

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.

Who are the Perpetrators?

Survivors of ritual abuse tell us that perpetrators come from all walks of life with most professions and occupations being mentioned. Often survivors will describe perpetrators as 'comfortably situated' and tell us that there are financial incentives to stay in the cult. We are also told that some perpetrators practice other, more conventional religions as a pretence aimed at deflecting possible suspicion.

Feelings that may be experienced by survivors of Ritual Abuse

The most important issue for survivors is that they feel they can trust and be believed when they disclose. Survivors will often have been told by the perpetrators that they can never escape, that no matter where they go, they will be found or that no one will believe them.

Supporting survivors of ritual abuse may be similar to supporting other survivors of sexual abuse. Most abuse has some measure of ritual involved such as:

- Grooming
- Secrecy
- Repetitive behaviour
- Organised group of perpetrators (as in paedophile rings)

However, the needs of survivors of ritual abuse can be extremely complex and they may need a huge amount of very intensive support. If they are still involved with the cult they may express a desire to leave but be unable to do so. The reasons for this can include:

- The control that the cult has over every aspect of their lives
- They may be programmed to believe that telling is useless as no-one will believe such incredible stories and that they risk psychiatric intervention.
- A belief that cult members have supernatural powers which will know if they disclose and will find them if they ever try to leave
- Forced use of drug induced hallucinations and trickery and by encoding these ideas over many years

Challenges for Workers

Supporting a survivor of ritual abuse may challenge some workers in a number of ways. You may feel what you are hearing is 'unbelievable' but this does not mean that you should disbelieve the woman.

You may worry that you are not saying the right thing – this is understandable if the issue of ritual abuse is new to you. There are a number of books that have been written on the subject and these are listed in this booklet.

But the most important way to work with this issue is to take advice from agencies that have experience in dealing with survivors. There is a list of agencies in this booklet that have many years experience of working with ritual abuse survivors and you can refer on to them or check out any training opportunities that may be available.

Your boundaries may also be challenged. Survivors have reported that they have been forced to witness or participate in activities which mean they feel they are as culpable for abuse as the perpetrators. They may have been told that they face punishment for their involvement but there also may be a level of loyalty to members of the cult, particularly if these are also family members.

All of this can result in survivors feeling that they cannot ever leave the cult or achieve any level of safety.

You may experience difficulty working with a survivor who is disclosing to you that s/he has also been a perpetrator and you should take advice from your organisation on this work. However, at all times you must ensure that you, and the survivor you are working with, have all the information available on your child protection policy and your legal responsibilities.

Most importantly, **do not judge**. No one asks to be abused and a survivor should not be blamed for participating in acts over which they had no control. It will have taken a great deal of courage to speak out about the abuse and this should be respected.

Issues for Workers

Many survivors of ritual abuse suffer post traumatic stress disorder because of the long term effects of the abuse. This can cause survivors to experience:

Hypervigilance

This may show itself in the survivor's unwillingness to give you a name, address, meet with you (if the initial contact was by phone), or trust you

in any way. When you speak to the survivor s/he may seem constantly on edge, may question everything you say or may jump at any small noise or disturbance.

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 a woman least expect them and can be triggered by a noise, a smell or by seeing something that reminds her of the abuse.

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 she does and where she goes. But there are other ways to help alleviate the fear and panic that flashbacks cause. If you are supporting a survivor who is experiencing flashbacks you can suggest that she:

- Tells herself that it's a flashback and that, scary as it is, she is 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 the woman can start breathing normally the feelings of panic will lessen.
- Take time to recover. It will take a while for her to feel herself again so she should give herself permission to take some time to get back to her normal activities.
- Gets some support. She might want to be on her own when the flashbacks happen but if she has someone who knows about them, she can choose to talk about her feelings anytime she needs to.

- Remind herself she's in the real world. She could stamp her feet or clap her hands loudly.
- Remember that this is part of her healing process and she is 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, her mouth may dry up and she may jump at even the slightest noise.

When a woman first experiences a panic attack she may be confused, not sure of what is happening to her body and frightened that she can't control it. But panic attacks are another way a woman's body has of coping with the abuse she has 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 a woman's 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.
- 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 the survivor afraid to go to sleep. Talking to someone about the nightmares and the feelings they bring up may help. It may also help for a woman to have someone with her, or a friend she can wake up for support if the nightmares do not go away.

Coping with Triggers

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

- Thinking about triggers and look at the ones she could work on while still feeling safe. Perhaps friends or a support worker could work on this with her. For instance, she may stay at home because going outside triggers a panic attack. Going for short distances with someone she trusts may help her work on this.
- Or the woman may try to visualise herself doing something that she fears may trigger a flashback or panic attack, or make her feel anxious - before she actually does it. For instance, she may become very distressed going on the bus but could go through a process of visualisation where she is at the bus stop, getting on the bus, sitting through the journey, then getting off at her stop and the entire process being anxiety free and enjoyable. The woman may want to have a friend with her while she is doing this visualisation so that she knows she has support while working through this process.
- The woman may want to talk through her fears with a friend, a support worker or a counsellor. She may also want to think about how she feels while talking about her fears, what makes her feel uncomfortable and what helps.

Getting Support

If you are working with a survivor of ritual abuse and you feel you cannot cope with the disclosures – **get support from a specialist organisation as soon as possible.**

There is a list of such organisations at the back of this booklet. All of these organisations have built in support networks for staff and volunteers that you may not have access to in your own workplace or personal life. Some disclosures about ritual abuse practices may challenge your own beliefs and values and could result in secondary trauma for you as a support worker.

Recommended Reading

The Politics and Experience of Ritual Abuse: Beyond Disbelief
Sara Scott ISBN: 0335204198

Treating Survivors of Satanist Abuse
Valerie Sinason ISBN: 0415105439

Behind Enemy Lines
Laurie Matthew ISBN: 0954346416

Fight! Rabbit! Fight!
Laurie Matthew ISBN: 0954346408

Resistance: A Ritual Abuse Survivor Speaks Out
Mary Smith ISBN: 0954474007

Where Angels Fear: Ritual Abuse in Scotland
Laurie Matthew ISBN: 095399614X

Who Dares Wins
Laurie Matthew ISBN: 0953996115

Spirit Alive
Jadelinn ISBN: 0889612218

Stripped Naked
Lauren Stratford ISBN: 0882899678

You can obtain these and many other similar books from:

DABS. Directory and Book Services

4 New Hill
Conisbrough
DONCASTER
DN12 3HA

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

