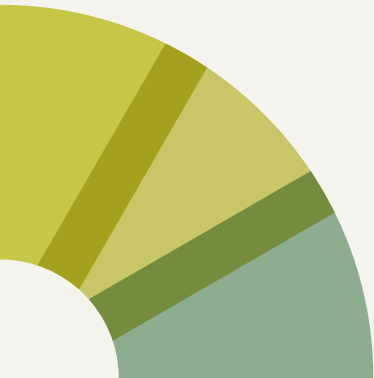

Rape Crisis Scotland

Information for survivors of sexual violence

Self-harm



Self-harm

What is self-harm?

- » Self-harm is a form of coping. Survivors of sexual violence sometimes self-harm. There are many different reasons for this including to express emotional pain; to block out painful thoughts; to become 'grounded' in the here and now; to punish themselves/others; to prompt self-care; to communicate with others; and to get the support and care they need
- » Self-harm can take many forms including: cutting, scratching or burning; over-dosing on alcohol or drugs; over- or under-eating; overworking or over-exercising; neglecting emotional or physical wellbeing
- » People often hide their injuries because they fear others' reactions or disapproval. This can affect relationships and can be very isolating

How does self-harm affect survivors of sexual violence?

- » Sexual violence is traumatic and affects self-esteem and self-confidence. Many survivors of sexual violence do not get the support they need at the time, and do not have the chance to talk about the complex and painful feelings associated with trauma. Self-harm can be a way to cope with feelings of betrayal, anger, pain and isolation which may 'work' in the short-term but may become problematic over time

- » There may be physical health consequences from self-harming such as injury, infection or addiction. It can be helpful to keep first aid supplies to treat any injuries. It is best to get medical attention if an injury is deeper or more severe than usual
- » Survivors may have to cope with other people's negative attitudes or lack of understanding about self-harming. People, including professionals, may see the behaviour but not the underlying reasons. People who do not understand may react with shock, anger or frustration

What you can do: self-care tips for survivors

- » There are things you can do to help manage the feelings and reactions which lead to self-harming. They can help you to stop self-harming. They include:
 - Talking to someone supportive (RCS Helpline can help with this)
 - Attending a self-help group (RCS Helpline can help with finding one in your area)
 - Building up self-esteem and self-confidence and reducing self-blame
 - Reducing stress and anxiety
 - Relaxation and breathing techniques
 - Exercise and activity
 - Developing new coping strategies

See the information sheet on *Coping after sexual violence* for some helpful techniques.

- » There are alternative ways to release intense feelings. Some ideas are to:
- › Tear up phone books/newspapers
 - › Fill a sink with ice cubes and plunge hands into it/hold ice cubes
 - › Hold a bag of frozen peas against your body
 - › Write on yourself in red marker or red food colouring
 - › Paint face paints on the place where you usually hurt yourself
 - › Punch/scream into a pillow
 - › Smash up old china (you can buy this second hand)
 - › Go to the golf driving range
 - › Use a punch bag
 - › Write a letter/draw a picture of what is bothering you and then rip it up
 - › Go for a walk/run/swim/exercise
 - › Draw/paint what you feel inside
 - › Use play-dough to express yourself. You can also squash it and throw it about
 - › Take bottles to the bottle bank and smash them up safely
 - › Rip up old clothes or sheets

- Eat a chilli/something hot
 - Have a cold bath/shower
 - Throw eggs in the shower/outside
 - Throw stones in the river/sea
- » There are things you can do to minimise hurt and injury when you self-harm:
- Avoid drugs and/or alcohol if you think you are likely to self-harm, so you don't accidentally wound yourself more seriously than you intend
 - Prevent infection by using something clean when you cut. Never share what you use to self-injure. Try to avoid areas where there are major veins and arteries close to the surface. Make sure your tetanus jags are up to date
 - Put burns under cold water for 20/30 minutes. Burns and scalds can be more severe than you think - the pain can be far worse later. Cling film, loosely covering the burn, can act as a temporary dressing. You can buy creams and sprays for burns from your chemist
 - You should get medical attention for burns larger than a 50p piece, or that have penetrated deep into the skin
 - Be prepared. Have dressings and antiseptics ready so you can care for your injuries. You can learn more about looking after wounds, cuts, burns and so on from a first aid book, someone you trust who knows about first aid or perhaps the nurse in your health centre/GP practice

- Call an ambulance if blood is spurting from a wound. Wrap the injury in a clean towel or tea towel and try to stay calm
- Clean any cuts with gauze swabs, not cotton wool. Cover with a dry, non-adhesive dressing. It can be useful to keep antiseptic creams and sprays handy. You can use paper stitches to close superficial wounds
- If any of your cuts are gaping and deep you need medical attention. Try to keep the injured part raised and apply pressure until you get to hospital (A&E), to reduce the bleeding
- If cuts or burns become infected it is important to get medical treatment
- You can go into shock if you lose a lot of blood or if you have severe or large burns. Call an ambulance if this happens
- If you drink bleach or any other corrosive liquid you can be in danger of poisoning. You must get medical advice or attention immediately

If you think you may have taken too many drugs (prescribed or illegal) get medical help quickly, particularly with drugs such as paracetamol. Sometimes damage can occur later or there can be a cumulative effect if you have overdosed more than once. If you do not wish to attend A&E, think about phoning NHS 24 on 0845 24 24 24 for advice or help.

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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