"No matter what your past has been,
your future is spotless."

H.B. Brown

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edinburgh rape crisis centre
supporting survivors of sexual violence

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide offers practical information and exercises to help those who have experienced sexual violence. We look at what trauma is, its effects, ways of coping and recovery. We can't include everything in this short space so based on our experience we have tried to include the issues which are common for survivors.

At the back we have included some further reading.

Everyone's experience is different and there is no magic wand, but we hope it will help you. Others have experienced sexual violence too. It was not your fault. The fact that you are reading this shows that you are a strong and an empowered survivor.

"When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak." Audre Lorde

TAKING THE FIRST STEPS

It may be very difficult to talk about what happened and you may worry about not being believed.

However, as a survivor of sexual violence it can be very hard to just forget about what has happened to you, even if it happened a long time ago, no matter how hard you try. As part of the healing process, breaking the silence and talking about your thoughts and feelings can help. Taking this step, when the time is right for you, can be the beginning of regaining control over your own life and feeling better about yourself.

Healing from trauma can take time, and it is important to be patient with yourself and take things at your own pace. There is no right or wrong way and the most important thing is to trust your own feelings. If you are able to, talk to someone you trust. It may be painful at first but it can help. You can contact us via Rape Crisis Scotland's helpline (08088 01 03 02) and we will listen to you, believe you and work with you to empower yourself. We will not tell you what to do. We will offer a support session at our centre where we can talk to you about the different types of support we offer.

Somethings in this booklet may be upsetting or triggering for you. You can create your safety plan over the page or refer to the relaxation section on pages 25–26. If you feel that you need support immediately please see the list of helplines and organisations at the back.

"I had a fear of open spaces and felt my surroundings caving in and that I had a stamp on my forehead, saying I have been raped and everyone knew. My first steps to the healing process was walking through the door of the rape crisis centre." - Annie

CELEBRATE YOUR SURVIVAL

We use the term survivor rather than victim when we talk about those who have experienced sexual violence. They mean very different things and we feel the term victim does not recognise the process the individual has undertaken to come through their experience – to survive. We use the term survivor in the same way it is used to describe someone who survives and lives on after a plane crash or overcoming cancer. We recognise trauma as a life-changing event.

"Some people think that they have to wait until they have cleared up all of the issues of their trauma before they can recognise and mark the truth of their survival. Not so. At any time, you can acknowledge that you have survived. You can do this on your own or in the company of others. And you can celebrate survival as many times as you wish. Buy a gift for yourself, make a special meal, create a piece of art, carry out a ritual, anything that helps you to reinforce your survival."

Babette Rothschild, 8 Keys to Safe Trauma Recovery

Reading about sexual violence and its effects may be upsetting and uncomfortable. If you become distressed at any point while reading this, take some time out – you can ring one of the helpline numbers at the back of the guide or look over the relaxation section on pages 25 – 26. It is also a good idea for you to have a think about a safety plan for yourself.

BEFORE YOU START: YOUR SAFETY PLAN

Creating your safety plan: you can come back and add to this

- Set some boundaries – when and where you can safely think or talk about this
- Find a place of comfort where you feel safe
- Privacy – do you want to share this with anyone?
- Establish a protective ritual e.g. hold a special object or cup of tea

EXERCISE: IN TIMES OF CRISIS

WHEN I NEED SPACE FOR MYSELF I CAN GO TO

IF I FEEL I CAN'T BREATHE I CAN

AFTER A PANIC ATTACK I CAN CALM MYSELF BY

IF I FEEL SUICIDAL, I WILL

AFTER A FLASHBACK I CAN

MY SAFEST PLACE IS

THESE THINGS CALM ME

MY POSITIVE THOUGHTS ARE

WHAT IS SEXUAL VIOLENCE?

Sexual violence takes many forms and is any kind of unwanted sexual behaviour. It happens without consent, is an abuse of power and a form of control. It can be verbal, physical or emotional – can take place online, and be perpetrated by someone you know or someone you don't. It could happen once or be something which has taken place multiple times, and could be something which occurred very recently, or many years ago. Most forms of sexual violence are criminal offences in Scotland, and all of them have a significant and harmful impact.

Sometimes it can be hard to name something as sexual violence. We may feel in our gut that it is wrong, or feel deeply unhappy, disturbed and worried by what has happened, but not want to name is as violence or use words associated with sexual violence. We recognise and respect that each individual's experience is unique to them.

Instances of sexual violence occur more commonly than is realised. As many as 1 in 4 women are estimated to experience sexual violence at some point during their lives. It can happen to anyone, people of all genders and identities. People of marginalised identities such as LGBTI and black and ethnic minority people can and do experience sexual violence in the form of hate crime. This means they are targeted because of their identity. 38% of trans people have experienced sexual harassment because of their transgender identity.

If you have experienced any kind of sexual violence at any point in your life, you can contact us. We will support you to use the words you choose to describe what has happened, and will not pressure you to disclose anything you are not comfortable with. We're here to support you and help you with the impact it's having on you and your life.

Trauma and overcoming its effects

Trauma is a term to describe how the psyche (the mind and its functions) responds when a person experiences or witnesses a situation that is threatening or dangerous, and out of their control. Sexual violence may result in trauma that can affect your mind and body, and produce symptoms that may include intense feelings of fear and helplessness, withdrawal, lack of concentration, sleep disturbance, aggression, hypervigilance (the state of being constantly tense and 'on guard') and flashbacks (sensing the event as if it were reoccurring). If these symptoms persist for a significant period of time, a person can be said to be experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Overcoming the effects of trauma

The activation of the brain's alarm system in response to danger is a normal biological function which serves to keep us safe from harm. The body then reacts to this and uses an adrenalin rush to increase our heart rate to prepare us for action; we hyperventilate and our muscles tense up. This is called the 'fight, flight or freeze' response. Even when we are no longer under threat it can sometimes continue to engage when something reminds us of danger. As the sensitivity of the brain's alarm system is altered, various triggers, or even the act of remembering the event can activate it and lead to an emotional state of fear and hypervigilance.

The good news is the brain is changeable and traumatic symptoms can change, and new methods for working effectively with trauma are constantly being developed (see page 30 for information on EMDR and Somatic Experiencing).

Here are some suggestions on ways to help calm your system when the brain's alarm system becomes activated:

- Focus on your breathing (see page 30 for free downloads of breathing and mindfulness exercises)
- Engage in activities that promote purposeful relaxation of the body, such as yoga
- Activate the thinking part of your brain with planning, stories, problem-solving and by identifying memories as memories
- Physical tasks such as artwork, gardening or something mechanical can redirect your thoughts and feelings, and help to engage different parts of the brain. Tasks which use both hands may be especially effective.

We acknowledge that trying these suggestions can at times be challenging. You may feel like you've tried everything and nothing works, but survivors have told us that these things can help. Taking small steps and practicing these suggestions, even just a little, can help. Treat yourself with kindness; give yourself permission to do something caring for yourself.

EFFECTS OF TRAUMA AND WAYS OF COPING

After a trauma, people may go through a wide range of feelings such as: depression, anxiety, not being able to trust others, intrusive thoughts, feeling overwhelmed, sadness, heartachey, anger, feeling detached or numb. Many avoid talking about their feelings but expressing them is really important.

Other effects include panic attacks, flashbacks, nightmares and dissociation/detachment. These can be terrifying and confusing. Over the next few pages we will look at some common effects that survivors often talk to us about and offer some practical suggestions to help you.

ANGER

Many people can find it hard to show anger. We are told from when we are young that being angry is not 'nice' so we learn to hide it. However, feeling angry at someone who has deliberately hurt you is a healthy response. Anger can play an important and welcome role in support; it can be positive and constructive, if directed appropriately. It provides us with boosts of physical and emotional energy. This power can motivate us and help us to find courage, survive, empower ourselves, make changes in our lives and be creative. However, it can also be destructive to yourself and others and therefore needs to be directed appropriately.

Bottling up our anger is unhealthy for us. It can lead to intrusive thoughts, feelings of going mad or we are losing control. Allowing our anger to surface and expressing it is one of the most compassionate things we can do for ourselves. **Anger is an emotional and a healthy response – we need to allow our emotions a release.** This helps to harmonize our body and mind – the more release the more relief.

"To be angry is very good. It burns out things and leaves nutrients in the soil. You should always be ready to be angry at injustice and cruelty."
Maya Angelou

<< TIPS FOR RELEASING ANGER >>

Writing about your experience – how it is felt in your body; draw or express yourself.

Stomping, dancing or singing

Physical exercise such as running, boxing, playing tennis or the gym

Creative activities such as drawing or painting

Ripping up old magazines

Keeping an anger journal

Screaming into a pillow

Hitting a pillow with a tennis racket

Throwing stones into the river or sea

Writing a letter to the person who hurt you and then tearing it up

Breathing exercises

Yoga or Tai-Chi

Going near nature

EXERCISE: RELEASING RAGE

Allow yourself to release rage in a private and safe space. This time is for you. Do not physically hurt yourself, destroy property, engage verbally or physically with the person you are angry at. Afterwards you may feel vulnerable and tender – give yourself time to be alone and rest in the inner space you have created. Take several deep breaths, wrap yourself in a blanket for physical comfort and maybe hug a stuffed animal or pillow. Tell yourself that you are healing and that you are precious and brave. You may even want to have a nap.

ALLOW YOUR BODY TO RELAX. WHAT DOES RELAXATION FEEL LIKE?

WHERE DO YOU HOLD ANGER IN YOUR BODY?

HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH YOUR ANGER?

ARE THERE OTHER FEELINGS THERE ALONGSIDE THE ANGER?

DOES ANGER PROTECT YOU FROM OTHER FEELINGS?

WHAT ARE YOUR STORIES ABOUT ANGER?

IS IT HARD TO LET THEM GO?

"The truth does not harm us, it liberates us to be true to ourselves."
"To heal rage you must be willing to experience its nature - get close to the heat and be warmed and informed by it." - Ruth King, Healing Rage

FLASHBACKS

Flashbacks are a memory of a frightening experience and can be very distressing. They tend not to be like an ordinary memory, but more an unexpected intrusion in which you feel like you are 'reliving' the events. It can feel almost as real as when it originally happened. They can last from a few seconds to a few hours and can happen at any time, anywhere and often occur without warning, regardless of how you are feeling – whether you're feeling low, tired, anxious, happy, calm or relaxed. They can be triggered by anything that reminds you of what you experienced: someone who looks like your abuser; a voice; music; a TV programme; colours; tastes or smells.

DO FLASHBACKS TAKE DIFFERENT FORMS?

Flashbacks can occur in many forms which include visual, auditory or sensory.

Visual flashbacks of your experience can be like watching a single slide from a slide show, a snapshot or photograph that flashes repeatedly like a video clip. Not everyone's flashbacks are visual.

Auditory flashbacks take the form of words, phrases or sounds that you associate with your experience. These sounds may either be in your head or voices around you. Sometimes a flashback can occur in response to hearing voices that tell you to do things, such as harm yourself or someone else. Hearing voices can be very frightening.

Sensory flashbacks can be accompanied by intense feelings, such as shame, anger, physical sensations including numbness or feeling like you are being touched when no-one is there. These are known as 'body memories' which may have been felt at the time of your experience. Sensory flashbacks can also strongly affect your sense of smell and taste.

WILL THEY EVER STOP?

You are not going mad; your mind is trying to make sense of what happened and is remembering feelings, sounds and images which were too traumatic to cope with at the time they occurred. Flashbacks are a healthy sign that you are now ready to process the trauma you experienced. They are part of the healing process and they should decrease in frequency and intensity as enough memories of your experience return. This will allow you to move forwards along the path to healing. If you are able to understand why flashbacks occur they may not be so frightening.

Some ideas of what you can do during a flashback are:

Tell yourself that this is a temporary and normal reaction to what you experienced.

Ground yourself in the present – take a look around and note what can you see and hear? Keep an elastic band around your wrist and 'ping it' to try and bring yourself back to the here and now. You may find it grounding to carry something in your pocket like a small stone or shell that you can hold or rub when a flashback occurs.

Try to allow part of yourself to remember the past. Take long deep breaths as the memory emerges. As much as you are able to, don't fight the flashback. However it may often feel too much to cope with, and so it is helpful to have techniques to ground/distract yourself so that you start to feel safer.

If you start experiencing a flashback whilst having sex with your partner, you can stop and take time to relax.

If the flashback occurs whilst you are out, try to get yourself to somewhere that you feel safe and concentrate on your breathing.

Remind yourself that you have survived this experience and that you are not being hurt in the here and now.

Exercise: Flashback halting protocol

Say the following sentences and fill in the blanks.

RIGHT NOW I AM FEELING

<< name your current emotion

AND I AM SENSING IN MY BODY

<< describe your current bodily sensations, e.g. hot, cold, trembling etc.

BECAUSE I AM REMEMBERING

<< name trauma by title only – no details

AT THE SAME TIME, I AM LOOKING AROUND WHERE I AM NOW IN

<< the current year

HERE

<< the place where you are

AND I SEE

<< describe what you see around you

AND SO I KNOW

<< name trauma by title only – you can have a code name for the event – one that feels safe for you to use

IS NOT HAPPENING TO ME ANYMORE.

It may be useful to write down the flashback or talk about it to someone you trust. Reliving memories can be tiring and emotionally draining. It may take hours or even days until you feel okay. Try to do something that makes you feel good and reward yourself for all your hard work – make yourself a hot drink or listen to your favourite music.

Remember to be patient; it takes time to heal and flashbacks are part of your healing. You cannot stop them from happening but you can do things to lessen the control and effect that they have on your life. You have let yourself remember a traumatic experience and that takes courage and strength.

Nightmares and night-terrors

You may be experiencing difficulties sleeping due to nightmares or night-terrors (when you are awakened by a flashback) which can result in feeling fearful or panicked. If you are wakened by a nightmare or night-terror, write it down in as much detail as possible including smells, sights, sounds, sensations and tastes. Then answer these questions:

Was it an exact re-enactment of the traumatic events?

Can you think of a way to change the nightmare's ending?

What new information does the nightmare give you that you can use to build an understanding of what happened to you?

How has the nightmare helped you to respond differently to your trauma?

Try to have something warm to drink, watch some TV, listen to music or do something else that you find relaxing. It's often best not to try and sleep until you have been able to relax for a while. The 'flashback halting protocol' on page 9 can also be helpful for nightmares. You can use it as a ritual before sleep to prepare for any nightmares you may have or you can keep it beside your bed ready to use it when you need it.

Ways of Coping

Survivors have different ways of coping such as alcohol and drugs, self-harm, eating disorder, shutting down, talking, exercising or creative activities. As trauma is processing it will become easier to find more positive ways of coping. See our section on your survival toolkit and relaxation and self-care on pages 25-26.

Self-Harm

Self-harm is any action which causes physical harm to oneself. People self-harm to relieve emotional distress. It can take many forms and includes cutting, burning, bruising, abuse of food or overdosing. As a way of coping, self-harm can provide temporary relief and a sense of calm and control to survivors.

Dissociation

This is the ability of the mind to disconnect from what is around us and also our own body as a form of self-protection. The mind does this quickly when it feels that what is happening is too much for us to handle. It acts like a light switch and turns off all or parts of the event. Everyone dissociates from time to time when they daydream or space out, but sometimes it can become a survival technique when a person feels overwhelmed by trauma. Many survivors also experience dissociation during sex (see page 23).

> "The only way past fear is to go through. Courage is being afraid but going on anyhow." - Unknown

Try to complete this sentence:

I 'space out' so that I don't have to feel

When dissociating you are emotionally and physically distant. This can lead to avoiding difficult situations and feeling detached from your body and emotions. You might feel out of your body, startle easily, feel numb or experience memory problems and have gaps of missing time. You can begin to feel less detached by working on staying in the present. It is important to make a plan for how to do this safely; for instance, having another person with you or comforting yourself if you are staying with painful feelings. You may need to distract yourself at times so try not to be hard on yourself or expect things to change quickly.

You can explore ways to bring yourself back into your body and to feel grounded again through physical activities such as running, jumping and singing, or soothing ones such as cuddles, taking baths or meditating. It can be helpful to focus on the five senses as a way to stay in the present, for example, noticing all the different sounds you hear or noticing the different textures you can touch with your fingers.

> "There are days - depression is a part of it - when if all you do is get dressed, take a shower and put on your makeup, then it is a good day. Your goals have to be much lower. But if you take one tiny little step, then you can take another and another.." Deborah Norville

Exercise: What are my Ways of Coping?

What coping methods do I feel ashamed about?

Which feel ok to me?

What needs am I meeting with this activity/behaviour?

Can I meet those needs another way?

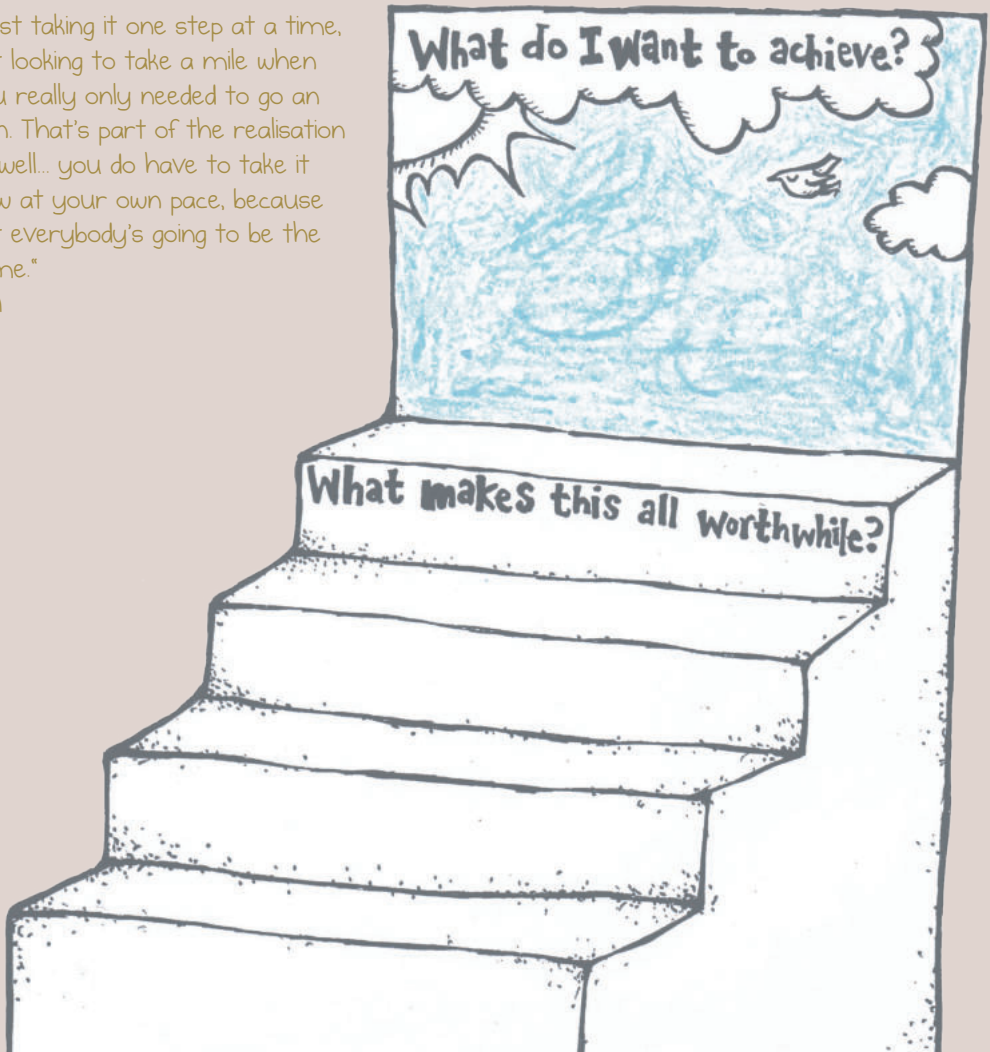
Rather than feel ashamed, it is important to recognise your survival and resourcefulness. What might have happened if you had not coped in the way you have? Perhaps it felt you had no other options?

Recovery – breaking the silence and preparing for change

Deciding that you want to change things in your life is a big step. You are reading this; perhaps you are seeking counselling or support, or have already talked to someone and broken the silence about your experience. Wherever you are in your journey, you have taken a positive and scary step out of the comfort zone and into something new.

You are facing painful or difficult memories or feelings, and you may not know what will happen next. This might feel like the hardest thing you have ever done in your life, and it takes courage. Feeling overwhelmed, terrified or wishing to escape are natural responses to exploring trauma, so remember your safety plan.

"Just taking it one step at a time, not looking to take a mile when you really only needed to go an inch. That's part of the realisation as well... you do have to take it slow at your own pace, because not everybody's going to be the same."
x A



Am I Ready?

It may be that it never feels as simple as being ready or not ready. It may feel as if things are happening naturally. The brain has a way of releasing memories or feelings when we are ready to cope. Hold onto your strengths – you have survived so far, you are resilient. Perhaps you also have a determination to live a better life.

Check in with yourself each day. How am I feeling today? If not so well, then a bit of distraction today will be good for you to shut down the memories as much as possible. If you are feeling a bit better today, then it might feel safe to stay with difficult feelings or to let yourself cry. Remember to try to be compassionate to yourself as you do so.

Disclosing trauma is an ongoing process, as you learn more about yourself and your feelings.

Things might feel a bit worse before they feel better. It might feel like a rollercoaster, or that the steps go back and forth all the time without progress. It can get easier and is worth the effort.

You may never achieve justice for yourself or know or understand why the other person(s) hurt you. Your recovery may be a process of shifting the focus from them, back onto you.

Exploring the trauma may affect your relationships; how you see yourself and others; your lifestyle or work.

Going through the memories, thoughts and feelings cannot be rushed. The process must feel safe enough for you to cope with. Do not try to rush to try to 'get it over with', as this will mean you might be avoiding something.

Working through and exploring trauma is a lifelong process. It will mean different things to you at different times.

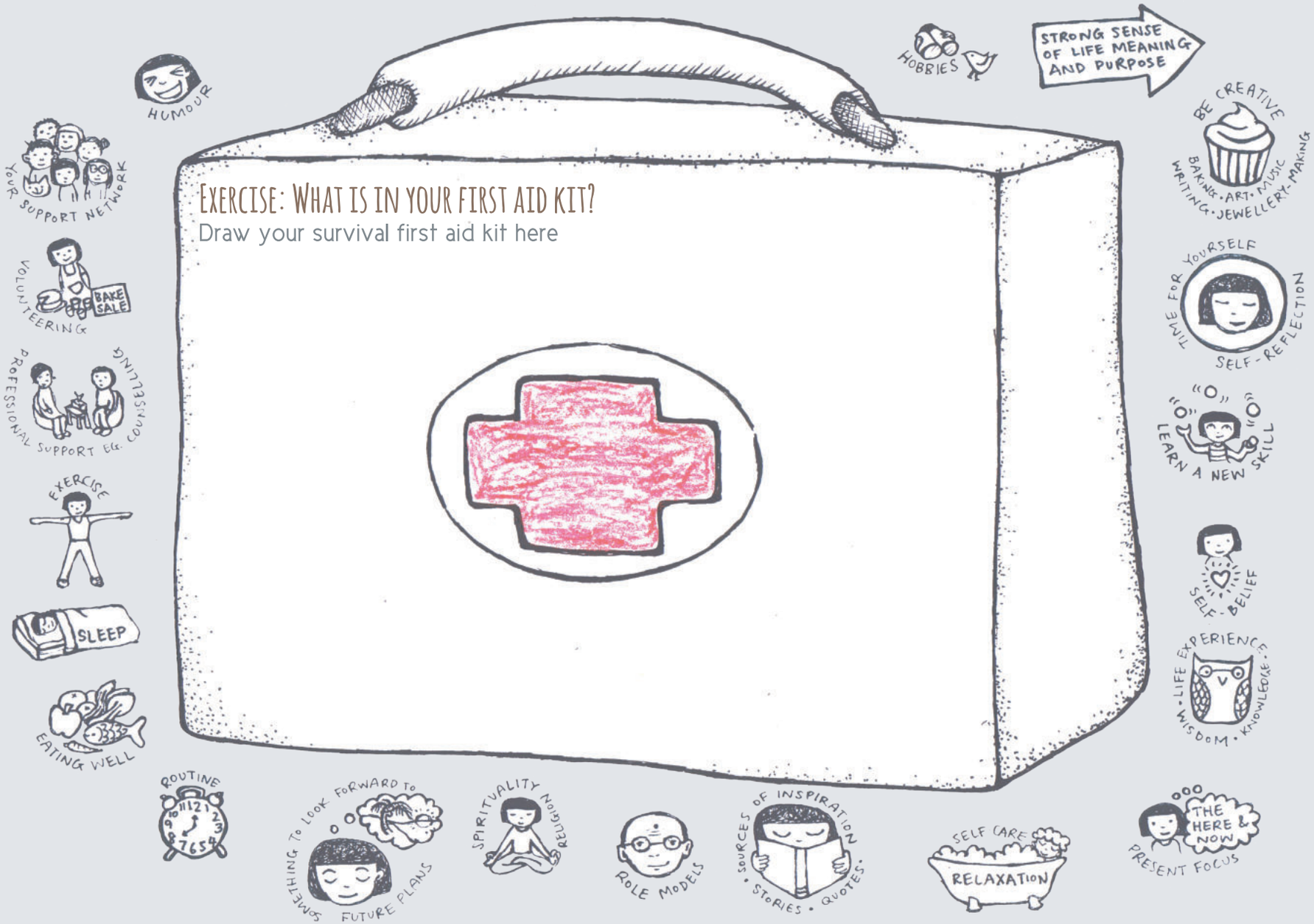
You may think you are not brave, but facing fears requires courage. You were abused and you survived. It is how you respond to trauma that is a sign of a healthy life.

"The sessions have given me a new meaning to life. My whole thinking process has changed. I no longer feel I blame myself for what happened. Thank you for everything. I love my new life."

"The sessions were helpful in that I could use the time the way I wanted. I could talk or draw, whichever I found useful. It helped to let me have a bit of control, it was not something that I really had over my life before, it was nice to know that I could take control every once in a while."

Your survival first aid kit

When we have a visible injury it is easier to take care of it; we show a doctor; we have it bandaged and give the wound time to heal. Trauma is usually an invisible injury, but we also must take care of the wound and allow time for healing.

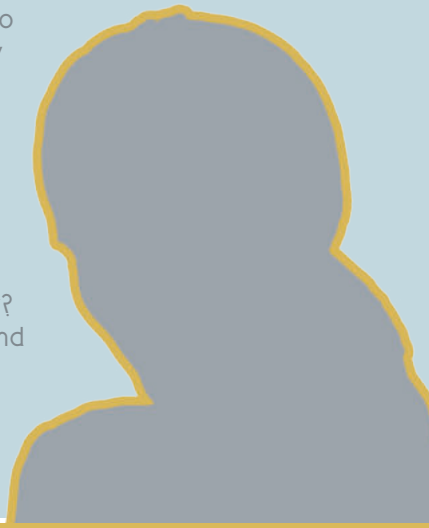


Shame and Self-Blame

Sexual violence is a taboo subject in our society, and often the burden of secrecy and shame is wrongly placed upon the survivor. Feelings of guilt and shame can hold back survivors from speaking about the abuse and can result in a feeling of isolation. Isolation can be particularly apparent for those who are part of marginalised communities, such as LQBTI and black and ethnic minority, and who are cut off from them as a result of sexual violence. As part of your recovery, you must learn to let go of these feelings and understand that it was not your fault. It takes a great deal of courage to speak up about sexual violence. What does it mean for you to be breaking the silence?

Feelings of self-blame can occur because you are trying to make sense of something that feels incomprehensible or random, for instance, 'this happened because I did this ...' This can provide meaning or a sense of control, which can be easier to face than 'this happened because someone chose to abuse me'.

For survivors of childhood sexual abuse, it is important to understand that children, and adults as well, can be easily manipulated by an adult and therefore vulnerable to abuse. They are physically smaller, lack maturity to fully understand what may be happening, are dependent, trusting and keen to please adults.



Look at the table below and try to argue with that inner voice that says it was your fault. Is there any room for another voice inside you, one that is nurturing and loving? It might take a lot of practice to start to create a new kind voice but it will be worth it. Sometimes people blame themselves for not doing anything but it's important to understand that people can go into a freeze response during a trauma.

It was my fault because	But it wasn't my fault because

Sexual violence can result in negative feelings such as 'you are worthless', which can be so powerful that you start to believe them and lose touch with your true self. However, you can make a positive decision now to rediscover your true self which has been silenced by the trauma. Start by beginning to notice when thoughts of shame and self-blame surface. Would you be so harsh with anyone else? What purpose do these thoughts serve? Are you repeating old patterns?

Perspective: what stops you from placing the blame where it belongs? Perhaps you might become angry or it might make the trauma more real?

Responsibility: do you have a heightened sense of responsibility?

Self-compassion: what stops you from being kind to yourself?

Feelings of Loss

Some survivors feel sadness and heartachey, this is part of the grief for the life that the abuse took away from you – the person you would have been or your sense of safety and security. Allow yourself to grieve, let yourself cry and comfort yourself. Sadness is the most natural feeling after trauma. The only way to get through grief is to go through it.

Making Meaning

Write down everything you miss since your abuse, starting with "I never can..." You may also try to answer these questions: Why me? How can I go on? What do I need? What does all this mean? Why did this have to happen? What can I do now? Who am I now? What insights and strengths have I gained?

Acknowledge your own resourcefulness and positive aspects of being a survivor.

Adapted from The PTSD Workbook

The final stage of grief involves acceptance and the recognition of what has happened, and how it has impacted on your life and relationships. Try to channel your energy into something positive. As you work through your grief try to face your loss, keep a normal routine, get help when you need it and remind yourself that even though it is painful you have survived.

"No emotion is the final one." - Jeanette Winterson

Relationships

Having people who are supportive can help your recovery. These are people who believe you and won't pressure you to get over it, talk about it or go to the police if you don't want to. However, people vary in how they respond to news of abuse and some may react with disbelief or be dismissive, push us to get over something traumatic before we're ready or are overwhelmed or awkward when you tell them. Negative reactions may be more common when the abuser is well liked or respected. Remember you are not alone and you can contact us on Rape Crisis Scotland's helpline (08088 01 03 02) or email us at support@ercc.scot.

Abuse can change the way we view relationships and often survivors find it hard to trust people. Many people speak about feeling unsafe or alone in the world and uncomfortable in social situations. However, positive relationships are very important to them, especially those with trusted family and friends, as these support them and give meaning to their lives. As part of the process of recovery, you may find that your relationships change. It is important to recognise and break away from threatening relationships.

It might be helpful to think about your different relationships with friends, family or partners:

What five words describe this relationship? Why did you choose these?

What is good and what is bad about this relationship?

How do they support you? How do they not support you?

How much do you trust this person? Do you trust them in some ways and not in others?

What needs do you fulfil for this person?

What needs do they fulfil for you?

How has this relationship been affected by the abuse? What would you change? What blocks these changes?

What are your hopes for the future of the relationship?

"At any given moment you have the power to say: this is not how the story is going to end." Unknown

Setting Boundaries

How do you set boundaries in each relationship?

How do you communicate these boundaries?

If your boundaries are not respected, what can you do?

Do your boundaries allow room for the other person and their feelings?

Exercise: Learning to say NO

Some survivors put the needs of others before their own. This may be a pattern from the past when it felt dangerous to disagree with abusers. As part of the recovery process, you need to learn how to put your needs first. Listening to your inner voice ('something is wrong here') can help you to set limits and take care of your needs. Say the following sentences and fill in the blanks.

If I say no, it would mean that

I'd really like to say no to

Here are all the reasons to say no

But I'm afraid to say no because

Here are some ways I could say no

If someone gets mad at me, I will

If someone gives me a hard time, I will

- What happened when you said no?
- How did you say no?
- What response did you get?
- How do you feel about the interaction?
- How would you do it differently next time?

Sex and your Body

You may have difficulties with sex and intimacy. Healthy sex is nothing like the abuse you experienced. By working on your sexual healing and rediscovering your likes and dislikes, you can learn to differentiate the two.

Your sexual well-being is important and you deserve to feel comfortable with yourself and your body. You have as much right to a healthy sex life as anyone else. As part of your sexual healing you need to work out what you want to achieve and to stay focused on that goal even when you get frustrated. Recovery is an ongoing process and remember to work at your own pace. People relate to their bodies and sex differently depending on their identities and life experience. Trans survivors might also be coping with gender dysphoria and this can change or impact how you reconnect with sex and your body in healing. It is important to go at your own pace and get the individualised support you need/deserve.

'Safe' Sex

Feeling safe and comfortable are important to progress your sexual recovery. You may never feel 100% safe during sex. You may feel fearful, confused or out of control. There is no right way for sexual relations following an assault – see what feels safe and comfortable for you.

Sometimes it can be helpful to work towards feeling more in your body via the experience of sensual pleasures. This might be: receiving a cuddle from someone; enjoying food or dancing; giving or receiving a massage. Also, think about your experiences of intimacy in life. When are you able to share and be close to someone else?

Exercise: Feeling Safe

What is safe touch with myself, another person, or my partner?

Am I able to stay 'present' when I am touched?

Is it easier for me to touch or be touched?

Does my partner respect my boundaries?

Can I allow feelings and sensations without judgement?

It is important you are not experiencing any abuse – emotional, physical or sexual. If you have a partner do they respect your needs, wants and feelings? It is important that you are free to make your own decisions and that your partner or someone else isn't trying to control your life. Is your partner capable of supporting you through this journey? Answering yes to these questions is an indication that you are in a safe environment.

It might be useful to explore how you define sex:

- What is healthy sex for you?
- What is unhealthy sex for you?
- What have your experiences of sex been?
- What are your experiences of sexual and bodily pleasure?
- What are some of your feelings about sex?
- How can you express your consent, boundaries and desires?
- What are your 'triggers' during sex?
- How can you create a new meaning for sex and relationships?

Some survivors use sex to punish themselves or relive their assault. If you're not sure if you are using unhealthy ways to cope, answer the following questions:

- How do you feel before sex?
- How do you feel after sex?
- Why are you choosing to have sex?
- Do you enjoy yourself when you are having sex?
- Would you change anything about your sexual encounters?

Reflect on your reasons for wanting sex, whao you enjoy about it and what you hope to get out of it. It is meant to be fun and enjoyable for both people involved. You can use sex as a positive way to move forward in your healing.

You can take control by thinking about what your sexual boundaries are:

UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS WILL I BE SEXUAL?

<< E.G. NOT WHILE DRUNK

WHAT ARE THE BOUNDARIES I WANT TO SET?

<< E.G. I WILL SAY NO TO SEX I DON'T WANT

ARE THERE ANY COMMITMENTS I CAN MAKE TO MYSELF THAT WILL HELP ME TO TAKE CARE OF MYSELF IN A SEXUAL SITUATION?

<< E.G. IF I AM NOT PRESENT I WILL STOP, EVEN IN THE MIDDLE, TO MAKE SURE I FEEL SAFE

Write down what things are safe, possibly safe or unsafe for you below

Safe	Possibly safe	Unsafe (anxiety, flashbacks)
Holding hands	Sexy clothes	A massage

Sex and dissociation

Dissociating during sex is common for survivors, this means they cease to be emotionally and physically present. If this happens to you, the goal as part of your sexual healing is to increase your capacity for discomfort and pleasure during sex without dissociating. Focusing on your feelings during sex and being physically present is important to help figure out what you do and do not like sexually. Try to take things very slowly, take small steps and allow yourself to fully feel your emotions.

Sex and survivors of childhood sexual abuse

Often survivors of childhood sexual abuse find that sex is a difficult area to heal as sex can act as a trigger, bringing back memories of the abuse and feelings of shame. Others find that they can have a lot of sex but that it isn't attached to any emotions. Similar to how sex was used to hurt them when they were young, they use sex to hurt themselves, through unhealthy sex (such as unsafe sex or by being sexual with people whom they don't trust).

Sexual arousal and sexual assault

Sometimes survivors experience sexual sensations connected to the abuse, which can feel shameful and confusing. The abuse experiences can enter sexual fantasies and acts. This is natural as is it common for the body to respond to stimulation even if the mind says something different.

Aphrodite Matsakis writes about sexual arousal or orgasm in rape:

"Before you chastise yourself for one more minute, remember that your sexual organs do not have a brain. They cannot distinguish between a mauling rapist and the gentle touch of a lover. They simply react to stimulation the way they were physically designed to respond. If you climaxed or had some other sexual response to the rape, this does not mean that you enjoyed it."

Effects on Sexuality

Having a rape or abuse fantasy as a survivor can be confusing; you might feel disgusted with yourself for being turned on by imagining rape. It may feel that in enjoying fantasising about rape it invalidates the trauma you went through. However, it in no way makes what happened to you less valid and you should not judge yourself for it. But you may wish to explore why something feels comfortable or uncomfortable.

Rape fantasies can be a powerful way of working through memories of your abuse. You may recreate the assault or aspects of the abuse in an attempt to take control over the past, or use the fantasy to get closure on what happened to you. You may feel empowered by taking a memory of something that was done against your will and using it in a sexual fantasy. However, if you feel that your fantasies are negatively impacting you it is important to talk to a professional about it, such as a sex therapist or trauma counsellor.

Exercise

Don't analyse the content of your fantasies – instead focus on whether they impact on you negatively or positively.

Do you dissociate when you have a fantasy?

Do you have more than one fantasy?

Is the fantasy the only way you can get turned on?

Don't use fantasies to avoid being present with yourself or with your partner. Fantasies can be a way to be present with your partner and can enhance your sex life. If your fantasy feels intrusive and uncontrollable try approaching it as a trigger and break it down the way you would any other kind of trigger.

Adapted from Stacey Haines, The Good Sex Guide

Relaxation and Self-Care

Stress, anxiety and excessive worry are common problems for survivors and these can make it harder to cope with feelings and memories from the past. During these difficult times it is important to eat, sleep, rest, take exercise and have time for relaxation. It can be difficult to relax your mind and body; with practice it can get easier and you need to work out what works best for you.

On the next page are some suggestions for relaxation and self-care. We also have an online resources section on our website. This includes suggestions for relaxation and self-care, and an audio aid to relaxation created by one of our support workers which you can listen to at www.ercc.scot/calm. You can also download a self-help guide on stress at www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/stress.asp or buy the Positive Rewards CD or download free audio courses which promote positive mental health at www.positiverewards.com.

If you are experiencing anxiety, intrusive thoughts or catastrophic thinking (thinking of the worst case scenario) you can also consider looking into Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT or tapping) which is based on the principle that distressing thoughts and emotions are coupled with a 'charge' in the body. The therapist talks you through the process of tapping on acupressure points to gently release the charge, so the thoughts and emotions can be released. It can help reduce anxiety, fear and tension caused by distressing experiences.

Mindfulness is about focusing on the here and now. Its techniques have been proven to help reduce stress and anxiety and help instill a sense of calm. For some survivors it helps with panic attacks and flashbacks. There are lots of websites about mindfulness where you can download meditation exercises, such as www.mindfulnessassociation.org and www.self-compassion.org or see our recommended reading section at the end for further reading.

"There are two mistakes one can make along the road to truth - not going all the way, and not starting. No one saves us but ourselves. No one can and no one may. We ourselves must walk the path." - Buddha

Here are some tips for relaxation and self-care:

Deep breathing exercises

Meditation is good for stress and anxiety relief, it can be hard at first but with practice it can get easier

Soothing and pleasurable activities – listen to your favourite music, sing, dance or spend time with animals

Have a massage if you're comfortable being touched, if not massage parts of your own body

Take a bubble bath or make your favourite meal

Be creative – make music or bake

Going for a walk is a great way to let go of stress, gathering your thoughts, getting some exercise and fresh air

Go to bed early or take a nap if you're feeling exhausted to help rejuvenate yourself

Release bottled up emotions by writing a letter to yourself or someone else (but don't send it – just let it out) – let your thoughts flow freely as bottled up emotions are harmful

A warm cup of tea can be soothing

Make art – draw, paint or colour. There's something healing about getting what you're holding onto a page. Even if you don't think you're good at art, it doesn't matter

Focus on what you can control

Read a book. If there's something you want to change about yourself read a self-help book. If you want a break from reality, read a fun book that takes your interest to take your mind off things

Spend time with nature

Nourishing and Depleting Activities

Depleting activities are things that drain our energy and lower our mood, such as drinking too much alcohol, staying up late or being on the internet too long. Nourishing activities give us pleasure, boost our energy and improve our mood, such as talking to a friend, taking a bath, going on a walk, listening or making music. These activities also give us a sense of accomplishment because we are getting things done or perhaps finishing a task we have been avoiding e.g. housework or replying to an email.

Reflect over the activities you do in your day and place them in the columns below – be specific and detailed about each. When you have finished, list the steps you are going to take to reduce the number of depleting activities in your life. If you are not able to avoid some of these think about how you can change the way you do them, such as getting the activity done first thing in the day or straight away; break it into manageable chunks; mix it in with enjoyable activities; or think about any beneficial results to make it more meaningful.

Engaging in activities which are meaningful or learning new skills help to build a sense of self and aid recovery. Try to increase the nourishing activities into your day. Start by adding in one or two and then gradually add more. Forgive yourself for using any coping methods that you feel unhappy with – everything has served a purpose at some point in your life because it has been needed.

Nourishing	Depleting
Cuddling a pet	Self-harm

Professional Help

Some survivors will not need professional support and some will. You may benefit from professional support such as trauma counselling or Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, which is a therapy which can help with traumatic feelings, anxiety, anger and PTSD. During a session, you will be asked to move your head from side to side while thinking of your traumatic events which will help to process your difficult memories.

Somatic Experiencing is a form of therapy which aims to release the nervous system's 'stuck' response to trauma. After a traumatic experience, the body's nervous system can continue to react as though the trauma is ongoing, which reduces our ability to cope in the present. Releasing this increases our resilience and capacity to respond to life's events. Body sensations (somatic experiences) hold the key to overcoming the effects of trauma. The therapy is done in face-to-face sessions, gently bringing awareness to body sensations whilst you talk to the therapist, so that your body and your nervous system can recover.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) can be helpful for those experiencing anxiety, intrusive thoughts or PTSD. It is a talking therapy that can help you manage your problems by changing the way you think and behave. It cannot remove your problems, but can help you manage them in a more positive way. You can also undertake mindfulness based CBT, which uses traditional CBT methods, mindfulness techniques and meditation.

Psychotherapy is a long-term therapeutic relationship that provides a space to explore and make sense of difficulties in an individual's life that may relate to the past.

There are a list of organisations which offer counselling, EMDR, Somatic Experiencing and CBT on the next page. They are often fee paying but some are on a donation basis. You can be referred to CBT on the NHS through your GP. If you are overwhelmed by worries and have become a risk to yourself or others, seek professional support immediately.

Useful Contacts

Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre
17 Claremont Crescent, Edinburgh EH7 4HX
Support service: 0131 556 9437 – email support: support@ercc.scot – www.ercc.scot

STAR Project for young people aged 12 – 18
Text: 07583 15 80 58 – star@ercc.scot

East Lothian Sexual Abuse Service (ELSAS)
07800 604 164 – elsas@ercc.scot

Midlothian Sexual Abuse Service (MSAS)
07860 774 503 – msas@ercc.scot

Edinburgh Women's Aid
0131 315 8110 – info@edinwomensaid.co.uk

Victim Support
0131 668 2556 – victimsupport.edinburgh@victimsupportsco.org.uk

Crisis Support

Breathing Space 0800 83 85 87 (6pm–2am Monday–Thursday, Friday–Monday 6pm–6am)

Edinburgh Crisis Centre freephone 0808 801 0414 (24 hours), Text 07974429075, crisis@edinburghcrisiscentre.org.uk

Rape Crisis Scotland Helpline freephone 08088 01 0 302 (6pm – midnight everyday)

Samaritans 116 123 (24 hours) – jo@samaritans.org – www.samaritans.org

Saneline 0300 304 7000 everyday 4.30pm – 10.30pm

Trauma Counselling

To find a counsellor please visit the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy website www.bacp.co.uk or the Counselling and Psychotherapy in Scotland website www.cosca.org.uk

You can view our list of free or by donation counselling services at: www.ercc.scot/information/useful-contacts

CrossReach Counselling: Lothians
0131 552 8901 – ccl@crossreach.org.uk

Health in Mind Counselling
Counselling, mental health, well being and trauma services covering Edinburgh and the Lothians.
0131 225 8508 – www.health-in-mind.org.uk – contactus@health-in-mind.org.uk

Rivers Centre
0131 451 7400 – rivers.centre@nhslothian.scot.nhs.uk

Trauma Counselling Line Scotland
Confidential telephone counselling service for survivors of childhood sexual abuse
0808 802 0406

Wellspring
13 Smith's Place, Edinburgh EH6 8NT
0131 553 6660 – mail@wellspring-scotland.co.uk – www.wellspring-scotland.co.uk

Alcohol Counselling

Edinburgh and Lothian Council on Alcohol 0131 337 8188

Somatic Experiencing

Trauma Recovery Clinic Edinburgh
Ann Cheshire 07890 212076 – anne@traumarecoveryclinic.com www.traumarecoveryclinic.com

Pain Recovery Clinic
Joolz Flynn 0789 193 8153 – joolz@painrecoveryclinic.com – www.painrecoveryclinic.com

Stress and Trauma Help
Roushan Martens (Somatic Experiencing and Emotional Freedom Technique),
07816 216 432, roushan@stressandtraumahelp.com – www.stressandtraumahelp.com

www.traumahealing.org

Sex Therapy

Relationship Scotland 0345 119 2020

Relaxation

www.mindfulnessassociation.org
www.positiverewards.com
www.ercc.scot/calm

Legal Information and Advice

Scottish Women's Rights Centre
Free and confidential legal advice, advocacy support and legal representation.
08088 010 789 – www.scottishwomensrightscentre.org.uk

LGBTI

For LGBTI services, counselling, and information and support for trans and non-binary people please see LGBT Health and Wellbeing website directory: www.lgbthealth.org.uk/services-support

Recommended reading

Below is a selection of recommended books for survivors and their supporters. They should be available to order online and from bookshops. You can view our full list on our website: ercc.scot/information/recommended-reading

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