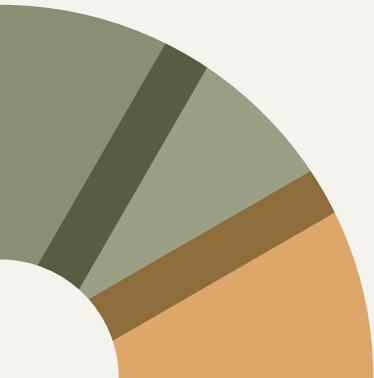

Rape Crisis Scotland

**Information
for survivors of
sexual violence**

**Healing from
sexual violence**



Healing from sexual violence

Background

- » Sexual violence can cause significant trauma and short and long-term physical, emotional and sexual health issues
- » Everyone reacts differently to trauma. Survivors' reactions to the trauma of sexual violence can depend on what happened and when; the support they have around them; their personal circumstances; personal resilience and many other factors
- » However, many people do heal from sexual violence and learn to cope, in their own way, with what happened
- » There is no set time for healing from sexual violence. Many survivors of sexual violence feel that they should 'get over it and move on'. Healing from sexual violence can take time

What is the 'healing process'?

- » Sexual violence affects people in many different ways. How survivors heal from their experience is individual to them and their circumstances
- » Healing from sexual violence is not a linear process, in the sense of following a straight line until you feel you are over what happened. Most survivors have ups and downs and setbacks and disappointments. This can be distressing as it can feel as if you are not making as much or as rapid progress as you wish. It is natural to feel this way. But these setbacks are your

mind revisiting the abuse in order to process and reconcile it in some way. This does not feel like healing but it is a really important part of healing. And, over time, it will help you heal

- » Healing means coming to terms with what happened and being able to see it in the context of the whole of your life; and not the dominant feature. This can be hard
- » Understanding your responses and reactions can help you heal. Knowing that your reactions are natural and common means that you are less likely to give yourself a hard time, and can help you deal with whatever arises
- » This includes understanding ‘trauma’ and how people can recover from it
- » Judith Herman describes a three-stage model of recovery from the trauma of abuse as follows:
 1. Safety: the survivor has to be safe and feel safe from further abuse first, before healing can take place
 2. Remembrance and mourning (speaking about and working through what happened; mourning the losses which resulted from the trauma; putting what happened in context of your past life which you can now move on from)
 3. Reconnecting with ordinary life (for example developing a new sense of self; new interests; self-confidence and self-esteem; being with people who make you feel good and so on)

You can read more about this in: *Trauma and Recovery* by Judith Herman, 1994. Published by Rivers Oram Press/Pandora List

What you can do: self-care tips for survivors

The following suggestions may be helpful ways of starting to heal:

1. Safety

- » If you are not safe at the moment because you are in contact with whoever abused you or are in a relationship with them, you may think it is impossible to be safe or that there is no way out of your situation. The RCS Helpline, your local rape crisis centre, or other services such as Women's Aid can help you to leave the situation or to make it safer whilst you decide what is best for you. This could involve safety planning, legal remedies, safe housing, security measures and medical help
- » If you are safe at the moment there are ways of increasing this, for example by forming a network of support with people you trust or with support workers, for example at rape crisis

2. Remembrance and mourning

- » Talking about what happened can be helpful. It is important to talk to someone you trust. You may find it helpful to talk to your local rape crisis centre or the RCS Helpline. You may be able to get telephone, face-to-face, group or email/online support depending on your preference and what is available in your area
- » Whether you talk to a trusted friend or a support worker, this is a significant step. It can sometimes seem that, by talking about what happened or about how you feel, more things come up or that your feelings become more intense. Sometimes survivors of sexual violence find that this makes things more difficult for a while. However, by speaking about

the abuse, you can start to acknowledge what happened and how it has affected you. People always imagine healing to feel positive, but remembering fear and pain and processing what happened, can make healing feel difficult

- » Many survivors blame themselves for the abuse, and this can lead to feelings of guilt, shame or anger. These feelings are difficult to talk about and can seriously affect everyday life. It can be very helpful to talk about how you feel, to get support, and to place the responsibility for the abuse with the abuser
- » You probably have your own ways of coping with stress but traumatic stress can be different. It can sometimes seem like the symptoms of traumatic stress - panic attacks, nightmares, flashbacks – are not getting better or going away. Having some support to find other ways to cope can be helpful. So too is having somewhere safe to express your feelings and work out where they fit into your life now. Healing from sexual violence is hard. It is very tiring. Survivors often end up questioning what they believe about themselves and the people or world around them. So it is important to look after yourself during this time
- » If possible try to:
 - Take care of your health. Eating regularly and well can make you feel better. Cut down on sugar and caffeine as they can increase stress. Alcohol and drugs may make you feel better in the short-term but can cause longer-term problems. If you think that your alcohol or drug use is becoming a problem, seek advice
 - Try to give yourself time to rest and relax. There are many different relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, listening to music, reading. The RCS Helpline can give you information about these

- › Exercise reduces stress, is good for your physical and emotional health, and makes you feel better. A short walk every day can make a big difference; even housework can help. Swimming, cycling, going to the gym, aerobics, dancing...whatever you fancy

3. Reconnecting

- » You may start to feel more positive as you begin to move on with your life. No one can make it so that the abuse did not happen but it is possible to move on, to 'find yourself' so that you do not feel as though the experience of sexual violence is what makes you who you are. You may still have bad days, but they will gradually become further apart and you will know how to deal with them when they do happen. Having some bad days does not mean that you are getting worse. Healing is not about always moving forward; it is natural to have ups and downs
- » Being active and having positive social contact can help. This could be meeting friends, volunteering or taking up a new activity. It is important that you feel safe and that the people you are with make you feel good about yourself as this can boost your confidence and self-esteem
- » It is possible to heal from sexual violence. By the time you are reconnecting with life and finding a new way forward you will know that you have survived the attack/s and also the most difficult stages of healing

Remember: you are important. Your feelings matter. You do not have to cope on your own.

Help and information

There are many people who want to help. You can phone/email the RCS Helpline for support and information. We can tell you about services in your area. You do not need to give your name. RCS Helpline (6pm to midnight every day) on 08088 01 03 02 or email anytime on support@rapecrisisscotland.org.uk

If you are feeling overwhelmed and you think this is having a serious effect on your health, speak to your GP or another professional. They may be able to refer you for talking or other therapies which can help you manage better.

The information in this leaflet draws on various sources including those below. **You can find more information online at:**

- » www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk
- » Information after rape and sexual assault:
www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/06/13141931/0
- » www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk
- » www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/Anger.asp
- » www.mind.org.uk
- » www.getselfhelp.co.uk

App: eCBT Trauma

A useful book is: *The Courage to Heal Workbook: For Women and Men Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* by Laura Davis, 1990. Published by: HarperCollins in paperback.

Local rape crisis centres

Rape Crisis Centres are located in all local authorities in Scotland; for the most up to date contact information and referral criteria please go to: www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/about-local-rapecrisis-centres/

Aberdeen

Rape Crisis Grampian

Argyll & Bute

Argyll & Bute Rape Crisis Centre

Dumfries & Galloway

Rape Crisis & Sexual Abuse Support Centre

Dundee

Women's Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre

East Ayrshire

The STAR Centre

Edinburgh

Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre

Fife

Fife Rape & Sexual Assault Centre

Forth Valley

Forth Valley Rape Crisis

Glasgow & Clyde

Glasgow & Clyde Rape Crisis Centre

Lanarkshire

Lanarkshire Rape Crisis Centre

Moray

Moray Rape Crisis

Orkney

Orkney Rape & Sexual Assault Service

Perth

Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre Perth & Kinross

Highland

Rape & Sexual Abuse Service Highland

Scottish Borders

Scottish Borders Rape Crisis Centre

Shetland

Shetland Rape Crisis

Western Isles

Western Isles Rape Crisis Centre

Information for survivors of sexual violence in this series:

- Anger
- Coping after sexual violence
- Dissociation
- Flashbacks
- Healing from sexual violence
- Nightmares and sleeping problems
- Panic attacks
- Relationships
- Self-harm
- Sexual health
- Suicidal thoughts/feelings
- Trauma



Helpline: **08088 01 03 02**

Email: **support@rapecrisisscotland.org.uk**

For information on your local rape crisis centre visit
our website: **www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk**

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