



**edinburgh women's rape  
and sexual abuse centre**  
support, advice and advocacy for women and girls

**information for workers  
who are supporting  
survivors of ritual abuse  
helpline: 0131 556 9437**

**administration, outreach  
& training: 0131 557 6737**

**minicom: 0131 557 6757**

**fax: 0131 558 1612**

**support@ewrasac.org.uk  
info@ewrasac.org.uk**

**c/o P.O. Box 120  
Brunswick Road  
Edinburgh, EH7 5WX**

**Registered Charity Ref. SC 006208**

## **what is ritual abuse?**

Ritual abuse can be defined as the organised sexual, physical, psychological (mental) and emotional abuse of one or more children, adolescents or adults. It usually involves a group or groups of people of both sexes and this often involves family members.

Ritual abuse can be practiced as part of a religion or a belief system, which abusers use as a means to control the individual and justify their actions. As little is known in society about ritual abuse, myths shape people's understanding, and many assume that it is always satanic (based on a belief system of devil worship). Some ritual abuse does involve this, but some does not.

There are different forms of ritual abuse and survivors speak of differing experiences, but it also has common aspects which are its distinguishing characteristics:

- Elaborate rituals, 'games' and 'ceremonies'
- Systematic emotional, physical and sexual abuse
- Being used in child pornography and prostitution
- Being forced to participate in the abuse of others
- Abuse often, but not always takes place in rural areas
- Being forced to take drugs

Ritual abuse may, in some cases, be more extreme than other forms of sexual abuse, but it also has similarities. Most sexual abuse of children is ritualised in some way, for example in the practice of grooming. Indeed, ritual abuse shares common features with the activities of paedophile rings including secrecy and the involvement of people from 'respectable' professions.

## **who are the abusers?**

Survivors of ritual abuse tell us that their abusers come from all walks of life, and most professions and occupations have been mentioned. There are often close family connections that cross generations. We have also been told that some practice conventional religions as a charade designed to avert suspicion. As with all forms of sexual abuse, it is not specific to one type of person, and it crosses religions, cultures, races, age etc.

## why do survivors not speak out?

There are many reasons why survivors of ritual abuse do not talk about what has happened to them:

- They may fear they will not be believed. Little is known about ritual abuse and the abusers will have undertaken a great deal of planning to cover their tracks. This has led to scepticism and denial within our society that such abuse happens. Many people find it hard to believe. Survivors may therefore feel that it is pointless to speak out as most people reject that it happens and talking will not change anything. However, ritual abuse is an unfortunate reality.
- Ritual abuse can involve being forced to participate in the abuse of others and survivors may fear that they will be judged if they talk about this.
- People in positions of power or 'respected' professions may be part of the group of abusers. This will make it harder for survivors to be believed should they tell.
- Fear of repercussion or reprisals from the abusers. They may fear that they or someone else will die.
- Loyalty towards the group which will have been instilled over time to keep them involved in the group.

Every aspect of ritual abuse involves control and secrecy. Abusers use repetition, routine and ritual to, force patterns of behaviour, instil fear, and ensure silence to protect themselves.

Survivors of ritual abuse are similar to survivors of childhood sexual abuse in that they are groomed to believe that no-one will believe them. If you add the extent of trauma, and how talking about the abuse can cause flashbacks, it can become impossible to talk. This means it is largely unreported crime.

As more survivors come forward and speak of their abuse, this is evidence itself that ritual abuse happens, and will correspondingly increase agencies ability to respond to survivors' needs. If listened to, survivors can learn to trust. They should be listened to and given help.

## the effects of ritual abuse

It is common for survivors of ritual and sexual abuse to experience flashbacks, panic attacks and sleeping problems. These are often brought about by smells, places, dates or names, which can trigger a memory or an emotional or physical response. They may have been given a trigger as a means to control them when the abuser is not present. Triggers are very restrictive and survivors may go out of their way to avoid them. However, they can develop ways to help them cope with triggers, which can make a difference to their lives.

Survivors of ritual abuse may experience a range of triggers, including: dates on the calendar, phases of the moon, music, smells, certain words or colours. Triggers can also be an everyday object or phrase which will remind them of the abuse.

### if you are supporting a women experiencing these effects you can suggest:

- During a flashback – she can try grounding herself in the present and reminding herself that it is a flashback and that scary as it is, she is now safe. Some women keep an elastic band around their wrist and 'ping it' to try and bring them back to the here and now. Alternatively, she could stamp her feet or clap her hands loudly.
- Breathing techniques can be useful to reduce the effects of panic attacks or flashbacks. During flashbacks she can take long deep breaths and focus on her breathing as the memory emerges. During panic attacks, concentrating on her breathing will help her body relax naturally. She can also try to visualise being calm and relaxed.
- Sleeping patterns are often disturbed which can make it more difficult to cope. You could talk to her about developing a routine before bed and it may be useful to discuss what makes her feel safe.
- Re-living memories in flashbacks and nightmares can be tiring and emotionally draining. It is important that she looks after her body after a flashback, and does not place any pressure on herself to recover and get on with things. She could make a hot-water bottle or have a hot drink.

## **if you are supporting a survivor of ritual abuse:**

**Believe** what she is saying, even though you may find it difficult. Her memories may be fragmented and confusing at first, but be patient. Belief is crucial as not being believed can be a great burden and lead to her doubting her memories and experiences. It is very important to validate her experience.

**Listen** to what she has to say and let her take her time. Do not advise or judge her. If she has kept silent for a long time it will not be easy for her to start talking. It may be difficult for her to trust you or feel safe enough to talk. Be guided by her responses to your support.

**Respect** her feelings and decisions. Remember that she has developed her own ways of coping which will have helped her to survive the abuse. She may still need these.

**Remember** that it is not her fault. No-one asks to be abused. She cannot be blamed for participation in an act she did not understand, or was forced into.

**Recognise** that it takes courage and strength for her to face fears and talk about the abuse

Drug induced hallucinations and trickery may have been used to instil belief in supernatural powers which the cult or group claim they can use to find them should they leave. This level of extreme mind control and torture over many years often results in an intense level of trauma and survivors' needs can be extremely complex.

Due to the nature of the abuse and the language that many survivors use when talking about their experience, it may be difficult for you to understand what she is trying to say. Support workers sometimes do not ask for clarification or ask questions, yet she may need to be asked questions in a direct manner. You may worry that you are not saying the right thing, which is understandable. There is a list of books given at the back of this leaflet which you may find useful.

## **some ways of coping for survivors are:**

Many survivors of ritual abuse experience Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) to some extent. It is a way of coping with the extreme trauma which they are subjected to. This used to be known as Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD).

Self-harm is a common way for survivors to cope. People self-harm to relieve emotional distress. It can take many forms including cutting, burning, bruising, abuse of food or overdosing. Physical pain is often easier to cope with than emotional pain, and self-harm can provide survivors with temporary relief and a sense of calm.

For further information about ways of coping with flashbacks and panic attacks or information about self-harm, please contact us on 0131 556 9437 to request copies of our leaflets. The websites listed on the back of this leaflet also contain useful information.

## **getting support for yourself**

You may feel horrified, upset or shocked by what you are told. These feelings are understandable but may add to the survivor's distress as she may feel responsible for upsetting you. It is important to remember that while you are hearing about her experiences, she has lived through them and survived.

You may need support for yourself to cope with or understand what you are hearing. There is a list of agencies at the back of this leaflet which you can contact or you can call us on **0131 556 9437**. If you do not feel able to cope with what is being disclosed to you, or if ritual abuse is new to you, it is important to refer her to an appropriate agency, or at the very least seek advice from a specialist agency. We run trainings on ritual abuse for agency workers. Please contact us on 0131 557 67 37 for further information about our training opportunities.

Much of what you will hear will challenge your beliefs about what can conceivably happen in our society. It is important to remember that it takes a great deal of courage to speak out about ritual abuse and this should be respected.

## recommended reading

### **Behind Enemy Lines**

Laurie Matthews, 2005  
ISBN – 13: 978-0954346416

### **Fight! Rabbit! Fight!**

Laurie Matthews, 2004  
ISBN – 13: 978-0954346409

### **Resistance: A Ritual Abuse Survivor Speaks Out**

Mary Smith, 2003  
ISBN – 13: 978-0954474003

### **Where Angels Fear: Ritual Abuse in Scotland**

Laurie Matthews, 2003  
ISBN – 13: 978-0953996148

### **Who Dares Wins**

Laurie Matthews, 2001  
ISBN – 13: 978-0953996117

### **Spirit Alive – A Woman's Healing from Cult Ritual Abuse**

Jadelinn  
ISBN – 13: 978-0889612211

### **Stripped Naked – Gifts for Recovery**

Lauren Stratford  
ISBN – 13: 978-0882899671

These books should be available to order at Waterstones' book shops, through DABS (see below) or online at [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)

**DABS: Directory and Book Services** runs a specialist book and information service for people who are overcoming childhood abuse, sexual abuse, or domestic violence, and for anyone else who wishes to understand these issues more clearly:

Tel: 01709 860023  
4 New Hill, Conisborough, Doncaster, DN12 3HA  
[books@dabsbooks.co.uk](mailto:books@dabsbooks.co.uk) / [www.dabsbooks.co.uk](http://www.dabsbooks.co.uk)

## useful contacts

**Edinburgh Women's Rape  
and Sexual Abuse Centre**  
0131 556 9437

### **Rape Crisis Scotland Helpline**

08088 01 03 02  
Freephone helpline 7 days a week 6pm-midnight for survivors of sexual violence at any time  
[www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk](http://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk)

### **Ritual Abuse Network Scotland**

[www.rans.org.uk](http://www.rans.org.uk)

### **TAG: Trauma and Abuse Group**

PO Box 465, Godalming, Surrey, GU7 2YL  
[www.tag-uk.net](http://www.tag-uk.net)

### **Survivorship**

Forum on survival of ritual abuse based in California  
[www.survivorship.org](http://www.survivorship.org)

### **The Freedom Room**

Forum for and by survivors of ritual abuse  
[www.thefreedomroom.piczo.com](http://www.thefreedomroom.piczo.com)

### **Ritual Abuse Information Website**

[www.ra-info.org](http://www.ra-info.org)

All our leaflets are available in larger print. If you would like copies please contact us on 0131 556 9437.