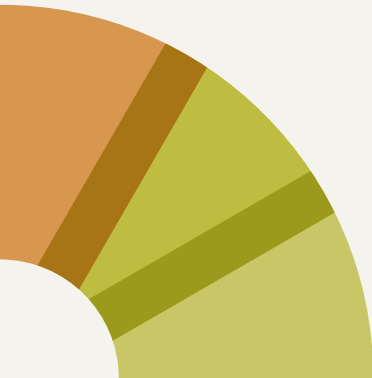

Rape Crisis Scotland

**Information
for survivors of
sexual violence**

Relationships



Relationships

Background

- » Sexual violence can cause significant trauma and short and long-term physical, emotional and sexual wellbeing issues
- » It is a major experience which can change your view of the world. It can make it difficult to trust anyone, even yourself, or relate to people in the way you used to
- » It can affect your confidence and self-esteem which are important aspects of healthy relationships
- » It can make you feel uncomfortable about any physical or emotional contact with anyone, and affect how you feel about sex and intimacy
- » This can affect your relationships with other people, including your friends, intimate partner, children and wider family. It can result in isolation from friends and family or make it difficult for you to make new friends and relationships
- » You may not have told anyone about the sexual violence, including your partner (if you have one)
- » If you do tell family, friends, partners and others, they may be shocked and distressed for you and want to help in any way they can. But they may have their own difficulties, such as not knowing what to say or even believing things about sexual violence that are unhelpful. Friends and

family members may react in unexpected ways

- » Your family and friends may not know how to handle the situation. They may find you difficult, for example if you are irritable or withdrawn. They may have unrealistic ideas about how long it might take you to 'recover'. They also may need some help themselves to cope with their own feelings and be strong enough to support you
- » Even people who are well meaning may not understand your situation or what you are going through. People generally do not know very much about rape or sexual assault. What they see on TV or in newspapers may not help
- » Relationships can be further complicated if the person who sexually assaulted you is a family member/intimate partner. Other family members may be reluctant to support you or cause 'upset' in the family or find it hard to believe that someone they know/love could do this

How sexual violence can affect intimate relationships

- » Sexual violence is, more often than not, committed by someone known to the survivor. This can be a partner or ex-partner and can happen in the context of an intimate relationship. This can be very confusing. It is important to remember that you always have the right to say no to sex, whether or not you have previously had consensual sex with someone. Forced sex within marriage or an intimate relationship, whether a heterosexual or same-sex relationship, is still a crime

- » After sexual violence you may have difficulty with trust, intimacy and sex, immediately after the abuse or many years later
- » Some people react by avoiding intimacy and sexual activity. Some find that they no longer enjoy sex in the way they used to. Some react by having more sex or rushing into sex because they think that that's what people want from them or to prove something to themselves. Your friends and family might feel confused by or judge your reaction

Some common reactions are:

- › Avoiding or being afraid of sex
- › Seeing sex as an obligation
- › Negative feelings such as anger, disgust, or guilt with touch
- › Having difficulty becoming aroused or feeling anything
- › Feeling emotionally distant or not present during sex
- › Experiencing intrusive or disturbing sexual thoughts and images
- › Having flashbacks during sex
- › Engaging in compulsive, inappropriate or harmful sexual behaviour
- › Difficulty establishing or maintaining an intimate relationship
- › Pain or difficulty with orgasm

- » You may have previously been assaulted by someone you knew and trusted, and this may also affect how your present relationship develops
- » There may be ongoing medical issues to do with sexually transmitted infection (STI). If it is an infection which flares up, it can remind you of the assault or make you anxious about a current or future sexual partner rejecting you. You may not want to tell an intimate partner about the STI, but if you do not, this could affect their sexual health

What you can do: self-care tips for survivors

- » There are things you can do to help you feel better about yourself, to build up your own sense of self-esteem and control. These are described in the information in this series on *Coping strategies*
- » It is important to think about who you tell about the abuse and to make sure that it is someone you can trust. If possible, it may help to have a network of people who you trust around you
- » It is important to take care of yourself first. You are not responsible for how other people feel. They need to find their own ways of coping – you cannot fix it for them. It can help if they understand more about what you are going through. You can tell them that they can contact the RCS Helpline or a local rape crisis centre for information and support for themselves
- » Being able to be honest with yourself and with others can help you feel more in control
- » This is hard but a lack of communication can lead to

misunderstandings, hurt feelings and a loss of intimacy. For example, a partner may feel rejected and unloved. Being able to tell a partner that it is not about them but the emotions and memories that sex or intimacy brings up for you, may help you both and your relationship

- » When someone uses sex to hurt you, it can be hard to feel confident that sex can be good. The passing of time and positive sexual experiences by yourself or with a partner may help
- » In your sexual relationships, it is important to feel that you are in control. This means being able to go at your own pace and trying to be open and honest about what you want and need
- » You may not want any sexual contact and it is important to talk to your partner about this or to negotiate the level of intimacy you are comfortable with. This communication may not be easy, but it is important that your partner understands how you feel, so that you can deal with it together
- » You could think of the different forms of physical contact that you are comfortable with and, when you are ready, build on this gradually
- » Some survivors experience flashbacks during sex. If you are able to speak to your partner about your experience of sexual violence, it may be possible to explain about flashbacks and agree in advance what you want if this happens. If you experience flashbacks during sex, it is OK to take time out from the sexual side of your relationship to work through these memories. Your partner should respect your choice and support you. If you are unable to tell your partner about the abuse, it may still be possible to talk about what you are or are not comfortable with sexually

- » With a new partner, it can help to take control of planning the time you spend with them. Think about what helps you feel OK. You do not have to be alone with someone unless you want to be. You can set your own limits, including how much intimacy you can cope with. It will help if you can explain your reasons so that they can support you and not feel rejected or that you are not interested in the relationship
- » Talking about your relationships with others 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

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

Lanarkshire

Lanarkshire Rape Crisis Centre

Argyll & Bute

Argyll & Bute Rape Crisis Centre

Moray

Moray Rape Crisis

Dumfries & Galloway

Rape Crisis & Sexual
Abuse Support Centre

Orkney

Orkney Rape & Sexual
Assault Service

Dundee

Women's Rape & Sexual
Abuse Centre

Perth

Rape & Sexual Abuse
Centre Perth & Kinross

East Ayrshire

The STAR Centre

Highland

Rape & Sexual Abuse
Service Highland

Edinburgh

Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre

Scottish Borders

Scottish Borders Rape Crisis Centre

Fife

Fife Rape & Sexual
Assault Centre

Shetland

Shetland Rape Crisis

Forth Valley

Forth Valley Rape Crisis

Western Isles

Western Isles Rape Crisis Centre

Glasgow & Clyde

Glasgow & Clyde 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**

Published: Rape Crisis Scotland Helpline 2013

Compiled by Shirley Henderson www.shirleyhenderson.co.uk