



Self help booklet

Help after rape and sexual assault

Call us now on 0117 342 6999

Or email: TheBridge@UHBW.nhs.uk

www.thebridgecanhelp.org.uk



theBridge
here, no matter what

Contents

How to use this guide	5
If you have experienced rape or sexual assault recently	6
Rape and sexual assault	8
Our brain	10
Responses to rape and sexual assault	11
Fight, flight and freeze	12
How you may be feeling	
<hr/>	
Memory	13
Reactions to experiencing rape or sexual assault	14
Thoughts	16
Anxiety and panic	20
Flashbacks	22
Sleep	23
Nightmares	25
Self-harm and suicidal thoughts	26
Relationships and intimacy issues	28
Ways to help	
<hr/>	
Grounding	30
Breathing techniques	32
Self care	33
Mindfulness colouring	34
Exercise	35
Telling someone	36
A page for someone supporting you	37
Useful information	
<hr/>	
Closing information	38
Useful organisations and resources	39
Common worries or frequently asked questions	43
Notes	46

The Bridge – Who are we?



You may have been to The Bridge for a forensic medical examination with or without the police. Perhaps you have come in to meet with a Crisis Worker or spoken to us over the phone to discuss the options of support available to you. Or you may have come across this guide via our website.

The Bridge is a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC). We offer medical care, emotional and psychological support, and practical help to anyone who has been raped or sexually assaulted at any time in their lives.

Depending on what support you would like, we can make referrals for counselling, support from an Independent Sexual Violence

Advisor and arrange a sexual health screening. We can also write to people such as your GP, workplace, university, school or anyone else you would like to be aware, so that they can offer you ongoing support.

Call us on **0117 342 6999**. We will listen to you even if you find it very difficult to know what to say or how to say it. We will believe you. We will explain the help that is available to you and support you to decide what you want to do next.

Self help booklet

How to use this guide



You may be confused about what has happened, overwhelmed, emotional or numb. You may feel alone, angry, ashamed or frightened – these and many other thoughts and feelings are all normal responses to being sexually assaulted or raped.

This guide aims to support you to understand the psychological, emotional and physical reactions that someone might have in response to experiencing rape or sexual assault. It may help you to understand your own personal responses and reactions and aims to give you ideas to try and help manage these. This guide uses the term 'sexual assault' to refer to both acts of sexual assault and rape.

This guide may not cover every response or symptom that is experienced and so it may be helpful as you are working through the guide to acknowledge the feelings and thoughts that you are personally experiencing by noting them down. You can do this in a notepad or in this guide itself – it is yours to write in and to do what you find useful with it. It might be helpful to keep a pen or pencil with this guide. Think about a good time to read it that works for you.

After reading, make sure you look after yourself and do something nice like going for a walk, listening to music or talking to a friend – whatever you enjoy doing!

If you have experienced rape or sexual assault recently

If you have been recently sexually assaulted and want to report to the police you can do this by calling **101** or **999** if you need urgent help.

If you don't want to report to the police or are not sure at this stage, you can call The Bridge to talk to a Crisis Worker about your options.

You can call us anonymously too if you would like to ask someone about your options without identifying yourself. You will never be forced to do anything you don't want to do...

every decision is always your choice.

Female

If you were assaulted 7 days ago or less, you may be able to have a forensic medical examination at The Bridge depending on the type of assault and how many days have passed since. **If you come to The Bridge for a forensic medical examination we can:**

- Listen to what has happened to you and explain how we can help
- We can arrange for a Nurse or Doctor to examine you, to check you are ok and take samples that might be helpful as forensic evidence
- We will store forensic samples for 26 months or until your 25th birthday. If you decide to report to the police, the samples can be used as evidence in their investigation
- You can have an examination even if you have already washed
- We can give you emergency contraception if needed
- We will make sure that your sexual health is looked after, including providing you with medication, if necessary
- We will offer you practical and emotional support, and arrange ongoing support including counselling.

Male

If you were assaulted 3 days ago (72 hours) or less, you may be able to have a forensic medical examination at The Bridge depending on the type of assault and how many days have passed since. **If you come to The Bridge for a forensic medical examination we can:**


- Listen to what has happened to you and explain how we can help
- We can arrange for a Nurse or Doctor to examine you, to check you are ok and take samples that might be helpful as forensic evidence
- We will store forensic samples for 26 months or until your 25th birthday. If you decide to report to the police, the samples can be used as evidence in their investigation
- You can have an examination even if you have already washed
- We will make sure that your sexual health is looked after, including providing you with medication, if necessary
- We will offer you practical and emotional support, and arrange ongoing support including counselling.

LGBTQ+

We support everyone at The Bridge including people who are LGBTQ+ and we understand individual journeys with gender identity and sexual orientation can be different and not always clear-cut. Forensic care options vary across genders because of differences in the way male and female sex organs work. Call The Bridge to understand if you have a 3 day window for forensic services or a 7 day window.

If you don't think you want a forensic medical examination but were assaulted recently, please give us a call so we can give you information on where to access medical support such as emergency contraception or other medication for your sexual health. We can then discuss arranging ongoing support if this is something you would like.

Rape and sexual assault



What is rape and sexual assault?

Sexual Assault is when a person intentionally touches another person, the touching is sexual and the person being touched did not consent to the touching.

Assault by penetration is someone intentionally penetrating someone's vagina or anus with another part of their body other than their penis, or with an object without their consent.

Rape is defined by someone intentionally penetrating someone's vagina, anus or mouth with their penis, without the other person's consent.

There are other crimes that are classified as sexual offences that do not involve physical contact. This includes exposure to sexual images and grooming.

There are also crimes that are classified as sexual offences that are linked to the relationships between people, for example a family member or someone who is in a position of trust with you.

What is consent?

Consent is when both people agree by their own choice to engage in the activity involved. The person must have the freedom to do this and therefore not feel under pressure or fear to make their choice.

They must also have the ability to make this choice. Sometimes due to other factors, a person's capacity to consent can be affected. This can include a person's mental health or if they have a learning disability. If someone is under the influence of drugs or had too much alcohol to be able to make a decision, then they do not have the mental capacity to consent. If someone is asleep or unconscious, they are unable to consent. You can withdraw consent at any time no matter what the situation.



The age of consent in England and Wales is 16 for men and women. This is the same regardless of a person's gender identification or sexual orientation and whether the sexual activity is between people of different or the same gender.

When a person is over the age of 18 and in a position of trust, it is against the law for them to engage in sexual activity with a person under the age of 18.

This includes teachers, social workers, doctors and care workers. You can find out more information by visiting <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk>



Our brain

It is really useful to know a little bit about how the brain works so that you can understand what happens to the brain and body during a sexual assault or sexual abuse. This will help you to process what happened and why you might have reacted in a certain way.

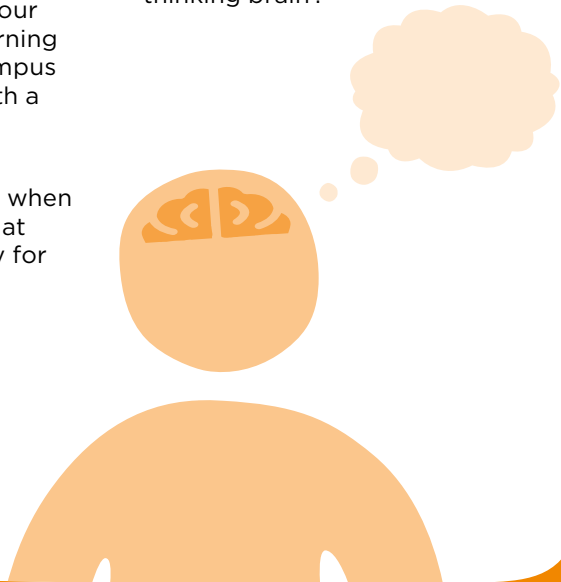
Our brains are extremely complex and have many different parts that have different functions. **Below are the ones we will talk about:**

Pre-frontal cortex: this is a part of our brain that helps us organise our thoughts, think about our behaviour, make decisions, think rationally and is therefore part of our 'thinking brain'.

Hippocampus: this part of our brain plays a big role in learning and memory. The hippocampus helps to 'tag' a memory with a place, time and context.

When we think about the memory we can remember when it happened, where and what happened. It is like a library for your memories.

Amygdala: this is our brain's alarm system that detects possible danger. It is part of our 'emotional brain' and fear system. If it detects what it perceives as a big enough fear, it will take over from our 'thinking brain'.



Responses to rape and sexual assault

Your brain and body is designed to do anything it can to survive. When it senses danger, such as that experienced during rape or sexual assault, its natural reaction takes over. You would have had no conscious choice over the way you reacted during the assault, it is in-built as a survival instinct our ancestors needed a long time ago. It chooses a reaction that is most likely to keep you alive. It is important to understand this in order for you to process some of the feelings you may be experiencing which are mentioned in this guide.

When there is a perceived danger (this can be real or a trigger that

might make you feel you are back once again in danger), the part of our brain called the amygdala jumps into action. Remember the amygdala is our brain's alarm system that detects possible danger. It sends signals to another part of our brain called the hypothalamus which in turn stimulates our autonomic nervous system. This then makes a decision on how we will react dependent on the threat. This decision is made within seconds, if not less, and you will have no conscious control over it.

There are **3 main ways** that we might react towards this; **Fight**, **Flight** and **Freeze** and they are explained on **page 12**.

Fight, Flight and Freeze

Fight

Flight

Freeze

Fight

The Fight response is an active survival response where a person's brain has assessed that it thinks (correctly or not) you have the ability to overpower the danger facing you. Therefore it releases hormones such as adrenaline and prepares your body to 'fight' by making changes to the body such as increasing your heart and breathing rate, rushing blood to big muscles in the body and heightening your senses.

Flight

This response is also an active survival response where the brain has assessed (correctly or not) that the danger facing you is too powerful to overcome and so the instinct is to try to outrun it. Similar changes happen to the body as with the fight response as the body prepares to run as fast as it can to escape the danger.

Freeze

The first two responses; Fight and Flight, are often not the reactions that happen during rape or sexual assault as these might lead to further harm or danger. Therefore, what is commonly experienced is the survival response Freeze. The brain has assessed that the danger is so great that you cannot fight it or outrun it. It concludes the safest thing to do is to go into the protective state of Freeze. By freezing you are temporarily immobilised mentally and physically to protect you from the danger and to ensure your best chances of survival. Which is what you did, you survived!

It is important to note there are also some other responses that are similar to freeze and these are flop and friend. Flop is very similar to freeze where the muscles in the body go 'soft' and this works in a similar way to protect us from physical pain. Friend or be-friend is when you may try to appease or pacify the other person, negotiate or plead with them. You may also try to be-friend a passer-by or someone in the same building by calling out for help.

You can sometimes feel angry, annoyed or disappointed with yourself and the way you reacted during an assault but hopefully by learning about the above responses, you can understand them. Your brain helped you to survive and it did it without your conscious control.



Memory

On **page 10** we touched on the part of the brain called the hippocampus that helps us to store memories properly. When something traumatic happens to us, the hippocampus is often impacted. Our fear system, including the amygdala, impairs the hippocampus from 'tagging' and storing the 'when', 'what', 'who' of the event. This means that memories from the traumatic event often aren't stored properly.

You might find that you have parts of your memory from the assault/abuse missing. For example you might remember events leading up to it and after but no memory of what happened during the assault. You may also find that you can remember some things but they seem to be out of logical

order. These are all very normal things to happen after a traumatic event. The lack of clarity about what happened and when may be greater if you were drinking alcohol or taking drugs before you were assaulted. Try not to punish yourself for not remembering what happened, you had no control over whether this part of your brain was working.

Sometimes following a traumatic event, people experience flashbacks. These are unprocessed memories and because these were not properly tagged by the hippocampus with a 'where', 'when' and 'what' stamp, they often feel as though they are happening here and now rather than there and then. We will talk about this more on **page 22**.



Reactions to experiencing rape or sexual assault

Everyone reacts differently following a traumatic event and there is no right or wrong way to do so. It is important to remember that it is normal to experience a number of different reactions including emotional, physical and behavioural changes and also that it is likely to have an impact on your thoughts.

On the opposite page are some examples of some of the reactions you might have had or might be experiencing. Remember this list is not exhaustive! Think about which ones you might have experienced and note down any others that aren't on the list in the empty boxes.

Feelings and emotions

Sadness

Anger

Loss of confidence

Shame

Guilt

Apathy

Shock

Loneliness

Fear

Embarrassment

Physical sensations in your body

Headaches

Shaking

Nausea /
Stomach issues

Flashbacks

Sleep
problems

Appetite
changes

Tight
chest

Tiredness

Memory
loss

Numbness

Changes in your behaviour

Being
impulsive

Change in
sexual activity

Twitching

Lack of
concentration

Apathy

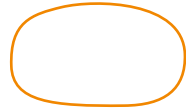
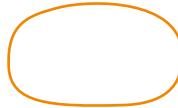
Isolating

Self-harming

Using alcohol
or drugs

Worrying

Aggression



Thoughts

You might find that your mind is constantly filled with thoughts in relation to the assault or abuse you experienced. You may experience intrusive thoughts where they pop into your head, sometimes seemingly out of nowhere and you can find yourself going round in circles in your head. This can be emotionally and physically exhausting.



This is a normal response to what you have experienced and you are not alone. The following are some of the thoughts you might have had or might be experiencing. Remember this list isn't exhaustive and so use the space after to note down any other feelings you might have.



Shame

Shame is the self-belief that there is something deeply wrong with you, you are flawed. Maybe you can first remember feeling shame in childhood and thinking 'This is all my fault there must be something wrong with me'. Shame in sexual assault/abuse can result from the messages you tell yourself "I must have wanted this as I didn't scream for help". "I am dirty and my body didn't protect me." Remember your survival brain will have made the decision it deemed necessary at the time to keep you safe. In order to do this, other areas of your brain can become restricted, for example, your language centre is just one of these. Of course taking the responsibility for the actions and behaviours of another can give us a sense of control.

Ways to manage shame:

- To move past shame you need to **let this flawed belief go**. You cannot be responsible for the actions and behaviour of your attacker the responsibility lies solely with them. The shame belongs to them, give it back.
- Ask yourself what would you say to someone going through a similar experience to you who was blaming themselves and feeling ashamed? Now **treat yourself with the same compassion and nurturing**.
- It will be helpful to **talk to someone trusted** about your feelings of shame. Talking to an experienced counsellor about this will help you to heal and to break free from feelings of shame.

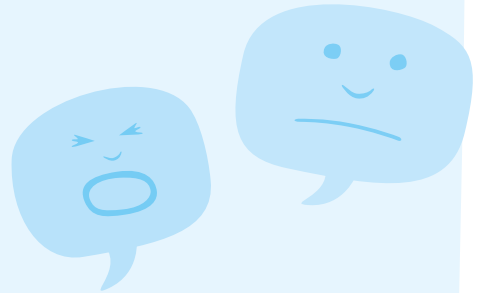
Have you had any other thoughts that you would like to write down?

Anger

It is completely normal to feel angry after rape or sexual assault. You might feel angry at yourself, the perpetrator and / or the world. You might feel betrayed by someone's trust or feel that someone could have done something differently to keep you safe. You might wonder why it was you that experienced this. Anger can be helpful and can motivate us. However if it doesn't improve over time or becomes uncontrollable it is important to get support with this. **Exercise can help to release anger and aggression**, while talking about the feelings to someone who can hear and accept them can help you to begin to feel better. If you do not feel ready to speak to someone, you might find that **writing a journal helps you start to understand your thoughts** and behaviour and begin to feel more in control.

Guilt and self-blame

It is very common for people to blame their own actions or behaviour when they experience rape or sexual assault. You might think "I shouldn't have drunk that much" or "It's my fault, I didn't make it clear". You may also wonder things like "Why didn't I fight back?" It is important to **remember that you are not to blame**, you did not want this to happen. The responsibility lies solely with the perpetrator.



Have you had any other thoughts that you would like to write down?

Loneliness and isolation

You may find yourself feeling empty and alone. You may have very few people around you for support or you may have lots of people around you trying to help. You may not have told family or friends about the incident or if you have they may not have reacted in a way that was helpful or supportive. Or you may have decided not to tell certain people or anyone at all about what has happened. You may feel completely alone and unable to trust that anyone else can understand or help. It may be true that no-one else can understand your unique experience but talking can help you to feel better.

Tips to manage loneliness:

- **Consider talking to someone you trust** about what is going on for you. By opening up it might help to get some of the thoughts out of your head.
- **Take it slowly:** think about how you might be able to build up to spending more time with others or meeting new people again.
- **Think about support groups** for people who have experienced a sexual assault – you may find it helpful to meet people who may be experiencing similar reactions to you. There is also some good online support too. **See pages 39 – 42** for more information.
- **Consider volunteering** to help others. You could help an elderly neighbour out, give blood, donate to a foodbank or volunteer at a charity. By helping other people it reminds you that you have strengths and coping skills and helps you to reconnect with people in the world and feel a sense of community and connection.

Have you had any other thoughts that you would like to write down?

Anxiety

Anxiety is a feeling of worry or fear. Most people experience anxiety from time-to-time as it is a normal response to feeling under threat or stress. However for some people anxiety can be something that is a regular occurrence and can feel like it is taking over their lives. Anxiety can be short lived or can continue for hours or days. **Below are some of the symptoms that might be experienced as a result of anxiety:**

- Heart racing - Sweating - Light headed - Fast breathing - Tight chest - Numbness - Tingling - Churning feeling in stomach - Nausea - Pain - Headache - Feeling of dread - Inability to relax

After a sexual assault it is normal to feel anxious. You might view the world differently and worry you can't trust anybody. You might be anxious you are going to be assaulted again or it might make you avoid going out or interacting with people.

All the symptoms above can be linked to our natural response to a perceived threat that we discussed earlier on **page 12** when we talked about the **Fight, Flight and Freeze** responses. However there are times when anxiety is caused when there is a reminder of a past experience, when we are triggered by something that makes our brain think we are under threat, when actually we are safe and there is no threat.

Ways to help manage anxiety:

It is important to remember that anxiety will not cause you harm and that there are ways you can help ease the symptoms.

- Grounding techniques (discussed more on **page 30**).
- Talk to someone you trust about your worries.
- Mindfulness and Relaxation.
- Distraction.
- Write down your anxieties or keep a diary.

Have you had any other thoughts that you would like to write down?

Panic

Panic is experienced as an intense feeling that something bad is going to happen or feeling extreme stress. It is very frightening and can feel as though there is impending doom and can even feel as though you are going to die. You may feel completely out of control and that you are going mad. You may feel completely overwhelmed and as though you need to escape and your breathing is likely to be affected. The symptoms of a panic attack are similar to those of anxiety however they are felt much more intensely. They are often unexpected and appear for no apparent reason. Although panic attacks are scary it is important to remember that you are not in danger during a panic attack and it is your body's response to a perceived threat.

Remember on page 12 when we talked about **Fight, Flight and Freeze**? This is linked to each of these responses. We talked about the body preparing for these things for example by releasing adrenaline when it is preparing to fight or flee... well this is what the body is doing during a panic attack. It thinks there is a real danger.

Ways to help manage panic attacks:

- Focus on your breathing - see **page 32** for techniques.
- Try some grounding techniques - see **page 30**.
- Practice mindfulness regularly.

Have you had any other thoughts that you would like to write down?

Flashbacks

Flashbacks are when you experience a very vivid memory of a painful or frightening experience. They are memories that your brain is replaying in order to try and process what happened. They often come out of nowhere and can feel very real, like the incident is happening again which can feel really frightening. Flashbacks can be triggered by a number of things such as a sound, smell, place or seeing something that reminds of you of the assault e.g, a clip on TV or a specific facial feature – it can be absolutely anything and therefore they often occur unexpectedly and all of a sudden. Flashbacks can last from anywhere between a few seconds and even days.

You might want to consider getting help and support from a professional in regards to your flashbacks and the trauma you experienced. The best way to prevent flashbacks is to seek treatment. You can contact your doctor/GP to discuss what support is available. You could also see if

you can access Psychological Therapies through the NHS, you can often self-refer for support.

You can find out about these on the NHS Choices website:

www.nhs.uk

Below are some coping strategies that can help in the short-term:

- **Focus on your breathing:** when you are scared and experiencing a flashback you often forget to breathe. Try to focus on your breathing, taking a deep breath in for four seconds and then breathing out for four seconds.
- **Remind yourself that you are safe now:** this can be difficult during a flashback so perhaps you can keep an object on you at all times that reminds you of the present. When you touch it or squeeze it you can tell yourself, 'I am here with this object now and I am safe'.
- **Try some grounding techniques:** we discuss this further on **page 30** which help to bring you back to the here and now.

Sleep

When we are asleep, a lot of very important things happen to our brain and body. We process new information and memories and it is really important to allow our brain and bodies this time to heal.

- Following a sexual assault or sexual abuse, your sleep might be impacted.

- You might find you are experiencing: Inability to sleep - insomnia, being scared to fall to sleep, a fear of the dark, waking up during the night, nightmares.
- As a result of these you may feel tired a lot of the time, irritable, anxious or worried about going to bed at night.

Below are some things you can try to help improve your sleep:

Find things that help you to feel calm. Some people find a warm bath or shower relaxes them. Reading a book or listening to calming music can help.

Get yourself into a good routine before bed so your mind and body recognises you are preparing to go to sleep.

Avoid using your phone or tablet/laptop or watching TV for about an hour before bed. The blue light they emit disrupts our bodies' natural way of feeling sleepy.

Make sure your bedroom feels safe, quiet, cool and comfortable. It often helps to sleep in the dark but if it helps you feel more safe, you can try sleeping with a nightlight.

Take some time to do some meditation. Try practicing breathing exercises.

Try to get some exercise in the day even if this is just a walk to the shop. Do this when it's not too late in the day.

Go to bed when you are tired. Try to go to bed at a similar time every night if you can but do not lay in bed for long periods awake. Get back up and do something relaxing until you feel tired again.

Practising mindfulness regularly throughout the day can help you to sleep.

Avoid alcohol, caffeine and smoking later at night as they will keep you awake.

Ways to help improve your sleep





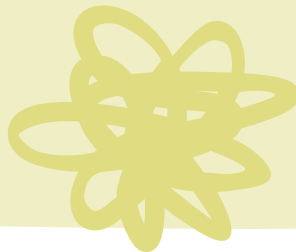
Nightmares

Lots of people experience nightmares when they sleep and they can become more common after a sexual assault. This is a natural response to sexual violence. Nightmares can be very scary and you may wake up feeling frightened, worried or sad. They can also feel as though the same event has just happened again. Nightmares can happen in isolation or can be recurring.

The fear of nightmares is often a factor in the developing of sleep difficulties as people are afraid or reluctant to go to sleep in case they experience a nightmare.

Managing nightmares

- When you wake up from a nightmare, remind yourself that the nightmare was not real. It may have had similarities to the assault or abuse you suffered but it is not happening now.
- Try some grounding techniques that we discuss in this guide on **page 30**.
- Practice breathing and relaxation techniques and some meditation which may help you to relax and fall back to sleep.
- Do something comforting – hold a favourite teddy or hot water bottle, drink a hot drink (avoiding any caffeine) or visualise your favourite calm place.
- Consider keeping a notepad and a pen near your bed. You could write your nightmare down and tell yourself you can come back to think about it the next day if you feel you need to or next time you see a support worker or counsellor. This may help to stop you letting the nightmare go round and round in your head and stop you from getting back to sleep.



Self-harm and suicidal thoughts

Self-harm is defined as any act which someone does to intentionally hurt or harm themselves. This may involve hurting themselves by cutting, burning their skin, scratching or picking their skin or hitting themselves. They may cause harm to themselves by eating too much or too little or drinking alcohol or taking drugs.

Why do people self-harm?

Following a sexual assault, some people may start to self-harm or if they already self-harm it might get worse. Self-harm (also known as self-injury) is used for a number of reasons. It may be used to cope with strong feelings that may feel overwhelming and unmanageable. It may be used to punish oneself, to turn emotional pain into physical pain or to stop feeling numb and disconnected.

Ways to help:

In the longer term you may need support from a therapist or specialist professional to help you manage your self-harm. You can talk to your GP confidentially about accessing support with this.

When you have that overwhelming urge to harm yourself it can be difficult to think of any other way out of those thoughts other than to act upon them. However there are some ways that you might find helpful in the short term.

Distractions can be helpful, see below for some ideas:

If you do self-harm, make sure that you seek appropriate medical attention if you need it for your injuries. Please visit www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/behaviours/self-harm/getting-help

Scream into a pillow or squeeze a stress ball

Jump up and down or do a workout

Meditate or do some breathing exercises

Make lots of noise or listen to music

Do something creative or write in a journal

Visit a self-help website for distraction

Suicidal thoughts

It can be common for people to experience thoughts about not wanting to be alive anymore following a sexual assault. You may feel overwhelmed and it may feel as though you cannot imagine being free of the pain you are experiencing.

You may feel as though you cannot cope with all of your thoughts and feelings and that suicide is a way of escaping or ending the pain and distress. It is important to talk to somebody about how you are feeling so that you can get help and support. You may find it helpful to talk to someone you trust like a family member or friend. Your GP will be able to support you and there are also mental health crisis teams or helplines such as the Samaritans. There are a list of the support numbers you can call at the end of this guide on **pages 39 - 42**.

If you feel unable to talk to someone then you could try writing down how you are feeling or write a poem or a song. You could draw or paint your thoughts and feelings or find a way that suits you to express them.

Try to avoid constantly thinking about suicide as this will intensify your thoughts about it. Avoid coping mechanisms such as drugs and alcohol as these are not healthy and can lower your inhibitions and make you act on impulse.

Try to practice techniques such as grounding, mindfulness and meditation as discussed on **pages 30 - 35**. Also try to exercise and do activities that you enjoy and can help distract you. These will help you in the moments you are having these thoughts but also in the long term.

Relationships and intimacy issues

After experiencing a sexual assault it is normal for your relationships with other people in your life to be affected. Your view of the world may have changed and you may now find it difficult to trust people. This can affect relationships with parents, friends or family and you may find yourself feeling isolated from others. Your self-esteem and confidence may have been affected and this can impact your ability to form and build-on healthy relationships.

You may not have told family or friends about the incident or, if you have, they may not have reacted in a way that was helpful or supportive. They may not know what to say or how to help you and this can add to your feelings of isolation.

Intimate relationships

As mentioned, your trust in others, particularly those who you may have been intimate with, may have been broken. This can lead to a number of reactions which may result in changes in your desire and ability to be intimate with someone. **These reactions can include:**

- Changes to how you feel about your body or self-image.
- Experiencing flashbacks of the assault during sex.
- Intrusive thoughts that are disturbing.
- Fear of sex and/or pain.
- Feeling emotionally distant during sex.
- Feeling out of control.

This may lead to people avoiding intimacy or not enjoying it as they used to. Some people may engage in more sexual activity than before. There is no right or wrong way to react but it is important to keep yourself emotionally and physically safe.

Coping with relationship and intimacy issues:

Take your time to become used to the idea of being intimate again. Do not rush into anything that you don't feel comfortable with and make sure you are ready.

- Remind yourself that what happened to you was not sex or part of a healthy relationship, it was an assault. Moving forward remind yourself that you are choosing to be intimate with your partner, it is a free choice.
- Talk to your partner about your thoughts and feelings. Talk through it and explain that these thoughts are a normal reaction to what you experienced.
- You may find it helpful to build up to sex with your partner. Enjoy other things such as going out for dinner, to watch a film, going for a walk, cooking or baking together. If you feel comfortable to, you can have physical contact through holding hands or cuddling when together.

- If things don't improve, it might be worth speaking to someone for support. You can visit your GP for advice as they may be able to refer you for support. A therapist may be able to help you and your partner work together around your intimacy and relationship.

Questions around sexuality and the way the body reacts to sexual assault

We do not always have control over our body's reactions, and during an assault this is no different. Your body may have become aroused or may have reacted in a way that you did not expect or want. This would have been an automatic response to physical stimulation and could not have been controlled. This does not mean you wanted to be assaulted or that you enjoyed it. It also does not say anything about your sexuality. Additionally, if you were assaulted by someone who does not identify as the same sexuality as you, it has no reflection upon your own sexuality.

Grounding



What is grounding?

Grounding helps us to reconnect to the 'here and now'. It helps us to focus on ourselves in the present moment, in our environment to remind us that right now we are not under threat. It can help us when we feel overwhelmed by distressing thoughts or memories and can help when experiencing anxiety or panic. It helps to break that cycle of negative thoughts that can sometimes feel impossible to break out of.

Tips for practising grounding

It can take a while to really figure out grounding and how effective it can be.

Here are some tips to try:

- **Keep trying:** if you don't get on with it the first time, don't give up!
- **Try different activities/ways of grounding:** everyone responds differently and so you might not get on with all grounding techniques. Explore different ones so that you can find what works for you.

- **Be open-minded:** it might feel during times of anxiety or panic that there is no way out of how you are feeling. You deserve to find a way to help ease these feelings and so give grounding a go. If you struggle to do it alone and you have someone supportive around you, ask them to join in. Some of the activities on the next page can easily be done with a friend.
- **Negative or intrusive thoughts:** These may pop back into your head. The aim is to divert away from these so it is best to acknowledge them and then refocus on the technique you are practising.
- **Don't worry about what other people might think:** there are a lot of grounding techniques that can be done without other people even knowing you are doing them! You can say things in your head or write them down instead of saying them out loud.

Grounding techniques

Stimulate your senses:

- **Sound:** listen to music, notice different sounds around you - can you hear birds chirping, a bus driving past, ticking clock.
- **Touch:** ping an elastic band or hair bobble on your wrist, hold your hands in water/under running tap, splash water on your face. Squeeze an object, touch objects around you that have different textures.
- **Sight:** what objects can you see in the room? What shape/size/colour are they? If outside, how many people can you spot wearing glasses? A hat? Are they tall/short?
- **Smell/Taste:** smell something strong like your favourite perfume. Light your favourite smelling candle. Make yourself a herbal tea and smell the aroma as you drink it - peppermint is perfect for this. Eat something strong tasting like a sour sweet.

Get thinking!

Get your thinking brain back online! **You can do these activities by yourself or with other people:**

- Can you go through the alphabet and name foods beginning with each letter? How about animals? Countries of the world? Girls names?
- Count to 100 in 3s. What about backwards in 6s? Can you say the alphabet backwards?
- C5, 4, 3, 2, 1: Name 5 things you can see, 4 things you can feel, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste.

Breathing techniques

Some people find breathing techniques extremely helpful and a useful tool to help them manage anxiety, panic and stress. When we start to feel anxious we often forget to breathe properly and then this can add to our physical symptoms and escalate our anxiety as we feel short of breath.

Below are some breathing techniques which can be used to help calm and refocus on the here and now. Guidance: Sometimes people may be triggered when they are too relaxed and so it is important to be aware of your own triggers if practising breathing.

- **Deep breathing:** Most of the time we take short, shallow breaths into our chest. However this can add to our anxiety. Try some deep breathing which involves taking deep breaths in through the nose filling your stomach first with air before your chest. Then breathe out through your mouth slowly. This can take some practice but you will get there! It might help by putting your hand on your stomach so you can feel it expand and then lower. You can also breathe in for 5 seconds and out for 5 seconds without pausing to replicate how waves move up and down the beach.

Sometimes you might feel lightheaded when doing this when you start deep breathing - try breathing more slowly or slightly less deeply.

- **Ocean Breathing:** This type of breathing helps to lengthen each breath cycle. You practice this technique whilst sitting up straight. Start by breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth. On your exhales, aim to slightly constrict the back of your throat so that when you breathe it sounds like the ocean. (**Tips:** the exhale breath should be similar to when you try to fog up glasses. It can also help to put your hands over your ears to help hear the 'ocean waves' sound when learning.) Once you feel comfortable exhaling, try the same technique on the inhale too. You can then close your mouth and continue to do this technique breathing in and out through the nose.



Self-care

Self-care is looking after your emotional, physical and mental wellbeing. It helps you to feel healthy and safe and to treat yourself with the kindness that you deserve.

Below are some ideas for self-care:

- Put on your favourite feel-good film or TV series.
- Do some creative things such as a painting, drawing or writing.
- Focus on fixing something in the house or garden.
- Wrap up in a blanket with a hot drink.
- Get some fresh air.
- Play your favourite video game.
- If you have a pet, spend some time with them.
- Run yourself a warm bath with bubbles or take a warm shower.
- Spend some time baking or cooking comfort food.
- Put some calming music on and lay down in a comfy spot.
- Put a soothing face mask on or paint your nails.
- Read a book.
- Spend some time with friends or family.
- Sort out your room – tidying and cleaning can really help wellbeing.
- If you play a musical instrument, practice for a while.



What are some of your favourite things to do to take care of yourself?



Mindfulness colouring

Colouring can have a calming effect on our mind and body. Studies have shown that colouring helps to lower the activity of the amygdala, our alarm/fear system and can lead to a kind of meditation state. **Try the one below:**



Exercise

Regular exercise has so many benefits, not just physically but also for your mental wellbeing. It helps to increase our energy and improve mood, and in turn this helps to reduce anxiety and stress. It can also help you focus and sleep better too.

Sometimes our lives can feel so busy we can wonder how we would fit another thing, like exercise, into our days. If you start out with small changes in your day it can feel less daunting and time consuming.

Can you start walking to work? Or maybe get off the bus a few stops early and walk the rest of the way, or park your car in a car park a little further away? You could take the stairs instead of the lift or go for a short walk on your lunch break—this is good for your body but also your mind to have a physical break away from work. Even some gentle stretching is good!

If you're at home you can find a short exercise routine on the internet, like yoga or pilates. If you're watching the TV, in the breaks you could do some sit-ups or star jumps? If you feel a bit bored, instead of scrolling through the TV, go out for a walk near your house or walk to a family or friend's house if they live within walking distance.

By adding these small changes into your day, it will help to improve your mental health and increase your motivation. It may also help to relieve some of the physical symptoms we discussed on **page 14**.



Telling someone

You may not have told anyone about what happened or you may have already done so but want to tell someone else. If you have told someone you know already, you may or may not have received a response that you were hoping for.

It is important to think about some of the following things when considering confiding in someone about your experience.

- What kind of response am I hoping for? What support would I like?
- How might I prepare that person for what I am going to tell them?
- How can I look after myself following disclosing this information?

Some people may find this disclosure difficult or upsetting to hear. They may not know how to react or support you and this can end up with you feeling let down, upset or isolated. Friends and family members may get things wrong when they try to reach out to you, but listen for their kindness, love and support, let them know that you have noticed and tell them what you need from them, especially if they are a partner.



Would you like to write down your thoughts?

A page for the person you trust, to help them help you

It can be very distressing and upsetting to partners, family members and friends to find out that someone that you love has experienced a sexual assault or abuse. You may feel overwhelmed and may be experiencing a number of different thoughts and feelings.

You may not know what is the right thing to say, or do, to help your loved one. The most important thing is for you to listen in a non-judgemental way. Let them know that you care, that you believe in them and that you do not blame them. Let them take their time to talk about their experience and explain in their own words. They may not want to disclose the full details and it is important to not try to force this.

It is very important for someone who has experienced a sexual assault to be able to make their own decisions. You may not always agree with those decisions but it is important for you to not take away their control. Sexual violence almost always brings feelings of

powerlessness and so part of the healing process for someone is beginning to feel that they are getting that control back.

It is important to look after yourself so that you have the resilience and emotional capacity to support your loved one. There are resources available to help you as a partner, family member or friend.

- **SARSAS** have a guide available if you are a partner, family member or friend supporting your loved one and can be found by visiting www.sarsas.org.uk/support-and-information/sarsas-self-help-guides
- **The Survivor's Trust** also has good resources and can be found by visiting www.thesurvivorstrust.org
- **We Stand** provides support for all non-abusing parents and carers whose children have experienced sexual abuse. Visit westand.org.uk



Closing information



We hope that you have found this guide helpful in some way and that it may have given you some reassurance that what you might be experiencing after an assault is normal and it is okay to feel this way. Hopefully it may have given you some strategies to help too.

It is never too late to seek support, whoever you are. We encourage anyone to contact us to see what support is available.

Call us on **0117 342 6999**. We will listen to you even if you find it very difficult to know what to say or how to say it. We will believe you. We will explain the help that is available to you and support you to decide what you want to do next.

If you feel that you can't call us, you can also email us on **TheBridge@UHBW.nhs.uk** to get the conversation started



Useful organisations and resources



Specialist sexual violence support

- **Survivor Pathway** - You can find out what support is available to you in your local area by visiting the Survivor Pathway website. It is an easy to use online resource for anyone who wants to find out more about the specialist services available. You can find them at www.survivorpathway.org.uk
- **Kinergy** is a specialist counselling agency in Bristol offering support for survivors of sexual abuse and sexual violence. They provide counselling, group therapy and a support group for survivors and their family / friends / partners. Kinergy is an inclusive charity offering support to all genders, 16 years and above. You can find them at www.kinergy.org.uk
- **SARSAS (Somerset & Avon Rape and Sexual Assault Support)** offer specialist support for survivors of sexual violence throughout the Avon and Somerset area. You can find them at www.sarsas.org.uk They run a helpline on **0808 801 0456 / 0808 801 0464**. This helpline can be accessed by everyone and you can find out more by visiting their website.
- **The Greenhouse** helps people affected by sexual abuse and rape to recover from their trauma and help improve their mental health, wellbeing and resilience through the provision of specialist professional therapy accessible to all including children. They have clinics in Bristol for all ages and genders and a clinic in Taunton for men over 18 years old. You can find out more at: www.the-green-house.org.uk

- **Womankind** aims to help women improve their mental health and wellbeing. They offer individual and group therapy including a specialist service for women who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. They also offer a befriending service to isolated women living in Bristol and South Gloucestershire. Find out more at:

www.womankindbristol.org.uk

- **The Southmead Project** provides free counselling and support for survivors of abuse and addiction across Bristol and surrounding areas. Find out more at:

www.southmeadproject.org.uk

Specialist support for men

- **SurvivorsUK** are specialists in the field of male sexual violence. They support anyone who identifies as male, trans, non-binary or has identified as male in the past. They offer a range of support services. You can find out more at

www.survivorsuk.org

- **National Male Survivor Helpline** run by Safeline. They offer a telephone helpline which is open Monday – Saturday. Call them on **0808 800 5005** or **01926 402 498**. They also offer email and text support. You can find them at **www.safeline.org.uk**

Other specialist support

- **Safelink** provides independent support for anyone who has been the victim of rape and sexual abuse across the whole of Avon and Somerset area. You do not have to report to the police to access their services.

www.safelinksupport.co.uk

- If you are a woman who experienced childhood sexual abuse and are preparing for pregnancy, birth and parenthood, there is support available to you. This can be found here

www.thesurvivorstrust.org/pbpaftercsa

- For support in relation to Honour Based Violence please visit **www.karmanirvana.org.uk**

Domestic abuse support

- In Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset you can access support from Nextlink. Their website is

www.nextlinkhousing.co.uk



- In Bath and North East Somerset, support is available from Southside and their services can be found at www.south-side.org.uk
- In Somerset, support is provided by **SIDAS (Somerset Integrated Domestic Abuse Service)** and more information can be found at www.somerseturvivors.org.uk

Mental health support:

- **The Samaritans** provides support to anyone who is having a difficult time for any reason. They can support you in a crisis or at any other time. They offer support over the phone, via email, letter, in person or via their app. Their telephone helpline is free and confidential, call them for free on **116 123**. Visit their website for more information at: www.samaritans.org
- **MIND** support for your general mental health: www.mind.org.uk
- **NHS mental health services** information, including crisis numbers, can be found at www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services
- Self Injury Support can be found at www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk

Apps

- **Calm:** This app provides support to help lower stress and anxiety and to help improve sleep. You can download onto your phone or tablet. More information can be found out via their website www.calm.com
- **Headspace:** this app focuses on using meditation to help reduce stress, to focus more and improve sleep. You can download onto your phone or tablet. More information can be found out via their website www.headspace.com



Support for young people

- **The Green House** offers therapeutic support for children and young people of all ages that live in Bristol, South Gloucestershire, BANES and North Somerset. Their website is www.the-green-house.org.uk to find out more about their service and referral pathway.
- **The Somerset Phoenix Project** supports young people who have experienced sexual abuse, and their families, living in Somerset. They also have resources on their website which you can find at: www.somersetphoenixproject.org.uk
- **KOOTH** is an online community that supports young people with their mental health. Their website is www.kooth.com
- **Off The Record (OTR)** is a mental health social movement by and for young people aged 11-25 living in Bristol and South Gloucestershire. Their website is www.otrbristol.org.uk. They also have a hub in Bath and North East Somerset and their website is www.offtherecord-banes.co.uk
- **Young Victims Support** is for young people aged 5 to 18 (can be up to 25 for those with additional needs) who want help and support when they have been victims of (or affected by) crime, anti-social behaviour or domestic abuse. The Service covers Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol, North Somerset, Somerset and South Gloucestershire. Their website is www.avonandsomerset-pcc.gov.uk/working-for-you/victim-support-services/young-victims-service
- **Childline** offers support to children and young people anywhere in the country. They can be contacted confidentially on **0800 1111** and also offer lots of online support at: www.childline.org.uk



Common worries or frequently asked questions

- **I'm worried and/or have questions about the police process, who can help?**

If you have been in touch with us we would have offered to refer you for support from an Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA) from Safelink. They should have been in touch within the following few days but if you have not heard from them then please let us know or you can contact them. We can refer you to their service if you give us a call. Details about them are on **page 40**.

- **I would like to talk to someone over the phone via a helpline for support, who can I contact?**

There are a number of helplines you can access anonymously for support and for someone to talk to. SARSAS (Somerset and Avon Rape and Sexual Abuse Support) run a helpline through the week. Further details about their opening times and contact information can be found on **pages 39**.

Common worries or frequently asked questions

- **I have not told anyone/very few people about what happened and I'm scared about talking to an organisation.**

We understand it can be extremely difficult to talk to people about what happened especially strangers. You can contact The Bridge anonymously to begin with if you feel happier and then when/if you feel comfortable, you can give us some of your details so we can arrange some support for you. We do not pass your information onto anyone else unless you ask us to. The only time we may have to do so is if there is a significant risk to someone's life (including yours) or if there may be a risk to children or vulnerable adults.

- **This happened a long time ago, is it too late to get help/talk to someone? And is it too late to speak to the police?**

It is never too late to seek support and it may be that now feels like the right time for you. You can give us a call or email to discuss what support is available to you. There is no pressure to do anything, we can just let you know your options.



If you had a forensic medical examination with The Bridge:

Common worries or frequently asked questions:

- **I gave my clothes to The Bridge/ police but I want them back.**

If you gave your clothes to The Bridge you would have signed a form to say we would hold them for 26 months before destroying them (or until your 25th birthday if you attended under the age of 18). As long as you contact us before this date, you can have your clothes back at any time. If you gave your clothes to the police, you will have to contact them. You can contact them via 101.

- **When do I hear back about the forensic samples taken?**

You will need to contact the police directly about this as once they are handed over to the police we do not get given any further information. If you attended for a self-referral examination, your samples were not tested but stored in our freezers until the 26 months have passed (or your 25th birthday as explained opposite).

- **I need a bit longer to make a decision about whether to report to the police, can you store my samples and/or clothes for longer?**

If you would like to discuss us keeping your samples for longer, please contact us before the date of destruction and we will be able to discuss this with you.



Notes



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Notes



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**Would you like to give feedback to The Bridge?
Is there something you feel we could do better?
We'd like to hear from you.**

The Bridge is setting up new client user groups to help us make the best service we can. The groups will help us:

- Make decisions on the look, design and feel of The Bridge
- Design new resources that people really want to pick up and read
- Ensure our resources (care packs, leaflets, posters) are relevant and appropriate
- Decide how we use our resources to reach more people

If you'd like to help or just want to know more about the group you can contact us in the following ways:

Tel: **0117 342 6999** and speak to a Crisis Worker who will take your details (or)

Email us at: **TheBridge@UHBW.nhs.uk** and we'll get back to you.

We look forward to hearing from you!

www.thebridgecanhelp.org.uk