

# A self-help guide for survivors of rape and sexual assault

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If you have been sexually assaulted or raped within the past year we can help you at the Havens. You do not have to cope on your own. We will do our best to provide the medical and emotional support that you need.

The Havens Advice Line: **020 3299 1599**

9am – 5pm, Monday to Friday, (not public/bank holidays)

**[www.thehavens.org.uk](http://www.thehavens.org.uk)**

## **Please note:**

This booklet uses the words 'sexual assault' to refer both to acts of sexual assault and rape.



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# Introduction

## Who is this self-help guide for?

This booklet is for survivors of sexual assault. It gives you information about the common psychological and emotional reactions to sexual assault. It may help you better to understand and process your own personal reactions to the experience. It is not intended as a replacement for human kindness, counselling or therapy.

At the Havens, we can offer face-to-face psychological support to survivors of sexual assault.

## Tips for using this booklet

- Think about the right time and place to read it. Have a pen ready to fill out the exercises and to mark the tips you find useful.
- Plan to do something relaxing or refreshing after you have been reading it. For example, calling a friend, listening to nice music, having a bath or doing some exercise.

## What are sexual assault and rape?

Sexual assault is **any** act of a sexual nature where one person has **not given their consent**. Not giving consent means not agreeing or giving your permission, either by saying 'no' or through your body language. You cannot freely consent if you feel pressured or threatened. You cannot freely consent if you are asleep or too drunk or high to understand the consequences. On average, one in four women and one in ten men are sexually assaulted in their lifetime.

Rape is defined as a man putting his penis in someone else's mouth, anus or vagina without their consent.

Sexual assault and rape are serious crimes. The maximum prison sentence for rape and sexual assault is life imprisonment.



## Consent and a cup of tea

You may find it helpful to watch this short video clip:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7Nii5w2Fal](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7Nii5w2Fal)

To find the video online, type “Tea Consent” into the search bar at [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

## Medical care after sexual assault

Sexual assault can cause physical and emotional injuries, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and pregnancy, so it is important that you get the right medical care. This can be provided by the Havens (020 3299 1599), your local Emergency Department, a sexual health clinic or your General Practitioner (GP).

You may wish to have a **forensic medical examination** at the Havens, either as part of your police report or anonymously whilst you decide whether or not you want to report to the police. This is a special examination by a health professional to gather information. They look for evidence of any injuries, and take samples of things such as saliva, semen, urine, blood and hair that may be tested for DNA (the ‘genetic blueprint’ of the person who assaulted you). The physical examination is relatively short but the whole process may take approximately 4 hours. Most of this time is talking and listening to you to ensure we give you the help you need.

Within a week of your forensic medical examination, you should receive a phone call to check how you are doing. Two weeks after the assault, you will be offered a follow-up appointment. This is to see how you are coping and to offer you tests for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and pregnancy (as needed). At this point, there should be a discussion about your options – you and the health professional might decide that it is appropriate to seek



some psychological support. If so, we will help you find the right support.

## Reporting sexual assault

Sexual assault is a crime and can be reported to police even if it happened many years ago. It is entirely your choice whether or not to report the sexual assault. If you are worried that you might forget some of the details while deciding whether to report it, you may find it helpful to write them down.

The first step to deciding whether to report the sexual assault to the police may be to talk to a friend or a health professional, such as a nurse or a counsellor.

You may also contact your local Independent Sexual Violence Adviser (ISVA). This is a person who is trained to offer free and independent advice about the criminal justice system. By contacting an ISVA, you are under no obligation to report the sexual assault to the police. You should be able to find your local ISVA by contacting your local authority or checking on the Rape Crisis website. The Havens can also advise you on this.

If you decide you want to report the sexual assault to the police call 101, or go to a police station, or contact an ISVA or the Havens, who will support you with the process.

If you report the sexual assault to the police, you will be given a Sexual Offences Investigative Techniques (SOIT) officer. They are specially trained to deal with sexual offences and will be your single point of contact during the investigation.



## The facts about sexual assault: Challenging common myths

A lot of people do not know the facts about sexual assault.

Responsibility for the offender's actions lies with the offender, **never with the survivor of the crime**. When people wrongfully blame survivors of sexual assault for what happened, this can lead to feelings of self-blame, shame and guilt. It is important for everyone, especially survivors, to be aware of the **facts about sexual assault**, so they can challenge popularly believed rape 'myths'. Rape myths wrongfully let offenders off the hook for their actions, by placing the blame for the sexual assault on the survivor instead.

**Myth 1:** Dressing a certain way, taking drugs or drinking alcohol means that you are asking for it

### **Fact 1: The clothes a person wears, or the alcohol they drink or drugs they take, do not show that they want to engage in sexual acts with another person**

Consent to have sex has to be communicated directly. Drugs and alcohol, or where you are, or your clothing are never an invitation for rape. The offender is ultimately responsible for the assault. This myth distorts the truth by shifting blame away from the offender and onto the survivor.

**Myth 2:** Most people who report rape are lying, looking for attention or seeking revenge

### **Fact 2: Almost everyone who reports rape is telling the truth**

This myth suggests false allegations of rape are common. In fact, it is far more common for rape and sexual assault to not be reported. Statistics from the USA reveal that only 2-8% of reported sexual assaults are false with statistics in the UK being even lower, at



0.62%. It takes a lot of courage to come forward and say you have been sexually assaulted, and the majority of people who report sexual assault are telling the truth.

**Myth 3:** If a person says 'no' it actually means 'yes' or 'try harder'

**Fact 3: If a person says 'no' it actually means 'no'**

Saying 'no' is not playing hard to get. When a person says 'no' to sex, it means they do not want to have sex. This myth undermines the ability of a person to express consent clearly. It suggests people might use ambiguous ways of communicating their willingness to have sex. It is also misleading because it falsely assumes that people are not able to tell when someone does not consent to sex. Even if a person does not explicitly say 'no', their body language – such as crying and/or tensing up – can clearly indicate that they are not giving consent. It is the responsibility of the person who wants to have sex to clarify that consent is being given.

**Myth 4:** Most sexual assaults are committed by strangers

**Fact 4: Most sexual assaults are committed by people known to the survivor.**

Most offenders are someone that the survivor knows and may have trusted. Only about 10% of sexual assaults are committed by strangers. This myth questions a survivor's credibility when they say they were sexually assaulted by someone they know. The majority of sexual assaults are carried out by someone known to the survivor, such as partners, friends, work colleagues or family members. For example, one in ten women are raped within marriage.

**Myth 5:** If a person does not fight back during a sexual assault, it means they wanted it.



## **Fact 5: Most people do not or cannot fight back during a sexual assault**

Fighting back can increase the risk of injury and may result in death. Everyone reacts differently when faced with a life-threatening situation. It is very common to freeze or submit during a sexual assault, to prevent further harm. This does not mean that the survivor consented.

This myth wrongly suggests that the only way to respond to a threatening person is by fighting back. But when faced with a threat, a person can respond automatically by fighting back, running away, freezing or submitting, to minimise harm. As these responses are automatic, they cannot be controlled or planned in advance. In addition, as the average man is bigger and stronger than the average woman, the brain might 'choose' the freeze or submit response during a sexual assault to reduce the likelihood of more serious injuries that could result from fighting back.

**Myth 6:** Most survivors are very distressed and report the sexual assault to the police straight away.

## **Fact 6: Most survivors do not react immediately, whether emotionally or by reporting the crime straight away**

Everyone reacts differently to a traumatic event. Some people may feel shock or disbelief. Others may feel angry, sad or numb. Only 15% of those who are sexually assaulted report it to the police.

This myth is misleading because there is no right or wrong way to feel after a sexual assault. The emotional turmoil often means people feel confused about what to do next, so many do not report it to the police straight away. They may also not feel able to talk about the sexual assault; fear retaliation by the offender; fear



they will not be believed; fear being blamed for the assault; or not recognise what happened as sexual assault.

**Myth 7:** A real survivor has severe injuries that can be seen

**Fact 7: Most survivors do not have severe physical injuries**

Most survivors of sexual assault do not have severe physical injuries that can be seen on their body or their genitals. This myth can make people without injuries that cannot be seen question whether they were really assaulted. It is also misleading because sexual assault often does not leave visible physical injuries. The most common injuries are psychological and these can seriously affect a person's daily life.

**Myth 8:** A real survivor remembers all the details of the sexual assault clearly

**Fact 8: Survivors may not have a clear memory of the sexual assault**

It is common for survivors to find it hard to remember all of the details of the sexual assault. This does not mean that they are lying or deliberately leaving out details. They may gradually remember more as they process what happened. This myth wrongly suggests that a person's memory of a traumatic event should be clear and make sense. Memories are always incomplete and have gaps, so this must not be taken as an indicator of accuracy. Memories of a traumatic event typically contain only a few key details. They can also be affected by alcohol or drugs, which can sometimes lead to loss of memory.

**Myth 9:** Men are not sexually assaulted



## **Fact 9: Rape happens mostly to women and girls but it also happens to men and boys**

According to the London Metropolitan Police, 11% of those reporting rape are men. In fact anyone can be raped or sexually assaulted. This myth is one reason why men are less likely to report rape and sexual assault.

**Myth 10:** Becoming sexually aroused during rape or sexual assault shows enjoyment and implies consent

## **Fact 10: A survivor of sexual assault can feel sexually aroused during the assault**

Sexual arousal is an automatic response to stimulation of genitals and other sensitive body parts. When stimulated, it is not possible for someone to consciously control whether or not they become aroused. In addition, being aroused during an assault does not indicate someone's sexuality. For example, a male survivor may have an erection during anal rape, but this does not indicate he is gay.

**Myth 11:** A rapist is someone on the fringes of society. For example, they are poorly educated, badly dressed, have a criminal background

## **Fact 11: Education, socio-economic status, religion, culture or ethnicity have nothing to do with whether someone is capable of rape**

This myth is damaging because survivors might feel more afraid of disclosing a rape if the rapist is someone who is well respected and liked in the community or is in a position of power and authority, for fear of not being believed. There are no typical features that can be used to identify a rapist.



## Common reactions to sexual assault

It is important to remember that there is no right or wrong way to feel if you have been sexually assaulted. Everyone reacts differently. These are all natural responses to trauma. Tick any of the following experiences that you have had recently.

| Your emotions   | Your thoughts   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anxiety                        | <input type="checkbox"/> It was my fault  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Panic attacks                  | <input type="checkbox"/> I should have done something differently   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shock                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty remembering or talking about what happened  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Disgust                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty thinking about the future   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Guilt                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Others are untrustworthy   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shame                          | <input type="checkbox"/> I am dirty or contaminated   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anger                          | <input type="checkbox"/> I am overreacting to this  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sadness                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Why me?  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Loneliness                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Did it really happen?  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of sense of self/identity |   |
| Your physical symptoms                                  | Your behaviour  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nightmares and hard to sleep   | <input type="checkbox"/> Difficult sexual relationships   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Flashbacks                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoiding reminders of the assault  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tiredness                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Not wanting to do things   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Poor concentration             | <input type="checkbox"/> Isolating myself   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Headaches                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Worrying   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Low motivation                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Using alcohol/drugs  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sweating                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Self-harming   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Breathlessness                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Smoking  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Change in appetite             | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoiding thinking about what happened by distracting myself, such as listening to music, working more and so on. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling sick                   |   |
| Other experiences:                                      |   |
|   |   |



## General coping strategies

Recovering from sexual assault takes time. It is important to look after yourself and to accept care and support from others. Tick any of the following strategies that you would like to try.

- Talk to others about how you are feeling, when you feel ready. Bottling feelings up can make you feel worse.
- Spend time with friends, family, peers – anyone who can offer you support.
- Remind yourself that you are alive and you survived the assault. Remind yourself of the little and the big things you achieve every day, such as 'I read a paper', 'I took a journey'.
- Positive self-talk is important when you are feeling low. Tell yourself: 'I will be OK – things take time to get better.' Try to remember what helped you get through other difficult experiences in your life. Do more of what has worked for you in the past, such as going for a walk, listening to music or watching a comedy.
- Avoid drugs and alcohol. Drinking alcohol or taking drugs to cope with how you are feeling is likely to make you feel worse in the long run. They might numb your feelings but they will not solve the problem. They can cloud your mind and prevent you from coping well.
- Try **not** to avoid reminders of the assault entirely. Avoidance can be helpful in the short term but is unhelpful in the long term.
- Go back to your usual routines. Get up at the same time each day, get ready for work and try to do your tasks for the day.



- ❑ Take extra care of yourself each day. After a sexual assault, people sometimes neglect their self-care or take less care of their safety. Take time to do things that involve caring for yourself, such as having a bath, moisturising your skin, brushing your hair and so on. Also be aware of your surroundings and safety, such as paying attention to traffic when crossing the road.
- ❑ Try to do at least one enjoyable activity each day to build positive experiences.
- ❑ Eat balanced meals each day, but watch out for over-eating. Some people eat more food to comfort themselves and this does not help in the long run.
- ❑ Look after your physical health because this will affect your mental health. If you need to go to the doctor, make an appointment and deal with any health concerns as soon as you can.
- ❑ Keep moving. Any type of exercise – and any amount – will boost your body’s natural feel-good hormones. Exercise is a good way to ease stress and help yourself feel better.
- ❑ Take time to rest and think. But try not to keep thinking about the assault. Use guided meditation (for example, from YouTube) if you find yourself thinking about it a lot.
- ❑ Challenge your difficult emotions when you can. Instead of attacking when feeling angry, walk away from what is causing it. Instead of avoiding something that makes you feel anxious/fearful, approach it. Instead of avoiding activities and people when you feel, try to do something and/or meet others.



- Get a good night's sleep. Using a lavender sachet or lavender pillow spray can help you to sleep.
- Be careful when making major life decisions straight after a sexual assault as you may regret them later.

## Understanding Reactions

Your brain is both rational and intuitive. When you are in dangerous situations such as sexual assault, the intuitive side takes over. It does **whatever it needs to do** to survive.

In these situations, your brain has five possible options to keep you safe from harm: fight, flight, appease, freeze or dissociate. It has a split second to decide the best option, so the decision is an automatic response rather than a carefully thought out plan. It will override any conscious thinking to protect you.

### Threat responses

*Tick the threat responses you think applied to you during the assault.*

- Fight:** This is when you feel fear, frustration or anger, which may make you want to shout, hit out or be aggressive to defend yourself against the danger.
- Fight:** This is when you feel anxious or fearful, which makes you want to run away or escape the danger.
- Freeze:** This is when you feel unable to act or move because the threat is so overwhelming. It is very common during sexual assault.





## Coping with flashbacks and nightmares

### What are flashbacks?

Flashbacks are vivid memories that you have when you are awake. They can make you feel as if you are back in the dangerous situation again. They often happen suddenly and unexpectedly and can make you feel very frightened. They can be triggered by many things: a time of day or year; a TV programme; a film; a smell; a sound; a place; a person; a taste; a picture; or having sex.

Flashbacks are unprocessed memories. Because they are so distressing, it is normal to want to try and push these memories away. But this can make them worse in the future. Here are some things you can do that might help.

### Coping with flashbacks

- Stop what you are doing.
- Do something that will help you relax, such as taking a few deep breaths, listening to calming music.
- Try a mindfulness exercise (see within document). Try grounding yourself in the present moment: speak to yourself about what you can see, smell, touch, hear and taste.
- Try to go somewhere where you feel safe and secure.
- Try to talk to someone.
- Think about writing down what happened in the flashback. Although this can be painful, it can also help 'get it out', and is a helpful way of processing what happened to you.
- Remind yourself: flashbacks are completely normal responses to an **abnormal** event.
- Try using the **flashback halting protocol** (see below). This can remind you that you are not back where the assault happened and you are **not** currently in danger



## Flashback halting protocol

- Right now I am feeling (emotionally)  
.....

- I am sensing (in my body)  
.....

- This is because I am remembering  
.....  
..... (name the trauma)

- At the same time, I am looking around where I am now on  
..... (say/write the day,  
date and year) here in (name the place)

- And I can see  
.....  
.....

(describe some of the things you can see right now, in this place)

- So I know  
.....

(name the trauma again) is not happening now or anymore

## What are nightmares?

You have nightmares when you are asleep. They are like flashbacks. The difference is that nightmares may or may not be directly about the sexual assault. Often, they can also be about less concrete things that are linked to feeling scared or unsafe. They might make you wake up suddenly with feelings of panic.

## Coping with nightmares

Lots of the ways of coping with flashbacks can also help with nightmares. You could also try the nightmare halting protocol (see below).



## Nightmare halting protocol

- Write down what happened in your most common nightmare.
- Identify which parts are the most frightening.
- Plan a change in those parts of the dream, so that it ends with you feeling safe and protected. Remember, it is only a dream. You can change it to be anything you want it to be.
- You can include 'protective figures'. Are there people or animals or anything that makes you feel safe and secure?
- Write down the script for this new and altered dream in which you are safe.
- Read the script every night before you go to bed.

## Grounding

'Grounding' yourself in the present moment is a helpful way of coping with flashbacks and nightmares. It connects us to the 'here and now' by using the five senses. Grounding can be done anywhere, in any place, or at any time. Others will not even know that you are doing it which makes this make much easier to do. Here are some examples of how you can use grounding, using different senses. It may be especially helpful if you notice you are having a flashback or slipping a dissociative state

| Sense | Grounding technique   |
|-------|---|
| Sound | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Play music and tune in to the different melodies, instruments or lyrics that you can hear.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Pay attention to different sounds that you can hear around you, such a ticking clock, a humming computer, cars passing by outside.</li></ul>   |
| Touch | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Pay attention to the feel of textures around you, such as the feel of your clothes against your skin, the chair against your legs or the table beside you.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Hold a piece of ice against your skin.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Ping an elastic band around your wrist.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Walk around in your bare feet, noticing any sensations.</li></ul> |



| Sense | Grounding technique   |
|-------|---|
| Smell | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sniff some strong perfume or smelling salts.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Drink some peppermint tea (or another strong tea), inhale the smell as you sip it and focus on the taste.</li> </ul>   |
| Taste | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Bite into a lemon or any citrus-type fruit.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Suck some strong-tasting sweets, such as Fisherman's Friend.</li> </ul>   |
| Site  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Describe in your head the details of everything that you can see, such as the colours, shapes, shading, sizes and textures,</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Think of a calm place. It could be real or imagined, perhaps a beach or the mountains or somewhere that is special to you.</li> </ul> |

### Other useful tips

- When practising grounding, keep your eyes open. This helps you stay in the present.
- You might want to carry a grounding object. For example, a stone, a stress ball, calming beads or a picture.

### Unhelpful thinking patterns

Everyone has thousands of positive, neutral and negative automatic thoughts every day. Mostly, we are completely unaware of these thoughts when they arise. You more often notice negative thoughts because they cause distress. After sexual assault, you may notice more negative thoughts than usual.

Common patterns of negative thinking often fall into the following categories. Please tick which ones apply to you

#### Unhelpful thinking styles

- Negative mental filter:** Focusing only on negative or upsetting information while ignoring the rest. For example. "She said I looked nice, but she wasn't smiling, so I must actually look terrible."



## Unhelpful thinking styles *continued*

- Jumping to conclusions:** Assuming that you know what another person is thinking (mind reading) or making negative predictions about what will happen in the future (fortune telling). For example: "They will think it was my fault."
- Hindsight bias:** Overestimating your ability to have predicted an outcome that could not possibly have been predicted. For example: "I should have known better..."
- Catastrophizing:** Imagining and believing that the worst possible thing will happen. For example: "If I tell someone what happened I will lose my home and my job, and no one will want to be friends with me anymore."
- Over-generalising:** Taking isolated cases and using them to make wide generalisations. For example: "A man sexually assaulted me so all men are dangerous."

After sexual assault, unhelpful thinking styles can:

- a) influence your view of yourself
- b) increase self-blame
- c) influence your views of others/the world
- d) influence your views of the future.

To overcome unhelpful thinking styles, it is important to **notice** your thoughts, **identify** the unhelpful thinking style, and then **challenge** your thoughts. You can **practise** this using the table on page 21. This is called a **thought record**.



|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Situation</b>   | What happened? Who was I with? Where was I?  |
| <b>Mood</b>  | What emotions and body sensations did I feel? How strong were the feelings (0%-100%)?  |
| <b>Automatic thoughts or images</b>                        | What was going through my mind just before I started to feel this way?<br>What is the worst thing about that? What does it say about me?                             |
| <b>Which thinking styles are my thoughts?</b>              | See pages 14 – 15.   |
| <b>Evidence that supports the negative thought</b>         | What are the facts? What facts do I have that the unhelpful thoughts are totally true?   |
| <b>Evidence that does not support the negative thought</b> | What facts do I have that the unhelpful thoughts are not totally true? What would others say about this?   |
| <b>Balanced thought</b>                                    | What would someone else say about this situation? Is there another way of thinking about what has happened? What advice would I give someone else in this situation? |
| <b>How do I feel now?</b>                                  | Re-rate your emotions (0%-100%)  |

## Low mood

Felling sad, down, hopeless or despairing are normal reactions after sexual assault. You may cry more often or find it difficult to cry at all. You may lose interest in people or activities you used to enjoy. Plans you had for the future may not seem to matter anymore. You might feel like life is not worth living. These feelings can affect your motivation, appetite, sleep, concentration, sex drive and desire to keep living. If you are having suicidal thoughts, please see pages 34 - 35.

**The best way to start improving low mood is to gradually start being doing more activities.**



Planning and doing more activities can really help to lift your mood and give you a sense of achievement. Try to build a little more activity into each day. Plan activities which give you a sense of:

**achievement:** for example, small chores such as doing laundry or cooking a meal

**connection to others:** for example, speaking with a friend or family member, or meeting a friend for a meal

**enjoyment:** for example, watching a film, reading a book or doing some gardening.

**List some activities you can plan to do:**



**If you are able to act according to a plan, rather than according to your mood, you should notice that you start to feel a bit better.**

Try to fill in an action plan for the next week using the activity schedule below. Include a range of activities which give you a sense of achievement, connection to others and enjoyment.

| Activity schedule |         |           |         |
|-------------------|---------|-----------|---------|
| Day               | Morning | Afternoon | Evening |
| Monday            |         |           |         |
| Tuesday           |         |           |         |
| Wednesday         |         |           |         |
| Thursday          |         |           |         |
| Friday            |         |           |         |
| Saturday          |         |           |         |
| Sunday            |         |           |         |



## Sleep problems

Sleep problems are the most commonly reported difficulty after sexual assault. After a traumatic event, your brain's threat system goes into 'high alert' mode, so it can be harder to relax. This can make it difficult to fall asleep and/or to stay asleep. Try some of these ideas for good sleep and see if you notice any changes.

### Try to...

- go to bed at a similar time every night
- have a regular routine when preparing for bed, such as brushing your teeth, washing your face, going to the toilet, setting your alarm, reading, turning your light off.
- get up if you are worrying, or having been lying awake for more than 20 minutes, and do something relaxing until you feel tired enough to go back to bed again
- remember that a lack of sleep will not harm you
- exercise regularly, but not late in the evening.
- make sure your bedroom is comfortable – that is, not too hot or too cold, and not too noisy or too bright
- rearrange the furniture in your bedroom if this is the place where you were sexually assaulted
- check whether any medications you are taking may affect your sleep.

### Try not to...

- worry about not getting enough sleep
- check the time during the night
- stay in your bed if you cannot fall asleep after 20 minutes of lying down
- lie in bed worrying about problems or not being able to fall asleep



- use your bed for working or studying or watching television or anything other than sleep and sex
- eat or drink caffeinated drinks or smoke cigarettes close to bedtime
- take naps during the day
- stay in bed longer to catch up on lost sleep
- drink alcohol or use non-prescription drugs to help with sleep.

## Anxiety and avoidance

### What is anxiety?

Everyone feels anxious from time to time. It is a normal response to stressful or threatening situations. Symptoms can include being out of breath, constant worrying, feeling tense, and being restless and unable to relax. These are part of your brain's 'threat system', which is designed to keep you safe. On the whole, anxiety is helpful because it helps you to deal with threat and stay safe. But there are times when anxiety is triggered by past experiences rather than anything dangerous or threatening in the present moment. This anxiety response is called a false alarm, because it falsely makes us feel like we are under threat in the present.

After a sexual assault, it is common to feel anxious about being assaulted again. It is also normal to see the world as dangerous and to think of others as untrustworthy. Anxiety can lead you to avoid certain places or people that remind you of the assault. Unfortunately, the more you avoid situations, the more and more difficult it will be to overcome the anxiety. It can make you feel worse and increase your anxiety in the long term.

### Coping with anxiety and tackling avoidance

1. It is important to remember that anxiety is not harmful.
2. Try to identify situations that you are avoiding. Where possible, try to tackle these fears in a gradual way.



| Situations (people, places, sounds, smells) I am avoiding | Small steps I can take to expose myself to these situations |
|---|---|
|   |   |

3. Write a list of things that you can do to distract yourself from your anxiety. This can include activities such as calling a friend, reading a book, listening to music, volunteering, exercising and having a bath.

| My list of things I can use for distractions |
|--|
|  |



4. Regularly practise relaxation and/or mindfulness. Relaxation exercises aim to help you to slow down and relax. Mindfulness exercises aim to help you to pay attention to things about yourself and the environment that may otherwise go unnoticed. You may like to try the exercise on page 22. You can find more exercises at: [www.headspace.com/](http://www.headspace.com/) and [insighttimer.com/](http://insighttimer.com/)

### **Mindful breathing exercise**

You may want to record the following instructions first so you can listen back to them and fully concentrate on doing the exercise. Try to find somewhere comfortable to sit where you know you will not be disturbed for at least 10 minutes. If possible, sit upright in a chair, place both feet on the floor, rest your hands in your lap, and close your eyes or fix your gaze on a spot on the floor.

- Focus your attention on your breathing.
- Gently allow the breath to travel down your torso and then to gently leave your body.
- Focus on the sensations of your breath going in and out of your nose.
- Notice the sensations in your stomach as it rises with the in-breath, and falls with the out-breath.
- Try to spend two minutes focusing on your breathing.
- You may notice your mind wandering off to something else. This is normal. Simply notice those thoughts and then bring your attention back to your breathing.
- You may notice sounds, physical feelings and emotions. Again, just practise gently bringing your attention back to your breathing.



## Guilt and self-blame

### What is guilt?

It is common for survivors of sexual assault to blame themselves in some way for what happened. You might have thoughts such as “I should not have...”, or “It was my fault” or “I deserved it...” These kinds of self-blaming thoughts can often lead to feelings of guilt and may prevent survivors from seeking help.

### Coping with guilt and self-blame

It is essential to remember you are not to blame for being sexually assaulted. It is also important to remember that your reactions during the assault were automatic. Your brain’s threat system was working to protect you. You could not have acted in any other way. Getting stuck in a pattern of looking back may stop you from getting over the trauma of what happened.

#### Useful questions to ask yourself

1. Are there other ways to think about what happened?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of blaming myself?
3. If a friend or family member was sexually assaulted or raped, would I blame them?
4. What would I say to a friend if they were in my situation?



# Shame

## What is shame?

Shame can be a very powerful and unpleasant emotion. We may feel shame when we believe others are thinking badly of us. After sexual assault it is common to think that others blame you for what happened or for how you acted. You may also feel shame because of acts you were forced to do during the assault. The feeling might stop you from talking to others who could provide you with valuable support during this difficult time.

## Coping with shame

1. Try to express your feelings by writing about them.
2. Talk to people who are supportive. Be around others who can distract you and help you to see that what happened was not your fault.
3. Work on developing a compassionate relationship with yourself and others. You could start by doing the exercise on page 24. You can find more of these exercises in the self-help book, 'Recovering from Trauma using Compassion Focused Therapy', by Deborah Lee.

### The compassionate self

You may want to read out and record the following instructions first so you can fully concentrate on doing the exercise while you listen back to them. Try to find somewhere comfortable to sit, where you know you will not be disturbed for at least 10 minutes. If possible, sit upright in a chair, place both your feet on the floor, rest your hands in your lap, and close your eyes or fix your gaze on a spot on the floor.

- Begin by focusing your attention on your gentle breathing rhythm, allowing yourself to slow down and ground yourself in the present moment.



- When you are ready, practise imagining that you are a deeply compassionate person.
- Think about the qualities that you show you are a compassionate person. These could include wisdom, authority and strength, warmth, empathy and responsibility.
- Spend at least one minute focusing on each quality.
- Now focus on your desire to become a compassionate person and to be able to think, act and feel compassionately.
- Imagine yourself having all of these qualities and include them in the way you are with yourself and others.
- When you are ready, gently bring your attention back to the room.
- You might want to write down what it felt like to have these qualities and how it might affect the way you want to act in future.

## Anger and irritability

### What are these emotions about?

After sexual assault, it is normal to feel angry: at yourself, others and the world. This is a common reaction that can happen when your trust has been violated. Anger can be useful in tackling injustice. But it can also be a problem when it feels uncontrollable, and happens too often or lasts too long. Common thoughts related to anger after sexual assault includes “They should have protected me”, “Nobody can be trusted”, “Nobody understands what I’m going through”, “Nobody cares”.

### Coping with anger and irritability

1. Next, have some time out away from the situation in which you feel angry.
2. It may be helpful to talk about your feelings. It is important to do this in a calm and assertive way, neither aggressive nor passive. Below/on page 26 are some tips on how to improve your



communication skills. They might help you and those who are trying to support you.

### **Being assertive**

- Slow down and **listen** to the other person. Do not say the first thing that comes to your mind.
- Try not to jump to conclusions about what the other person is saying or thinking; ask them to tell you more about what they are trying to say and how they are feeling.
- Consider that the other person may feel afraid, hurt or unloved.
- Try to plan what you want to say in advance, and to express your feelings in a clear and calm way.

3. Try not to dwell on a situation that made you feel angry after you have left it. Thinking about it will not change what happened. Instead, do something to distract yourself from your list.
4. It may also help to do some mindful breathing and relaxation exercises to ease the physical symptoms of anger. You may find it helpful to do the task below. The more you practise these techniques, the easier it will become to calm yourself down.

### **Progressive muscle relaxation**

You may want to read out and record the following instructions first so you can fully concentrate on doing the exercise while you listen back to them. Try to find somewhere comfortable to sit or lie down, where you know you will not be disturbed for at least 10 minutes. Close your eyes if you feel comfortable.

- Begin by taking a deep breath in through your nose (to the count of four), and then breathing out through your mouth (to the count of six). Repeat this several times until you begin to feel relaxed.
- Next we are going to focus on tensing and releasing different parts of your body in a sequence.



- Begin with your feet. As you breathe in, slowly tense your feet and your toes, by pushing your heel outwards so your toes lift up towards the sky. Then, as you breathe out, allow your toes to drop back to their resting position, as you say to yourself "relax". Repeat this a few times.
- Now follow the same instructions for all of your different body parts, working up from your feet to your head. While you are doing this exercise, remember to tense as you breathe in and to relax as you breathe out.
- You may first wish to focus on your legs by squeezing your calves and thighs together on the in-breath and then releasing them on the out-breath.
- Then move to your stomach by pulling your belly button towards your back on the in-breath and then releasing on the out-breath.
- Move next to your chest and back by pulling your shoulder backwards on the in-breath, and then releasing on the out-breath
- Next, tense your arms and your hands by clenching your fists and tightening the muscles in your arms on the in-breath, and then releasing on the out-breath
- Then tense your shoulders by pulling them up towards your ear lobes on the in-breath, and then releasing on the out-breath
- Finally, tense your neck by pulling your chin towards your chest, and your face by scrunching up all of your facial features, on the in-breath. Then releasing these body parts on the out-breath.
- When you have finished tensing and relaxing all parts of your body, gently bring your attention back to your breath. Take a deep breath in through your nose and let it out through your mouth before ending the exercise.



# Relationship and intimacy problems

## Relationship problems

People who have been sexually assaulted can find it difficult to trust others. This can make it harder for them to meet new people or have intimate close relationships.

## Intimacy problems

It is normal to find it difficult to have sexual relationships after a sexual assault. Sex may remind you of the assault. You may feel bad about yourself and your body. For example, some survivors say they feel dirty or undesirable because of what has happened. Others may react in the opposite way, having sex with a lot of different partners after an assault.

## Sexuality

Sexual assault can be committed by men or women, against men or women, no matter what the survivor's sexuality. Sexual assault has nothing to do with the survivor's sexuality. For example, a heterosexual man might be sexually assaulted by a homosexual man and vice versa. Sexual assault is a crime of power, not a question of sexuality.

## Coping with relationship and intimacy problems

1. Take your time to become comfortable with the idea of physical intimacy and close relationships.
2. Remind yourself that what happened to you was not sex, it was assault. Tell yourself you are not dirty, you are a survivor!
3. Be careful about risky situations. Make sure you feel safe and comfortable when having sex.
4. Talk to your partner about how you are feeling. Let them know that finding sex difficult is a normal reaction to sexual assault. It does not mean that you do not love or care for your partner anymore.



5. To start with, try to get sexually close to your partner through other forms of physical contact such as non-sexual touching (for example, cuddling or massage) rather than having sexual intercourse.
6. Spend time with your partner doing things you enjoy together such as having a meal out, cooking or watching a particular TV show.
7. Remove things in your bedroom that might remind you of the sexual assault.

## Suicidal thoughts and self-harm

### Suicidal thoughts

It is common to have suicidal thoughts after sexual assault. They can range from vague ideas to actual detailed plans. It is important that you talk to someone about these thoughts. Make sure you get the help that you need.

#### Getting help

- Contact a supportive friend or a family member that you trust and tell them honestly how you are feeling.
- Call the emergency services on 999 or ask someone to take you to your local Emergency Department (A&E)..
- Call Samaritans for free on 116 123. They provide a listening, non-judgmental service 24 hours a day.
- Book an appointment with your GP.

### Self-harm

Self-harm involves deliberately hurting yourself. This might be by cutting your skin, pulling out your hair, burning or hitting yourself. You may also be causing yourself harm by drinking alcohol, smoking or taking drugs, or eating too much or too little. Self-harm can be a way of punishing yourself or of managing your pain. Some of the techniques listed on page 36 can be a helpful and safer alternative to self-harm.



## Coping with self-harm

1. Think about your reasons to stop hurting yourself and write them down.

### My reasons not to self-harm

2. Try using some of the grounding techniques shown on page 18.
3. Imagine a calm place, such as a beach or the mountains. This could be real or fantasy.
4. Think about how you could cut down on alcohol, caffeine, sugar or cigarettes. For example, you may want to get rid of things that could tempt you to hurt yourself.
5. Work out what activities you can do when you feel like you want to self-harm, such as calling a friend, doing some exercise, having a bath or listening to music.

### Things I can do to help prevent me from self-harm



## Domestic violence

Domestic violence is a crime. It includes (but is not limited to) physical, emotional and sexual abuse, harassment, stalking and online or digital abuse, in relationships or between family members. If you are a survivor of domestic violence it is important to tell someone as soon as possible, rather than waiting for an emergency. Domestic violence can happen to anyone. You are not alone and you are not to blame.

Sometimes people find it hard to realise or acknowledge that they are survivors of domestic violence. They may not believe it or deny it. For more information about the different kinds of domestic violence, go to: [www.nhs.uk/Livewell/abuse/Pages/domestic-violence-help.aspx#Signs](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/abuse/Pages/domestic-violence-help.aspx#Signs)

If you are worried that reporting domestic violence could affect your safety, you can get advice from a number of organisations without having to tell them your name.

People you can speak to:

- **In an emergency, call 999.**
- Any health professional, such as your GP, a health visitor, a midwife or a therapist.
- **Women's National Domestic Violence Helpline**  
Tel: 0808 2000 247
- **Men's Advice Line**  
Tel: 0808 801 0327  
Email: [info@mensadviceline.org.uk](mailto:info@mensadviceline.org.uk)
- **National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline**  
Tel: 0800 999 5428  
Email: [help@galop.org.uk](mailto:help@galop.org.uk)



## Useful tips

- You can cover your tracks on your phone by deleting call and message logs. To find out how to cover your tracks online, go to: [/www.womensaid.org.uk/cover-your-tracks-online](http://www.womensaid.org.uk/cover-your-tracks-online)
- If you are thinking of leaving your partner, be careful who you tell. It is important that they do not know when and where you are going.
- Whether you are thinking of staying or leaving a partner, it is important to have a safety plan. To build one, go to: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/the-survivors-handbook/making-a-safety-plan>

## Advice for significant others

Sexual assault can have a profound effect on partners, friends and members of the family. In the same way that it can be extremely hard for you to process and understand what has happened to you, it can also be difficult for others.

A helpful starting point may be to share this booklet with those who are closest to you so that they have a better understanding of what you may be going through. They may also want to contact the Havens to arrange to come to a workshop.

## Tips for partners, friends and family members

- Be patient and understanding: recovery takes time.
- Do not pressure our loved one into talking, but be available to listen when they do want to talk.
- Believe their account of what happened.
- Try not to question them about why the sexual assault happened or why they behaved in the way they did during the sexual assault.
- If they appear distressed, remind them that they are safe now.



- Talk to your loved one about how they would like you to support them.
- Do not take your loved one's symptoms personally. If they are irritable, distant or closed off, it may not be anything to do with you or your relationship.
- Take care of yourself: supporting someone after they have been sexually assaulted can be draining and can take its toll on you, too.

## Male survivors

Men, like women, can be sexually assaulted and raped. Men, like women, can also face some social pressures which can influence how they cope with sexual assault. For example, they may feel pressure to deal with the problem on their own; to always be in control; to express only limited emotions; and to not admit vulnerability. These strategies can sometimes be helpful. But in the long run they are often unhelpful. The risk is that these beliefs can make you criticise and isolate yourself and stop you from getting the help you need.

## LGBTQ

Sexual assault affects all communities, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people (LGBTQ). Research suggests that rates of sexual assault may be higher in people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual. But homophobia can prevent people who are LGBTQ from speaking about a sexual assault. It is important to remember that sexual assault is an abuse of power, not a question of sexuality.

## Religious and cultural communities

Sexual assault committed within religious communities can affect a person's faith. It may make them leave a religious group, which can be lonely and isolating. It is important for them to build social networks with other groups.



Some communities condemn the survivor of sexual assault rather than the offender. It is essential to remember that in UK law, rape and sexual assault are crimes against humanity, for which the offender, not the survivor, should be condemned.

A number of religions suggest that forgiveness can help a person to recover. Some people find that forgiving the offender is empowering. Others find it an offensive and unthinkable idea.

Faith, religion and spirituality can be a personal journey of discovery. If you are interested in pursuing a religious journey, it may be helpful to speak to someone who can support you to think about how you might make faith and spiritual practices part of your life.

## Compensation

Survivors can claim compensation through the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (CICA), as long as the assault has been reported to the police. CICA recognises that sexual assault can cause both physical and psychological injuries. It can pay compensation regardless of a successful prosecution. To find out more, call 0808 2714 296 or go to: [www.cica-criminal-injuries.co.uk/index.php](http://www.cica-criminal-injuries.co.uk/index.php)

## Useful contacts

### National support organisations

#### **MIND**

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

Tel: 0300 123 3393

#### **The Samaritans**

[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

Tel: 116 123

#### **Shelter**

[england.shelter.org.uk](http://england.shelter.org.uk)

Tel: 0808 800 4444

#### **Mental Health Foundation**

[www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)



## Support organisations for men and women who have experienced sexual assault:

### **The Police**

[www.met.police.uk](http://www.met.police.uk)

Tel: 101

### **Rape Crisis England and Wales**

[rapecrisis.org.uk](http://rapecrisis.org.uk)

### **The Survivors Trust**

[thesurvivorstrust.org](http://thesurvivorstrust.org)

Tel: 0808 801 0818

### **Victim Support**

[www.victimsupport.org.uk](http://www.victimsupport.org.uk)

Tel: 0808 16 89 111

### **Respond**

[www.respond.org.uk/](http://www.respond.org.uk/)

### **GALOP**

[www.galop.org.uk/sexualviolence](http://www.galop.org.uk/sexualviolence)

Tel: 020 7704 2040

### **National Association for People Abused in Childhood**

[napac.org.uk](http://napac.org.uk)

Tel: 0808 801 0331

## Support organisations for women only

### **Women and Girls Network**

[www.wgn.org.uk](http://www.wgn.org.uk)

Tel: 0808 801 0660

### **Rights of Women**

[rightsofwomen.org.uk](http://rightsofwomen.org.uk)

Tel:

### **Women's Aid (domestic violence)**

[www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)

Tel: 0808 2000 247

## Support organisations for men only:

### **Survivors UK**

[www.survivorsuk.org](http://www.survivorsuk.org)

### **M Power**

<http://male-rape.org.uk>

Tel: 0808 808 4321

### **Mankind UK**

[www.mankindcounselling.org.uk](http://www.mankindcounselling.org.uk)

Tel: 0808 800 5005



For more advice, please contact the Havens on 020 3229 1599 (9am – 5pm, Monday to Friday, not public/bank holidays) or go to [www.thehavens.co.uk](http://www.thehavens.co.uk).

## **Words of encouragement**

We would like to share some words of encouragement from people who have used the Havens after sexual assault.



***You are stronger than you think! Be kind to yourself.***

***You are not on your own in this. It is scientifically proven not to be your fault – it never was.***

***Give yourself time. Once you have overcome this you can overcome anything.***

***It is a complicated journey to recovery but you will be stronger and wiser afterwards. You will only learn more about yourself and others.***

***Allow yourself to grieve and heal.***

***Self-compassion is key.***

***Time heals all wounds.***

***You will get through this, you will rebuild yourself.***



## Further support

We hope you have found this booklet helpful. We know that reactions to sexual assault can be individual and complex, so you may need some more support such as face-to-face therapy.

We offer people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) eight to 12 sessions of trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy (TR-CBT) or eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR) as the first line of treatment. This meets National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines.

According to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidance individuals suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) should be offered 8-12 sessions of trauma-focussed cognitive behavioural therapy (TR-CBT) or eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR) as the first line of treatment.

If you would like more support, you can discuss your options with us at the Havens by calling 020 3299 1599 (9am – 5pm, Monday to Friday, not public/bank holidays). Your GP can also refer you to local therapy services for support.





