

**RASA**  
Merseyside

Sexual  
Violence  
Services

Information  
for survivors of  
sexual violence

Coping after  
sexual violence



Data and content supplied  
by Rape Crisis Scotland

# Coping after sexual violence

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## Background

- » Sexual violence can cause significant trauma and short and long-term physical, emotional and sexual health issues
- » Everyone reacts differently to trauma and adapts in different ways. 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
- » There is no right or wrong way of coping with sexual violence. Everyone has their own way of dealing with it
- » Some ways of coping are helpful but others may be harmful, such as using too much alcohol or drugs, over- or under-eating, self-harming, compulsive shopping or other risky behaviour
- » You may need help at different times to cope with practical, health, or emotional issues
- » However, many people learn to cope, in their own way, with what happened just as they do with other forms of trauma and loss
- » Much depends on your own circumstances and the support you have. It helps if you give yourself time and don't expect too much of yourself
- » It is important to remember that you do not have to cope on your own

## Ways of coping after sexual violence

- » Some people tell no one. But many people say that talking to someone helped them. It is important to talk to someone you trust. If you are worried about the reactions of your family or the people around you, you don't have to speak to someone from your own community. You have a choice about who to tell. The people you go to for help should listen to what you say and should believe you
- » 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
- » You will find it easier to cope if you feel safe. There are many aspects to keeping safe. Do you feel safe where you live, at your work or in your neighbourhood? If not, you may need to think about contacting the police for help. Or you may want to make a practical change such as getting a new phone number. Are there any physical health risks as a result of the sexual violence? It may be worth getting a check-up from your GP or sexual health clinic
- » It is important to take care of yourself and avoid using ways of coping which might become problematic. For example, some people blot feelings out through alcohol or drugs; or take it out on themselves or others; or get into risky situations. If you think you might be at risk of any of these, try to find some other outlet or speak to someone about what is going on
- » If you are going through a hard time it's easy to neglect yourself. But if you neglect yourself physically it can be more difficult to deal with emotional pain. So, it helps to take care of your physical health. You may be finding it difficult to eat, sleep or

exercise. Is there anything you can do to care for your body? Examples might be to have your favourite food or a hot bath. Try to get some exercise suitable for your fitness level

- » Often survivors find it helps to focus on day-to-day things that are easy to do like watching TV, playing computer games or a familiar sport or hobby. Is there anything easy to get you started? Try to cut down the stress in your life so you are not under too much pressure at work or at home. Relaxation exercises including breathing deeply can be helpful. It may help to write things down or draw or paint, depending on your interests. (There are some ideas below.) Try to keep some kind of routine as this can make you feel stable in the face of traumatic stress
- » Take care of your health. Eating regularly and well can make you feel better. Reduce sugar and caffeine as they can increase stress. Alcohol and drugs may make you feel better in the short-term but can cause long-term problems. If you think that your alcohol or drug use is becoming a problem, seek advice
- » Give yourself time to rest and relax. There are many different relaxation techniques such as deep breathing (see below), mindfulness (see below), listening to music, reading
- » 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. Swimming, cycling, going to the gym, aerobics, dancing...whatever you fancy
- » Social contact can also 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

## What you can do: self-care tips for survivors

Try out the following exercise to understand your own coping strategies.

This is a list of the different ways people cope with feelings, memories and problems. Go through the list and tick how often you use these as ways of coping. Add in any other ways you cope in the blank boxes at the end. Some of these, such as self-harm could be problems in themselves, but for just now record all strategies you use, whether or not they are problematic.

Coping strategy	Often	Sometimes	Hardly ever	Never	Used to but don't now
Cleaning (house or self)					
Sleeping					
Keeping busy					
Going out a lot					
Staying in a lot					
Blanking off feelings					
Fantatising/ daydreaming					
Dissociating/cutting off					
Passing out					
Taking medication					
Taking non- prescribed drugs					

Smoking					
Self-harming					
Withdrawing from other people					
Spending time with others					
Over-eating/bingeing					
Under-eating/starving					
Working/playing on a computer					
Working					
Suicide attempts					
Becoming aggressive					
Having a bath					
Resting					
Painting					
Writing					
Phoning someone					
Talking to someone					
Walking					
Having a massage					
Exercising					
Dancing					
Listening to music					
Reading					
Shopping					
Gambling					
Having a hug					
Having sex					
Running away					

Avoiding					
Crying					
Routines (e.g. checking, counting)					

What have you learned from doing this? Have there been any changes?

This shows you already use many different strategies to deal with feelings and difficulties. Some, such as writing a diary, may be entirely helpful and cause no additional problems. Others, although helpful, can have their own problems or downsides or can be helpful in moderation but not in excess. For each of the coping strategies that you use write down how they help, then write down any problems which they lead to.

One idea is to keep a diary and record the situations you come up against, the coping strategies you use and the outcome. Are they helpful? What other options do you have? What else might work?

Looking at this are there any changes you would like to make? What is the first step to making those changes? How might you do this? When is a good time to try this out?

*Adapted from: Breaking Free Workbook by Carolyn Ainscough and Kay Toon*

## Healing

The *Courage to Heal Workbook* by Laura David (see below) contains good exercises to help you work out what coping mechanisms you use, negative and positive. Most rape crisis centres have copies which you can borrow or photocopy exercises from.

## Relaxation techniques

- » Practise relaxation techniques, for example before you go to bed. Breathe in deeply, in for a count of 5 and out for a count of 5. Put your hand on your tummy and watch this rise and fall as you breathe. Consciously tense and relax your muscles, in turn; start with your toes and work up
- » Contact the RCS Helpline (see below) for a copy of a relaxation CD which you can listen to and practise in your own time

## Resting and sleeping

Sleep problems are common after sexual violence, with problems such as flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety, over-reliance on alcohol to numb emotional pain. The National Sleep Foundation ([www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org)) recommends the following:

- » Sleep in a place where you feel most rested and safe. It may not be possible to rest in your bedroom if you experienced violence there
- » Create an environment in which you can sleep well. It should be safe, quiet, cool and comfortable. While it often helps to sleep in a dark room, if keeping a nightlight on helps bring



about a more safe feeling, then consider keeping the room dimly lit. It may also help if a friend or family member stays in the room, or perhaps in a nearby room, while you are sleeping

- » Engage in a relaxing, non-alerting activity at bedtime such as reading or listening to music. For some people, soaking in a warm bath can be helpful. Avoid activities that are mentally or physically stimulating, including talking about what happened right before bedtime
- » Do not eat or drink too much before bedtime and recognise the negative effect that alcohol can have on your sleep
- » Rest when you need to rest. It is common to feel exhausted after trauma, so you may need more rest or to rest differently during this time. Relaxing and resting for brief times throughout the day and taking short naps (15-45 minutes) may help
- » Go to bed when you feel ready to sleep. Try not to force sleep, which can add to the pressure of wanting to get to sleep. Developing the habit of lying in bed awake for long periods when you want to sleep is counter-productive

## Breathing

Concentrating on your breathing can help your body to relax naturally. Take slow deep breaths in and out. Relax your shoulders back; breathe out; and pull your stomach muscles into your spine. Breathe in deeply, in for a count of 5 and out for a count of 5. Put your hand on your tummy and watch this rise and fall as you breathe

## Grounding

Grounding is a way of keeping yourself in the present. This can help you manage overwhelming feelings.

Take a look around and note what is happening. What can you see and hear? Tell yourself your name and the date and time. You could keep an elastic band on your wrist and ‘ping it’ to bring yourself back to the here and now. Or, you could carry a pebble, a hankie or key-ring in your pocket which you can hold or rub when you need to ground yourself in ‘now’ (for example if you have a flashback or panic attack)

*Some exercises to try from [www.peirsac.org/peirsacui/er/educational\\_resources10.pdf](http://www.peirsac.org/peirsacui/er/educational_resources10.pdf)*

### Grounding exercise 1:

Begin by tracing your hand on a piece of paper and label each finger as one of the five senses. Then take each finger and identify something special and safe representing each of those five senses. For example: thumb represents sight and a label for sight might be butterflies or middle finger represents smell and a label for smell could be roses.

After writing and drawing all this on paper, stick it on your fridge or other safe places in your house where you can see it and memorise it.

If memories are triggered, breathe deeply and slowly, and put your hand in front of your face where you can really see it – stare at your hand and then look at each finger and try to do the five senses exercise from memory.

*Source: [www.stardrift.net/survivor/senses.html](http://www.stardrift.net/survivor/senses.html)*

## Grounding exercise 2:

- » Keep your eyes open, look around the room, notice your surroundings, notice details
- » Hold a pillow, stuffed animal or a ball
- » Place a cool cloth on your face, or hold something cool such as a can of juice
- » Listen to soothing music
- » Put your feet firmly on the ground
- » FOCUS on someone's voice or a neutral conversation or music

## Grounding exercise 3: 54321 game

- » Name 5 things you can see in the room with you
- » Name 4 things you can feel ('chair on my back' or 'feet on floor')
- » Name 3 things you can hear right now ('fingers tapping on keyboard' or TV)
- » Name 2 things you can smell right now (or, 2 things you like the smell of)
- » Name 1 good thing about yourself

Source: [www.ibiblio.org/rcip//copingskills.html](http://www.ibiblio.org/rcip//copingskills.html)

## Grounding exercise 4:

Re-orient yourself in place and time by asking yourself some or all of these questions:

1. Where am I?
2. What day of the week is it?
3. What is the date?
4. What is the month?
5. What is the year?
6. How old am I?
7. What season is it?

## Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a technique that helps you to focus your attention in the present moment – to focus on your breathing, your thoughts and feelings. It can help you relax before sleeping or if you wake after a nightmare. Mindfulness helps you to observe your thoughts and feelings without judging yourself. It also helps you to become more aware of changes in the way you see or feel about yourself.

It means noting the things that you might not usually notice about yourself or your surroundings. For example:

- » When you are out for a walk notice what your arms and legs, hands and feet are doing; notice your breathing; hear, see and smell what is around you

- » When you are washing the dishes, notice the temperature of the water, the feeling of the water on your skin, the bubbles, the sounds of the plates

*For more tips see [www.getselfhelp.co.uk](http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk)*

## Visualisation

Picture something that makes you feel happy and safe. Try to visualise being calm and relaxed when you are dealing with difficult situations

## Expressing feelings

You have a right to express your feelings, including anger. Expressing your feelings can help you feel better as long as you do this without hurting yourself or other people. Are there things you can do safely? Some examples which other people have found helpful are walking or running, shouting, writing, keeping a diary and painting.

## Doing things differently

There are some useful exercises, with free worksheets and downloads to help you do things differently at: [www.getselfhelp.co.uk](http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk)

**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](mailto: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](http://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk)
- » Information after rape and sexual assault:  
[www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/06/13141931/0](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/06/13141931/0)
- » [www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk)
- » [www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/Anger.asp](http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/Anger.asp)
- » [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)
- » [www.getselfhelp.co.uk](http://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/](http://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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Compiled by Shirley Henderson [www.shirleyhenderson.co.uk](http://www.shirleyhenderson.co.uk)





**Helpline 0151 666 1392**  
**[helpline@rasamerseyside.org](mailto:helpline@rasamerseyside.org)**

**Helpline Times:**

Tuesday - 6-8pm

Thursday 6-8pm

Friday 12-2pm

**Information & Referral Line Contact Numbers:**

Liverpool/Sefton 0151 558 1801

Wirral 0151 650 0155