereby our thinking part of the brain is pushed to one side, so that our instinctive part, which can respond much faster, can be in control. This means that how we react in the face of trauma and danger is often not in our conscious control and is managed by the involuntarily part of our brain developed to ensure we survive any threat.

The defensive survival reactions available to humans are:

- **Flight:** when we are in danger, one response is to try and escape by running away.
- **Fight:** trying to fight back can be a response to someone trying to hurt you.
- **Freeze:** here, the involuntary survival part of our brain takes over and freeze is a strategy to try and become invisible and minimize the danger.
- **Flop:** when your body is trying to process so much information, a normal response can be to flop. This is because there are so many hormones running through your body in that moment that your body can become overwhelmed by the traumatic event.
- **Friend:** trying to engage and reason with the attacker is another survival strategy intended to manage the risk and minimize the damage from the attacker.

There is a lot of social pressure on survivors to have fought back, but this is the least common response. Many survivors often live with a great deal of guilt and regret that they did not ‘run’ or ‘fight’ during the assault. The most common response to sexual violence is to freeze or flop, as often the first two defences are not possible if the system detects that it could lead to more harm. So even though we think we know how we would think and act in the face of danger (fight, scream, run), our logical mind is not in control but our responses are driven by instinct alone and a priority is to keep safe.

The hormones that are released into our nervous system can, in situations like rape and sexual abuse, keep our nervous system stuck in high alert, ready to respond to a danger that may no longer be present. This can mean that you are vigilant and sensitive to responding to even the slightest trigger or memory of the event, as if it was taking place again. These triggers may not even be conscious.

Dissociation

The freeze and flop defence is also closely connected to what is described as ‘dissociation’. Dissociation describes what happens when the pain that is experienced, this can either be physical or emotional, is so overwhelming that the only way to cope is to disconnect from the body in which the pain is felt. If connection is lost with the body, it can be difficult to stay present and grounded and this is why grounding is necessary for healing from trauma.

Dissociation can feel like you are...

- Watching yourself in a situation as opposed to feeling a part of it.
- Disconnected from your emotions and body.
- Floating and feeling ungrounded.
- Unable to tell where you end and other people begin.
- Feeling as if the world around you isn’t real.
- Seeing objects change their shape, size and colour.
- Feeling like the world is lifeless or seeing it in a foggy way.
- Losing track of time and your surroundings.
- Unable to remember things; losing concentration, missing appointments.
- Having confused memories or gaps.
- Appearing distant and disinterested.

Things to remember

- Even though it might feel really scary and unnatural when this happens, it’s a totally normal response and is part of the brain’s way of responding to the impact of trauma.
- If you disassociated during the abuse, your brain has saved this as a good response to trauma. As a result, when you feel overwhelmed and stressed it will keep going back to this initial response that kept you safe.
- The brain is always growing and changing so the trick is to develop new skills and find other ways to make yourself feel safe when you experience a trigger.

Flashbacks and intrusive memories

These exercises can be helpful when you find yourself disassociating

- **Keep your eyes open** – it's a simple one but by keeping your eyes open you can keep connected to what's going on right now around you.
- **Body scan** – do this really slowly and try and feel the tips of your toes, try to slowly move them, see how the ground feels under your feet if you don't have your shoes on. If you do, then press your toes to the tops of your shoes, then to the bottom. Try and think about how this feels trying to connect with your foot. Move up and do this slowly through your whole body.
- **Say a statement** – one that can help you to remember when and where you are e.g. "My name is _____. I am in my (room/workplace). I am safe. It is (the date). The colour of the walls is _____. etc."
- **Look at your hands** - study how they look, think about how old your hands are (this is useful if you are feeling younger than you actually are). Watch your fingers moving.
- **Take several deep breaths** - while you do this imagine the breath moving through you, energising different parts of your body.

Self-reflection exercise

If possible, keep a journal when you are feeling like you are disassociating. Write down what you have been experiencing and describe it in detail. Talk about how different parts of your body feel. You can then use this as a guide to notice when you are about to disassociate and can use the grounding exercises for support to remain present and in your body.

Self-care tips

- Taking an Epsom salts, magnesium flakes or essential oil bath can help to relax you and release any buildup of tension in your muscles.
- If you are prone to losing track of time, keep your screen clock visible. Wearing a watch is a practical solution, or setting small alarm reminders throughout the day.

Having flashbacks or dealing with intrusive memories can be a common experience for survivors of sexual violence. It can feel as though the event is happening all over again. These memories are a way of the logical mind attempting to make sense of what has happened and is a natural part of the healing process.

Tips for dealing with a flashback

- Accept and reassure yourself that this is a flashback. The abuse is over and you survived.
- Use the grounding exercises and orienting exercise to the right, the 5,4,3,2,1 exercise or connect with your comfort kit to help you come back to the present.
- Bring yourself back to the present by comparing then and now. "Now I am here in this room." "Now I am wearing..." "The date and time is..."

Exercise: Orienting and breathing

Take a look around the room, move your head really slowly from one side to the other and then back again before coming back to the centre. Doing this can help you to stimulate the part of your nervous system which helps you to relax.

Breathe

- Sit or stand comfortably with your back straight. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.
- Take a slow breath in through your nose, counting to four. The hand on your stomach should rise. The hand on your chest should move very little.
- Hold your breath for a count of seven.
- Exhale through your mouth to a count of eight, pushing out as much air as you can while contracting your abdominal muscles. The hand on your stomach should move in as you exhale, but your other hand should move very little.
- Inhale again, repeating the cycle until you feel relaxed and centred.

My feelings

Self-reflection exercise

If it is safe for you, you might find it useful to bring your memories out into the open by writing or drawing the sights, sounds, smells, emotions of the flashback. Only do this if it feels safe to do so and that getting it out of your mind could help you.

Self-care tip

Give yourself some time to recover, as flashbacks can be an intense experience. Be slow with yourself. This could mean taking a nap or having a bath, oiling and brushing your hair, giving yourself a manicure, pedicure or wrapping yourself in a blanket and drinking a soothing herbal tea like chamomile.

Affirmation

"I am feeling...because I am remembering the rape/sexual assault, but as I look around, I can see that the assault is not happening right now and I am safe."

Many survivors report being overwhelmed with the feelings that they have. It is useful to understand each feeling and explore them to understand why they are there.

Anger – This is a normal reaction to what has happened and is part of your recovery and a survival strategy. It's part of our defence response and tells us that a boundary has been crossed. It's OK to be angry and to express your anger in safe ways.

Guilt and shame – These are what many survivors report after an assault and can be the most destructive of feelings. Guilt is an aspect of trauma where the mind protects you by taking back control. You blame yourself through self-statements like, "I should have known better", "I shouldn't have gone out that night", "It's my fault because I'm gullible and too trusting". Unfortunately, for survivors, blame is also a response to social conditioning and victim blaming in a world that holds survivors responsible for sexual violence, citing what they have worn, not worn, drunk, etc. as reasons for them being blamed for the assault. These very same conditions and myths create feelings of shame that can stop survivors from talking to someone or seeking support.

Shock and numbness – Feeling shocked and numb is a very common response soon after a sexual assault. Reactions to the emotional shock could be crying uncontrollably, withdrawing or feeling nothing. Survivors can feel emotionally detached, drained and disconnected from what is happening around them.

Anxious – Survivors can experience extreme anxiety as a result of the assault. This may be experienced in physical symptoms such as difficulties in breathing, muscle tension, nausea, stomach cramps or headaches.

Alienation/isolation – A sense of differentness and despair is often experienced if a survivor is unable to share their experiences with others. The same feelings of guilt and societal attitudes towards blaming victims prevent survivors from talking about their experiences. For individuals from the LGBTQI, BME and disabled communities, such feelings can be magnified.

Exercise: Self-hug for containing big feelings

(Peter Levine)

Your thoughts and nervousness can become overwhelming, out of control, or scattered. It can become difficult to feel your edge. The goal of this exercise is to feel and develop your body as a container to nurture and help self soothe yourself.

Instructions:

- Place your right hand under your left arm-pit, next to your heart.
- Then place the other hand over the upper part of the other arm; you are giving yourself a hug.
- Pay attention to your body.
- Let yourself settle into the position.
- Allow yourself to feel supported by it. Allow yourself to feel contained.
- Watch and see if anything shifts with your breathing, bodily sensations, and how you feel in space.
- See if you can sit with it a while and let it shift your perceptions of yourself and the world somewhat before coming out of it.

Self-reflection exercise

Write or draw to express your feelings. You could use colours to represent each feeling. Identify and name each one of your feelings as a way of letting your feelings out into the open.

Memories and thoughts

When the body is experiencing a stressful and traumatic experience the brain releases the chemical cortisol. High levels of cortisol in the body can affect our memory and parts of the brain that we use to remember and learn.

Concentration and Memory

The way in which the events of the assault or the abuse are remembered can also be affected. During a highly traumatic experience as the instinctive brain takes over, it can short circuit the part of our brain that deals with remembering specific events. Memories of the abuse can be unclear, or intrusive (it keeps coming up), fragmented and not in order of how they might have happened, or memories can be remembered as sensations and images, in the form of pictures, sounds and smells.

Suicidal Thoughts and Feelings

Having suicidal thoughts and feelings after experiencing sexual violence is a common response to trauma. Experiencing strong emotions and psychological distress can be over-whelming, exhausting and can make survivors feel unable to cope and continue. Having these thoughts and feelings can be frightening and confusing, as deep down you may not want to die but the reality is that you are struggling to cope and manage living. Anyone can feel suicidal and although it may be hard to believe suicidal feelings are temporary, there are ways to manage suicidal thoughts and feelings. There is hope and there are people wanting to help you through this challenging time.

If you are thinking about suicide it is important for you to talk to someone and get help immediately.

Creating Safety

Things you can do to keep yourself safe:

- **In a crisis.** If you are alone and in crisis call Samaritans on 116 123 or other helplines (see page 8).
- **Know when it is best to ring an ambulance and go to the hospital.**
- **Reach out and seek help.** Talking to a friend, family member, GP, helpline or counselling service.
- **Postpone any decision to end your life.** Many people find that if they postpone taking action on suicidal thoughts and feelings for just 24hrs, things do improve and they feel better able to cope and find the support they need.
- **Avoid being alone.** Think about the times that you feel most vulnerable, stay with someone or see if someone can stay with you until the thoughts reduce.
- **Avoid drugs and alcohol.** These can make you feel worse about yourself and increase the risk of harming yourself.
- **Develop a safety plan.** Devise a plan that you can carry out at any time. Make an agreement with friends or family that you will call them when you are feeling

overwhelmed or upset. Include the grounding techniques, relaxation exercises and your comfort kit. You can make a safety plan at the following link:

www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/aboutsuicide/crisisplancontact.asp

- **Remove objects that you could use to harm yourself.**
- **See a GP or Mental Health Professional.** GPs and mental health professionals are trained to talk to and support someone who is feeling suicidal. You can search online for your local mental health crisis team or you can talk to one of the helplines (see page 8).
- **Write your feelings down.** If you can't talk to anyone, write down your feelings and what has stopped you before now. What are your reasons for living?
- **Remind yourself that suicidal thoughts are temporary.**
- **Do activities that you know will distract you.** Exercise, play a game, do a physical chore or plan to do something you enjoy.



My body

Sexual violence leaves a memory in the body. This can result in the different physical aches, pains and symptoms you are experiencing. How your body is reacting to the experience of the abuse can be helpful for recovery and healing.

The symptoms that you are experiencing could be mild to severe. If it is helpful you can rate each symptom to track the pain, discomfort and how it is affecting your life. Although this can be a daunting task, it could be useful to see how these may have reduced as a result of some of the help and activities you give yourself. In noting and monitoring these physical symptoms it can also highlight if you need to access a healthcare professional to support you. If you are worried or concerned about any of your symptoms, it is good to get it checked out as early as possible.



1. Yoga, Chi Kung, Dance and Movement

These forms of body-based practices have been found to be very supportive for survivors. Working safely to reconnect with the body as well as learning techniques that can be used specifically to reduced fatigue, aches and pains and low mood.

2. Therapeutic Massage

Massage can also benefit in providing relief to the symptoms you are experiencing. If you are not ready to see a therapist at the moment, you can learn to give yourself a massage. This is a great way to soothe and connect with your body safely.

3. Exercise

Any form of physical exercise (gym, running, weight training, cycling, skipping, small trampoline) that you enjoy, even a fast walk in nature, can provide a great number of benefits through the positive chemicals that are released. Regular exercise can help to support your overall well-being as it strengthens the immune system and supports better sleep.

4. Nutrition

Eating a rainbow diet can support the body to receive all the right nutrients it needs. This is particularly important in recovering from trauma and stress because, during these times, if the body stays on high alert the body releases chemicals (cortisol) that can deplete the body of nutrients and good health. To eat a rainbow diet simply means making sure that every day you eat many different coloured fresh fruit and vegetables and making sure you are drinking plenty of water to keep your system and cells adequately hydrated. It is also useful to reduce your intake of coffee, alcohol, sugar and nicotine as, although you might find them initially useful, they can be more harmful to your well-being and the symptoms you are experiencing.

My behaviour

It can be reassuring to understand how your behaviour may have been affected by sexual violence.

Changes in behaviour can be a way to cope with the emotional and physical pain of the abuse. For example, you could be eating more out of comfort, or self-harming in an attempt to block out painful memories. You may also be dealing with feelings of shame by distracting yourself through activities like

excessive cleaning. Such coping strategies may be helping you to cope in the short term, but could also be harmful in certain ways. It is helpful to acknowledge the behaviours that are supporting you at this time, but also to reflect on whether these are positive for you long-term.

Self-reflection exercise

What are my coping strategies? Go through the list of the behaviours that you ticked. Are there any other things you are doing to cope?

- Shopping
- Exercising
- Cleaning
- Walking
- Phoning someone
- Listening to music
- Writing
- Singing
- Writing poetry
- Keeping busy all the time
- Going out a lot

Some of these coping strategies may be helpful. Write down all of your coping strategies and then write if you feel they are helpful or unhelpful. If there are ones

that you think are unhelpful, write down what you think is the problem with that strategy. When are the times that you use this strategy? Do you use this strategy more times than others? What happens as a result of you using this coping strategy?

Would you like to make any changes to how you are coping? What one small thing could you do to help make this change? When could you do this? Think about how it could help. Visualize yourself making this first step and how it could help you. When could you practice making this change? Is there someone you can trust to tell them the changes you are making? Could they be your buddy, to call when you need some extra support to make any changes you have identified?

(Adapted from: Breaking Free Workbook by Carolyn Ainscough and Kay Toon)



Self-care tip

If you are finding it hard to relax

If your coping strategy has been to keep going and going, relaxing and letting go can be really hard. Some survivors talk about being left with the memories of the abuse and trauma when they stop, so it is normal to want to keep going! Here are some things that might help you relax:

- If you are finding it hard to concentrate try listening to audiobooks or podcasts, they can help to soothe you. Especially if you are finding that your mind is running very quickly. When you stop doing things this can be a good way to let your body rest.
- Use adult colouring-in books. They may sound silly but the repetitive nature of them can help your brain turn off when it is feeling really busy.

Self-harm

Having experienced sexual violence can make you feel out of control. Self-harm is often a way to get back some of that control as well as a way to cope and distract yourself from uncomfortable thoughts and feelings.

You might be self-harming because...

- It makes you feel more in control of your body, you can decide when the pain starts and stops
- If you are feeling numb, it can help you to feel something
- Some survivors talk about how it can be a release
- It can balance the emotional pain that you are feeling
- If you are having a flashback, the physical pain can bring you back to the here and now
- Some survivors may also want to punish themselves because they feel shame, guilt or feel that they are to blame

For many survivors, this can be part of your journey of healing. Here are some strategies to manage the risk whilst you explore other ways to manage your feelings:

- If you are cutting or piercing the skin, use something clean and sterile
- If you are burning, make sure you run it under a cold tap for up to 20 minutes, wrap it in cling film and if it is larger than a 50p coin, seek medical advice
- Make sure you clean the wounds afterwards to avoid infection
- If the wounds do become infected, see a medical professional as this can cause long term health effects
- If you think you have hurt yourself too deeply, call an ambulance for help
- If you have taken an overdose, call an ambulance
- If you feel like you are in crisis but don't need emergency medical help, search online for your local mental health crisis team.

When you are feeling more grounded it can be worth exploring what might have been the triggers that made you feel like you needed to self-harm. When the time is right for you, it can be useful to explore what this might have been. You can contact any of the helplines listed on page 8 if you would like support around this.

It can also be useful to know that there are alternatives to self-harming to deal with the painful thoughts and feelings. Some things that survivors have found helpful are:

- Going for a walk or doing some exercise
- Talking to someone who you trust (a friend, helpline or family member) about how you feel
- Grounding yourself by using the emergency self-care exercises on page 12
- Keeping a diary of your feelings
- Calling one of the sexual violence helplines on page 8
- Breaking something outside, like old china
- Getting a punch bag or taking up a hobby like boxing, which can make you feel stronger and relate to your body differently

If your feelings are still so intense that you still want to hurt yourself, here are some alternatives:

- Try putting your hands in a bowl of ice or rubbing ice on the spots you would usually cut or burn
- Use rubber bands to ping yourself on the wrist
- Use red markers to draw on yourself
- Eat a spicy chilli
- Have a cold bath or shower
- Tear up a phone book/newspapers
- Use face paints where you would hurt yourself, or write on yourself with a red marker or food colouring
- Punch/scream into a pillow
- Use a punch bag
- Write or draw to express the feelings that are inside you in your notebook

Eating distress

For many survivors eating 'dis'orders are actually very ordered! There are lots of different ways that it might manifest, such as:

- Not eating at all
- Eating in a way you are calorie counting
- Not eating then binge eating
- Making yourself sick after you've eaten

Survivors talk about how these help to distract them from feeling the complex emotions they experience. It can also support someone to feel more in control. If you have feelings of powerlessness since the sexual violence, controlling what you eat, how you eat or what you do with it once you've eaten it, gives you back the feeling of some power and control. Alternatively, using food can be a way to punish yourself for what you have experienced, even though it wasn't your fault.

Like other forms of self-harm, although it provides short-term support, it can have long-term effects on your wellbeing. It is encouraging to know that with the right support many survivors are able to move past problematic eating, as they learn to manage the negative feelings associated with the sexual violence.

If you feel like you would like to understand more around eating disorders you can visit the [Beat Eating Disorders website](#) or alternatively you can call any of the [sexual violence helplines](#) (see page 8) to talk about what is underlying the disorder.

Nightmares and sleep hygiene

Many survivors report that they struggle with their sleep.

Many can experience nightmares to do with the event. Once again, this is the mind's way of understanding the traumatic memory. You might be sleeping more, not sleeping at all, or your sleep might be disturbed (with nightmares or just generally feeling really afraid when you are going to bed). Below is a practical list of things that can support you when you are struggling with sleep.

- Make a routine to go to bed at the same time every night and to wake-up at the same time every morning. This routine can be supportive to allow your body to know when it is time to sleep and wake.
- Exercise as much as possible, even if it is a gentle stretching and relaxation routine before sleep.
- Try and get as much sunshine as you can in the day. It can be hard in a city like London, but even if it is for a little bit every day, getting the right level of vitamin D is important for good sleep.

- Avoid using your electrical devices including phone and TV at least an hour before you go to bed, as the light from these devices is known to affect sleep. Reading something that is soothing and calming or doing another calming activity you enjoy can help.
- You may need to avoid any caffeinated drinks from early afternoon as stimulants including tea and coffee affect healthy sleeping patterns.
- If you enjoy having baths, have a nice long bath before you go to bed. You can read something in the bath or listen to a podcast.
- If you like to meditate, do this before you go to bed to soothe yourself into relaxation and sleep.

Self-reflection exercise

Reflect on what has helped you in the past to have a good night's sleep. What routine and activities have worked for you? In your note-book, write the sleep routine which helps you to get a restful night's sleep.

My sleep routine is to...

SECTION 4:

Counselling

We hope this guide has been helpful to you. We understand that sexual violence, regardless of how recently or long ago this was experienced, can have profound consequences on the well-being of survivors, regardless of gender.

Many survivors seek counselling from specialist sexual violence services; these are available for male, female and LGBTQ survivors. Counsellors working in sexual violence services are trained to understand the impact of trauma of sexual violence and specialist services are there to give choice and to ensure that you get the help that is beneficial for you.

Counselling is a type of talking therapy, working face to face with a trained specialist. It provides a space in which you are able to explore your feelings and experiences at your own pace. You do not have to talk about anything that you are not ready to talk about. The focus is often on ensuring that you feel a sense of safety and wellbeing, allowing you to express your feelings in a way that is safe for you.

Counselling can be hugely helpful and many survivors talk about it having a powerful and positive impact, but it can at times be painful as you begin to explore distressing memories and emotions. This does usually improve in time and can support you to move forward.



What survivors tell us

Seeking counselling may feel daunting, below are just some of the feedback we have had from survivors who have accessed our services and how they have benefited.

“It has given me some basic strategies that help me deal with daily stress, flashbacks, anxiety attacks and general self-loathing in a way where I can now handle these issues and turn my thinking around. I am able to talk myself out of putting myself down.”

“It has been an immense help with feelings of blame, self-loathing and confidence issues.”

“It has helped with my self-esteem, with believing and understanding it’s not my fault.”

“It helped me to discover my triggers. Now I can say no and set boundaries to keep myself healthy.”

“I finally feel heard and have a sense of closure with which I am able to move forward.”

“It has enabled me to let go of the guilt and anger.”

“Now I realise that I have choices in my life.”

SECTION 5: How to support someone you know

It can be hard to know how to support someone you know in a sensitive and helpful manner. Listening to someone disclose to you that they have experienced sexual violence and abuse can bring up many different feelings and this can make it more confusing to know if you are responding in a way that is supportive to your friend or family member. The ability to stay present, compassionate and non-judgemental with an individual who discloses sexual violence can provide more than just reassurance and support, it can be affirmation that the risk they have taken to disclose, is the right one.

If a friend or family member discloses to you...

You can say these short sentences that show them that you are there to support them, not judge them and they are safe to disclose to you.

- Thank you for telling me.
- I'm so sorry that happened to you.
- I believe you.
- You didn't deserve it.
- You're not alone.
- How can I support you?

Listen and believe: Actively listening to what you are being told without giving advice or thinking ahead of what you need to say is important. Your role is to listen and to believe and to make sure that the person feels heard. Saying things like "I'm listening" or "I'm here for you" can do this. Be careful to not interrupt or ask for details. Let them talk in their own time.

Different reactions: Be available and prepared for the survivor to express a range of emotions. Some people may cry and others may act as if everything is fine, whilst others may feel angry. Whatever the response, it is important that you do not judge or label them but make their response feel validated and normal.

Respect their personal space: Any form of physical contact and intimacy can be uncomfortable and re-traumatizing for someone who has just experienced or disclosed sexual violence. Any affection such as holding hands or hugging might be difficult and so respect a survivor's personal space and boundaries by asking permission and then respecting the answer, as this can re-establish a sense of security, safety and control.

Ask them what support they want: Although obvious, asking a survivor what support they want gives them back power and control and will give them an opportunity to think about what type of support they need.

“You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated. In fact, it may be necessary to encounter the defeats, so you can know who you are, what you can rise from, how you can still come out of it.”

Maya Angelou

Challenge feelings of blame, guilt and shame: Many survivors may disclose the sexual assault whilst blaming themselves for what happened and expressing feelings of guilt and shame. When you hear any expressions of guilt, shame or self-blame, gently tell them that it is not their fault but that responsibility of the violence and abuse is 100% with the perpetrator.

Reporting to the police: The choice of whether to report the assault to the police can be very challenging for survivors. Many are aware of the difficulties of reporting to the police and so prefer to deal with the effects without going through this process. It's important to respect a survivor's choice, not pressure them in any way and never to report it without their permission. If a survivor would like to report then the helplines on page 8 can help them to know the best way to report.

Practical support: Provide tangible support such as access to a local rape crisis centre, support group, or therapist. If the survivor chooses to disclose, then it may be helpful to offer to accompany them to report to the police or other appointments, such as health visits, that might be necessary (to a sexual health clinic or GP or instance). You can also support with shopping, childcare or other practical tasks that the survivor might be finding more challenging.

Maintain confidentiality: Respect the survivor's privacy and confidentiality. It is up to them to decide who to tell about the assault.

Healing can take time: Supporting a survivor to heal from sexual violence and abuse can take time. It is important to remain patient, consistent and compassionate through this time, as progress will be at the pace that is right for the survivor. Recovery is not something that can be rushed.

Take care of yourself: Sensitively supporting a survivor can mean that you need support. Look at what your needs are and who you can talk to about your own feelings whilst respecting the confidentiality of the survivor. Sexual violence helplines often provide support to supporters of survivors, for example the **Women and Girls Network's Sexual Violence Helpline on 0808 801 0770**.

Where to access support?

Support services are available in London and the **London Survivors Gateway** can provide you with tailored advice and information on the services that are available to you. Unfortunately there can sometimes be waiting lists or periods when waiting lists are closed. If this is the case, you can contact the London Survivors Gateway at any point to see if anything has changed or look at the online service map on the website www.survivorsgateway.london to find the contact details for services directly and make enquiries.



Some of the key services in London for survivors of sexual violence are:

South London Rape Crisis – RASASC

www.rasasc.org.uk

North London Rape Crisis – based at Solace Women's Aid

www.solacewomensaid.org/solace-rape-crisis

East London Rape Crisis – based at nia

www.niaendingviolence.org.uk/rape/index.html

West London Rape Crisis – based at the Women and Girls Network

www.wgn.org.uk/our-services/west-london-rape-crisis

The Havens – for survivors who have experienced sexual violence within the last 12 months www.thehavens.org.uk

SurvivorsUK – for male survivors

www.survivorsuk.org

Galop – for LGBTQ+ survivors

www.galop.org.uk

However there are other services, including specialist services for BME survivors, that may be available to you. For further information call the London Survivors Gateway on **0800 801 0860** or visit the online service map.

www.survivorsgateway.london

Whilst you're waiting to access a service you may wish to use confidential helplines to express your thoughts and feelings. See page 8 for further details.

References and useful reading

Breaking Free Workbook – Carolyn Ainscough and Kay Toon

Trauma Toolkit – Susan Peas Bannit

The Courage to be Me – Dr. Nina Burrows

Anxiety is Really Strange – Steven Haines and Sophie Standing

Trauma is Really Strange – Steven Haines and Sophie Standing

Seeking Safety: A Treatment Manual for PTSD and Substance Abuse – Lisa Najavitt

Relaxation techniques: A practical handbook for the health care professional – Payne, R. A.



The London Survivors Gateway offers victims and survivors of rape and sexual abuse help to access specialist services in London.

We provide information on what support is available after rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse or any form of sexual violence and can help survivors to access these services. We work with anyone aged 13 or above regardless of gender, sexuality, disability, language, ethnicity or immigration status.

The Gateway is a partnership between the four London Rape Crisis Centres, Galop, SurvivorsUK and the Havens and is run by the Women and Girls Network.

www.survivorsgateway.london
0808 801 0860

