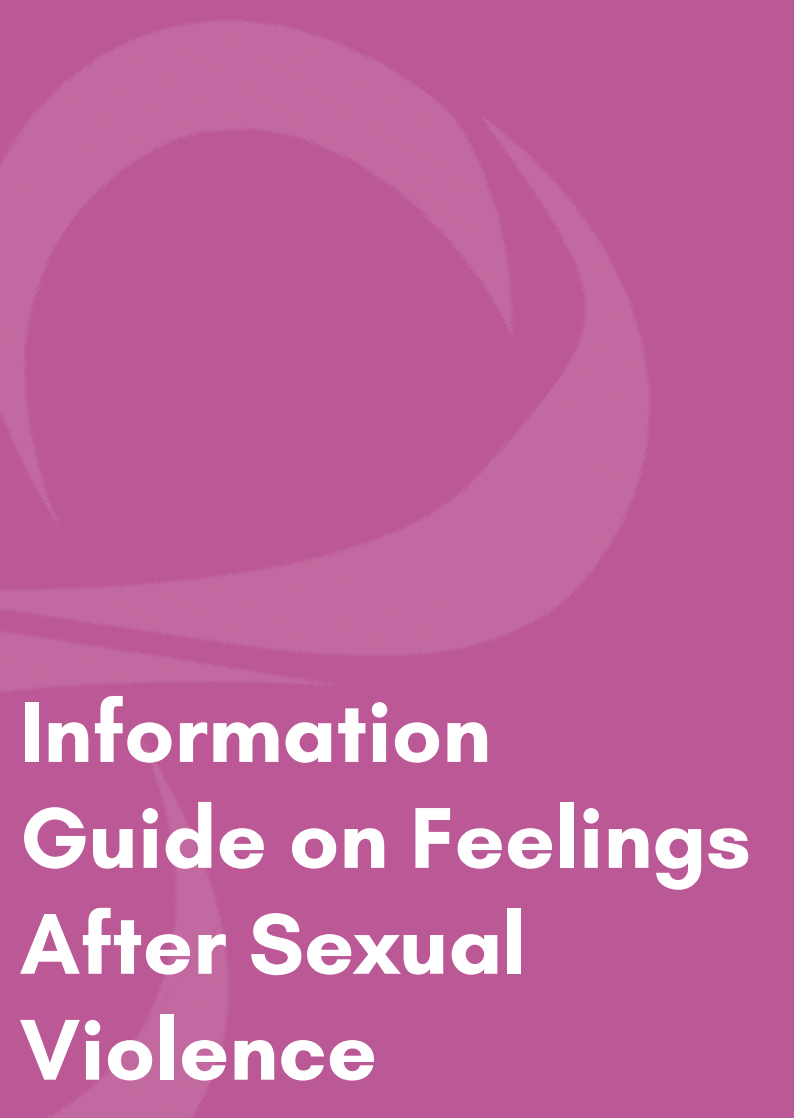




Information Guide on Feelings After Sexual Violence

What am I feeling?

After experiencing sexual violence, it can be really difficult to know what you are feeling. Despite beliefs that some categories of feelings are 'good' or 'bad', all emotions and feelings are relevant and are present for you to process and to help you heal. If we are able to tolerate and experience a range of emotions, you will be able to live life more fully, without regularly being overwhelmed.

There are many feelings you may have, this booklet will cover some of these. However, it is important to acknowledge that whatever you feel is completely valid and okay.

Confusion and Disconnection

Some survivors may be uncertain as to whether their memories of abuse are real or not. The memories may be fragmented or start to surface in flashbacks or dreams. Some survivors may feel disconnected from their feelings about the abuse. Pretending the abuse didn't happen and blocking out painful memories and feelings can be a common way of coping with trauma and can leave people very confused about what has really happened.

Some survivors lose access to all memories of the abuse, even when there is concrete evidence about what has happened to them.

Memories can then be reawakened by current events such as the birth of a baby or the death of an abuser. Our minds sometimes bring memories of frightening events into our mind when we are safe enough or strong enough to deal with them.

If you do not have full memories of what happened to you, you may be anxious to find out, however, this is not something that can be forced. Survivors often get access to suppressed memories gradually and this helps to protect them from being overwhelmed.

When we have been traumatised, our bodies are imprinted with memories of the trauma, particularly in cases where the body has been involved in some way as in cases of sexual or physical abuse. Some survivors may feel disconnected from their bodies, not being fully aware of when they are hungry, in pain or needing rest. This 'numbness' or disconnection can help prevent survivors feeling overwhelmed with 'body memories' of the traumatic events which happened to them.

Guilt/ Shame/ Self-blame

Survivors of childhood sexual abuse may feel guilty about the abuse because they enjoyed some aspect of the abuse or feel they got something out of it. Abusers may use threats but often they might offer what children want or need in order to form a relationship with them and keep them involved in the abuse. For instance, a child who is neglected at home may be given much wanted attention by the abuser and this makes the child keen to spend more time with them. Later, this makes it difficult for the child to tell anyone about the abuse because the child believes they have encouraged the abuse by seeking their attention. This is part of the abusers plan.

You may have got something you wanted from the relationship from your abuser such as attention, gifts or cuddles. Receiving these things or seeking out the abuser for these things does not mean you wanted to be abused – it means the abuser was deliberately offering you things you wanted so you would be available for them to abuse.

Survivors often blame themselves for how they reacted to their abuse. They may wish they had moved, or fought off their abuser. But it is important to know that however you reacted, was a biological response to keep you alive.

Abused by more than one person

It is not unusual for survivors to have been abused by more than one person because unfortunately, when someone is abused by someone, it can make them vulnerable to further abuse. For example, if you were in a situation which made it easy for abusers to get access to you. This can happen when, for example, a family takes in lodgers or uses different babysitters or if the child is in care. The danger of abuse is also increased if children have no one to protect them, for example, if a child has abusive or neglectful parents, no parents or parents who are regularly absent or ill. This may not be the case for every survivor and the circumstances outlined do not mean that every person would be abused.

If you have been abused by more than one abuser it is easy to think that you were the common factor and that somehow you drew the abusers to yourself or feel it must have been something about you or that you did that caused the abuse to happen. But it is important to remember the abuse was **never your fault**.

How to help feelings of guilt/blame

Imagine the abuser wearing a great big overcoat. The pockets on this overcoat are full with the abusers responsibility, guilt and shame about the abuse.

The abuser does not want to feel responsible, guilty or shameful about the abuse because if they do, they will no longer be able to justify their behaviour and will feel ashamed enough to stop the abuse.

Abusers do not want to stop what they are doing so they take off their overcoat and place it onto their victim.

The survivor is then left carrying a huge, heavy overcoat, with pockets filled with shame , guilt and responsibility.

This ensures the victim's silence about the abuse, as they believe that this coat is theirs and that the guilt, the shame and the responsibility for the abuse lies with them.

BUT... The coat was **never yours** in the first place – It was not your guilt and shame and responsibility that you have been carrying. Take the coat off and give it back to its owner.

Powerlessness

When you believe you were to blame for the abuse, you can at least feel that you had some control over what was happening. Realising you did not cause the abuse and could not stop it can relieve feelings of guilt but it can also be very frightening to realise you had no control over the situation and were powerless to stop it. Feeling powerless can make it difficult to let go of feelings of self blame.

As a child you were under the power of your abuser and so were preyed upon. As an adult you may still feel to blame for the abuse because you feel you should have been able to stop it or because you sought your abuser out. But this is not true.

Whether you were abused as a child or an adult, the only person to blame is the abuser. You can regain your power back as you begin to release the guilt that has been holding you back and as you break free from the effects of the abuse.

Relationships with an abuser

Sometimes survivors of abuse do not want to place the responsibility for the abuse onto their abuser(s) because they do not want to damage their relationship with them or change their view of them. This can be true whether you were abused as a child or an adult.

For instance, a child is dependent on their family or care givers for their emotional and physical well-being and usually want to maintain a relationship with them, even if they are their abusers. Adult survivors may feel loyal to their abusers, especially if they are family members or their partner and may feel like they are betraying them if they blamed them for the abuse.

Survivors may believe that they somehow caused the abuser to abuse them and by taking on the responsibility for the abuse, the survivor can continue to see the abuser as a loving, caring person.

Sexual abuse is always the responsibility of the abuser – you were not to blame.

Anger

Once you begin to realise you are not to blame for the abuse, you may start to feel very angry. Some survivors fear their feelings of rage and hatred are so powerful they might not be able to contain them.

Angry feelings can be very frightening and overwhelming and it is no wonder that some survivors retreat back into blaming themselves for the abuse. Blaming yourself can be easier and more comfortable than dealing with feelings of murderous rage.

Consider:

- If you stop blaming yourself for the abuse, who or what might you feel angry with?
- What do you fear might happen if you experienced anger?

See our booklet on Anger for tips to help handle it safely.

Dissociation

Dissociation is the feeling of being detached from reality. This could feel like intensely daydreaming or being focused on something. For others it can feel like they are completely disconnected. It is very common for people in this dissociative state to have difficulty with consciousness, memory and perceptions of themselves and others around them.

Dissociation can be a really scary experience for those who go through it, as well as anyone around them. But dissociation does have a purpose.

Dissociation is a way for your brain to cope with and deal with psychologically painful situations. In other words, a survivor may dissociate as a barrier to keep painful event memories out of their awareness. This may help them to prevent feeling pain. This is a survival method used by both children and adults.

How can I start to feel more like myself?

To start with, allow yourself to notice and sit with whatever it is you are feeling. This may feel extremely challenging, because, it can initially feel like things are getting worse. Feelings that have been suppressed or ignored for a long time start surfacing to be acknowledged and experienced.

It can be helpful to have therapy to deal with the abuse once you have a 'solid enough base', so emerging feelings and emotions will not be overwhelming for you. As you gradually get used to sitting with your feelings, you begin to create a greater tolerance for them and you may slowly begin to realise you can cope with them. Over time, as these feelings are acknowledged, they will begin to lessen and feel less scary.

Getting to know your feelings and emotions can gradually help you make decisions about whether to 'stay' present with these feelings.

Help to get to know your emotions;

- Pay attention to your body. Including: your heart rate, breathing, shaking, trembling, sweating, hairs standing up on back of neck, muscle tension, aches and pains. All of these physiological responses are clues as to what is going on emotionally.
- Start with identifying details – Is my heart rate fast or slow? Is my breathing deep or shallow? Does my face feel hot or cool?
- Ask yourself – Is it OK for me to feel this? And then ask yourself Why?/Why Not?
- Consider if there are any social judgements around you feeling like this? Consider where and with whom it might be safe to express this feeling without being judged.



**Remember: it is normal to feel lots
of different ways after
experiencing sexual violence and
abuse. How you feel is valid and
in time it will get easier**

Further support and information

RASAC provides further information via our website and helpline service which can be contacted via calling, email and webchat | 0300 303 4787 | www.rasac.co.uk | helpline@rasac.co.uk

Rape Crisis England and Wales | 0808 500 2222 | 24/7 Support line | www.rapecrisis.org.uk | Live chat via their website

Samaritans provides emotional support to anyone in emotional distress or at risk of suicide | 116 123 | www.samaritans.org

NSPCC | 0800800 5000 | www.nspcc.org.uk

MIND | 08457660163 | www.mind.org.uk/

Counselling Directory | www.counselling-directory.org.uk

NHS Talking Therapies | 01484 343700 | www.southwestyorkshire.nhs.uk/services/iapt-kirklees/

Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre Kirklees, Calderdale and Wakefield

PO Box 230
Huddersfield
HD1 5UY

Helpline: 0300 303 4787

Websites: www.rasac.co.uk

Email: helpline@rasac.co.uk

