

What is Ritual Abuse?

Ritual abuse is the severe and systematic abuse of one or more children, adolescents or adults, usually by a number of perpetrators of both sexes over a long period.

This can be based on a belief system (such as Satanic Ritual Abuse) that the abusers use to justify their behaviour. It can include physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse which may take place in a ritualised or ceremonial context.

Survivors of ritual abuse often speak of being forced to take drugs, being forced into prostitution or being forced to abuse other people. They also speak of physical injuries being inflicted upon them for the sexual gratification of the perpetrators.

Ritual abuse often involves whole families and can carry on through generations.

Feelings you may experience as a survivor of Ritual Abuse

You may have been told by the perpetrators that you can never escape, that no matter where you go, they will find you. And if you have left the group this may mean that you are constantly 'looking over your shoulder' in fear that you will be found. This is often used as a way to control and keep survivors in the group.

But many survivors do escape and reach safety.

You may live in fear of reprisals or there may have been threats to members of your family. It can also be difficult to leave the group if your whole family is involved, and there may be threats that members of your family will be harmed if you leave. It will take a great deal of courage to leave and you have to trust that others who want to leave the group will be able to find that courage for themselves and seek support.

You may feel that you cannot speak about your experiences because no-one will believe you – and you may have been told by your abusers that you will not be believed. This may make you feel you cannot trust anyone enough to speak to, but there are organisations which have experience of working with survivors of ritual abuse where you can get support and information.

Triggers

Triggers are smells, places, dates, names that trigger a memory or an emotional or physical response. Survivors of Ritual Abuse may experience a range of triggers such as dates on the calendar, phases of the moon, music, smells, certain words or colours and these can have provoke intense physical and emotional reactions such as:

Flashbacks

Flashbacks are a natural reaction to the trauma of sexual abuse but they can be very frightening and women often describe feelings of fear, confusion, panic, being out of control, terror. This is because they can happen when you least expect them and can be triggered by a noise, a smell or by seeing something that reminds you of the abuse.

No, you are not crazy. You may feel that you can't speak to anyone about your flashbacks because you think you are going crazy, but it's a natural part of the healing process.

Sometimes women will try to avoid all the things that trigger flashbacks but the down side of this is that it can really limit what you do and where you go. But there are other ways to help alleviate the fear and panic that flashbacks cause.

- Tell yourself that it's a flashback and that, scary as it is, you are now safe.
- Breathe. When you are having a flashback you stop breathing normally and this can cause a pounding in your head, dizziness, shaking, sweating, feeling faint. If you can start breathing normally the feelings of panic will lessen.

- Take time to recover. It will take a while for you to feel yourself again so give yourself permission to take some time to get back to your normal activities.
- Get some support. You might want to be on your own when the flashbacks happen but if you have someone who knows about them, you can choose to talk about your feelings anytime you need to.
- Remind yourself you're in the real world. Stamp your feet or clap your hands loudly.
- Remember that this is part of your healing process and you are a survivor.

Panic Attacks

Panic attacks are sudden, unexpected anxiety attacks that can include sweating, tightening of the chest, shortness of breath, numbness, tingling of the hands and feet or needing to go to the toilet, your mouth may dry up and you may jump at even the slightest noise.

When you first experience a panic attack you may be confused, not sure of what is happening to your body and frightened that you can't control it. But panic attacks are another way your body has of coping with the abuse you have experienced. If your body feels threatened, it responds with the 'fight or flight' response and a panic attack is an exaggerated form of this.

Although panic attacks are your body's way of coping with the memories of the abuse, there are some substances that can make it worse. These include:

- Alcohol, nicotine and caffeine and some drugs can make panic attacks worse. Also some prescription drugs can bring the attack on more severely. Withdrawal from some sedatives can have the same effect.
- Your blood sugar levels being too high – this can be caused by junk food, overeating or too much fasting.
- Hyperventilating caused by stress can make a panic attack worse.

Nightmares

It's also common for women survivors of abuse to suffer sleep disturbances or nightmares. These may be an exact replay of past events or it may be an abstract series of events that are hard to remember but are still upsetting.

Nightmares may be triggered by a date, a smell or a familiar place or person and can make you afraid to go to sleep. Talking to someone about the nightmares and the feelings they bring up may help. It may also help to have someone with you or a friend you can wake up for support if the nightmares do not go away.

Coping with Triggers

Triggers can be very limiting and you may find that you go out of your way to avoid them. But there are other ways that you can help to deal with triggers while still keeping yourself safe.

- You could think about your triggers and look at the ones you could work on while still feeling safe. Perhaps friends or a support worker could work on this with you. For instance, you may stay at home because going outside triggers a panic attack. Going for short distances with someone you trust may help you work on this.
- Or you may try to visualise yourself doing something that you fear may trigger a flashback or panic attack, or make you feel anxious before you actually do it. For instance, you may become very distressed going on the bus but you could go through a process of visualisation where you are at the bus stop, getting on the bus, sitting through your journey, then getting off at your stop and the entire process being anxiety free and enjoyable. You may want to have a friend with you while you are doing this visualisation so that you know you have support while you are working through this process.
- You may want to talk through your fears with a friend, a support worker or a counsellor. You may want to think about how you feel while talking about your fears, what makes you feel uncomfortable and what helped.

Speaking Out

Survivors are now beginning to speak out about their experiences and this has led to an increase in workers' awareness and agencies' knowledge of how best to offer support to survivors.

You may feel that you will be judged by those you speak to. If you feel unsure about speaking to an agency, you could contact one of the organisations at the back of this booklet, many of whom have helplines. This may help alleviate some of the fears you have about speaking face to face with someone.

Many survivors are concerned about confidentiality but most agencies will only pass on information outwith their own service in matters concerning child protection where there would be a legal obligation to pass information to the appropriate service. If you are worried about this you can ask a service for a copy of their child protection policy.

You may be worried that people will think you are 'mad' and may have been told this by your abusers. But as survivors have become more confident in disclosing information to support agencies this has increased the organisations' capacity to understand and respond.

If you are living with ritual abuse you may want to leave but are afraid. You can contact the Rape Crisis Centre or one of the other organisations listed in this booklet for support and to speak about ways of putting a strong support system in place so that you can get away safely. Support workers will help you look at your options and can give information about other agencies that can help with housing, benefits etc.

You may feel that you need to move to another part of the country – you can contact the Rape Crisis Scotland Helpline who will be able to give you information about Rape Crisis Centres across Scotland.

Recommended Reading

Behind Enemy Lines

by Laurie Matthew

Pub: *Young Women's Project (2005)*

ISBN -13: 978-0954346416

Fight! Rabbit! Fight!

by Laurie Matthew

Pub: *Young Women's Project (2004)*

ISBN -13: 978-0954346409

Resistance: A Ritual Abuse Survivor Speaks Out

by Mary Smith

Pub: *SAFE (2003)*

ISBN - 13: 978-0954474003

Where Angels Fear: Ritual Abuse in Scotland

by Laurie Matthew

Pub: *Dundee Young Women's Centre (2003)*

ISBN - 13: 978-0953996148

Who Dares Wins

by Laurie Matthew

Pub: *Dundee Young Women's Centre (2001)*

ISBN -13: 978-0953996117

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

by Jadelinn

Pub: *Woman's P. of Canada*

ISBN -13: 978-0889612211

Stripped Naked – Gifts for Recovery

by Lauren Stratford

Pub: *Portfolio Press US (2001)*

ISBN -13: 978-0882899671

Useful Contacts

rapecrisiscentre

5th Floor
30 Bell Street
Glasgow
G1 1LG

Tel: 0141 552 3200

Email: support@rapecrisiscentre-glasgow.co.uk

Rape Crisis Scotland Helpline

Tel: 08088 01 03 02

Helpline open 6pm until midnight 7 nights per week. Survivors can contact them if they have experienced sexual violence no matter when or how it happened.

Eighteen and Under

1 Victoria Road
Dundee
DD1 1EL

Tel: 01382 206222

Web: www.18u.org.uk

TAG. Trauma and Abuse Group

P O Box 465
Godalming
Surrey
GU7 2YL

Web: www.tag-uk.net

Survivorship

A forum on survival of ritual abuse based in California

Web: www.survivorship.org

