



Preventing | Supporting | Surviving

Information for Survivors of Sexual Abuse & Rape



www.safeline.org.uk

About Safeline

Safeline is a charitable organisation established in 1994 by survivors of abuse to provide support to survivors of sexual abuse and rape.

Safeline's aims are to prevent sexual abuse and to support anyone affected by sexual abuse. Our Face to Face services are available throughout Warwickshire and Coventry and our helpline and online services are available nationally.

Safeline has the specialist knowledge, experience and understanding of how best to protect and support people whose lives have been affected and to offer services that are tailored to fit your individual needs.

We work with women, men, children and young people, those in the LGBT+ community, parents, partners and anyone affected by sexual abuse.

We also support young people in schools who are at risk of sexual abuse through our Early Intervention and Prevention Service.

Have a look at our website or ask for our Safeline Services leaflet to find out about how we can help you.

All Safeline services are free.

What is sexual abuse?

It is estimated that 1 in 4 females and 1 in 6 males have been sexually abused. In more than three quarters of cases the abuse is committed by someone known to them. Although the majority of abusers are men, women are also capable of abuse or are complicit in some way.

Sexual abuse takes many forms: explicit sexual talk, exposure to pornography; sexual touching; lack of privacy to bathe or undress; exposure to masturbation and sexual intercourse. It can happen as a child, in adolescence or in adulthood; by someone known to you or a complete stranger; by one or multiple perpetrators; as a single incident or over a

sustained period of time. Internet grooming, sexting, trafficking, prostitution and gang-related sexual abuse are other ways in which perpetrators commit crimes.

If you think this relates to you, contact us.



Why do survivors of sexual abuse stay silent?

- They may have been threatened with further abuse and violence if they tell
- They may be afraid that no-one will believe them
- They may feel partly or entirely to blame for the abuse and carry a lot of guilt
- They may not be able to describe or understand what happened to them
- They may want to protect the family, or even the abuser(s) and have conflicting feelings towards them
- They may not want to 'rock the boat'
- They may feel powerless to stop the abuse for one reason or another
- They may fear being split up from their family.

Survivors may cope with abuse by...

- Alcohol and drug misuse
- Obsessive behaviour and strict routines
- Self-harming
- Forgetting or minimising the abuse
- Breaking ties with/confronting/avoiding the abuser
- Speaking about it and working through their feelings
- Speaking publicly or helping other survivors
- Working to protect others from abuse
- Writing about their experiences.

No two people are the same. By talking to someone, you can work out what will work for you.

What is trauma?



Trauma results from experiencing very stressful, frightening or distressing events which can result in strong feelings of terror, shame, helplessness and powerlessness. These traumatic experiences can compromise an individual's ability to cope. Trauma can result from a situation or an event we find traumatic (i.e. being a victim or witnessing trauma) or from how we are affected by our experiences (i.e. the effect the incident has on the sense of self – agency, identity, safety, belonging and connection).

Everyone has a different reaction to trauma, and there is no time limit, you may notice any effects immediately or a long while afterwards.

If you've been affected by trauma, it's important to remember that you survived however you could and are having common, normal reactions. When we feel stressed or threatened, our bodies release hormones called cortisol and adrenaline. This is the body's automatic way of preparing to respond to danger, and we have no control over it. The autonomic nervous system controls the glands and muscles of internal organs. It can be divided into two subsystems:

- The sympathetic nervous system which arouses the body
 - The parasympathetic nervous system which calms the body.
- When there is something potentially threatening, our sympathetic nervous system is activated and our body prepares us for survival. Basically, our body prepares to fight, flight or freeze. This leads to increased heart rate, breathing and blood pressure.

When trauma becomes chronic (in other words, when a person experiences multiple or ongoing traumatic situations), our bodies remain in a

constant state of alertness

in order to be ready for threats. This ongoing activation of the sympathetic nervous system is very draining on the body and can lead to symptoms, such as a weaker immune system, headaches, insomnia, depression and anxiety. The constant activation can also worsen an individual's ability to tell the difference between threatening stimuli and harmless stimuli. Fear becomes the automatic response to both threatening and non-threatening stimuli.

Symptoms of Trauma

The impact of trauma can vary and are unique to each person. Some common trauma symptoms include:

- Dissociation
- Nightmares
- Flashbacks
- Changes in eating and sleeping
- Hyperarousal (feeling constantly alert, and having difficulty concentrating) or hypoarousal (feeling emotionally numb and disconnected)
- Social withdrawal
- Low self-esteem
- Self-harm/injury
- Suicidal feelings
- Alcohol/substance misuse

Read the following pages for help with some of these symptoms and how to access support at Safeline.

If you're experiencing physical symptoms, speak to your GP for support.

Information on flashbacks

Flashbacks are recollections from the past. They may be pictures, sounds, smells, feelings or the lack of them (numbness). Sometimes there is no actual visual or auditory memory. You may feel panicky or trapped, you may feel powerless without knowing why. These experiences can also happen in dreams.

You may well have had to protect yourself from the emotional and physical horrors of abuse to survive. That memory remains locked inside and you are unable to express the feelings and thoughts of that time. It is as though that part of us is in a time warp waiting to come out in the present.

When that part comes out, the child in you is experiencing the past as if it were happening today. As the flashback happens, it is as if you forget that you have an 'adult' self, available for comfort, protection and grounding. The extreme feeling and body sensations occurring can be very frightening because they are not related to the reality of the present and may at times seem to come out of the blue.

You may begin to think you are crazy and are afraid of telling anyone about what is happening. You feel out of control and at the mercy of your experiences. You may begin to avoid certain areas and situations that you think triggered it. Sometimes flashbacks occur during any form of sexual contact or upon seeing a person who looks or behaves and reminds you of the person who abused you.

Try to remind yourself that the worst is over. The feelings and sensations you are experiencing are memories of the past.





Information on panic attacks

Anyone who has panic attacks will know that they can be debilitating. When you first experience panic, you may be confused and bewildered. It's common for people to be convinced there is something physically wrong with them.

A panic attack is an exaggeration of your body's normal response to fear, stress or excitement.

Some of the symptoms of panic attacks are:

- a pounding heartbeat
- feeling faint
- sweating
- nausea
- chest pains
- feeling unable to breathe
- shaky limbs, or feeling like your legs are turning to jelly
- feeling like you're not connected to your body

During a panic attack you might feel very afraid that:

- you're losing control
- you're going to faint
- you're having a heart attack
- you're going to die



What can help with panic attacks or flashbacks?

- Practise utter acceptance, don't fight it, let it go. During an attack this might seem impossible. It may take several attempts before you can start to look panic and flashbacks in the eye without turning away for safety. The paradox is that if you accept how you feel, the intensity and duration of the attack decrease.
- Whatever you are doing, it's okay to walk away if you need to, remember you're not trapped.
- Remember to breathe. Make the outtake of breath a bit longer than the intake. When we get frightened, we stop breathing normally. The resulting lack of oxygen can cause the feeling of panic and pounding in the head, tightness, sweating, feeling faint, shakiness, dizziness. When we breathe deeply enough from the stomach, a lot of the panic can gradually decrease.
- Re-establish yourself in the present. Use your five senses in the present. Look around and see the colours in the room, the shapes of things, the people near. Listen to the sounds in the room, your breathing, traffic, birds, people. Feel your body and what is touching it, your clothes, your own arms and hands, the chair or floor supporting you. Stamp your feet on the ground.
- You may want to be alone or have someone with you. It might be helpful to tell friends and relations about panic attacks or flashbacks so they can help if you need them. Whatever feels right for you is right.
- Take time to regain control. Sometimes these feelings can be very powerful. Don't expect to get back to normal straight away. Be kind and look after yourself, do something you enjoy.
- During a panic attack or flashback it's difficult to think rationally. Write down some messages to yourself on a card and keep it in your pocket or record them onto your phone.
- Anticipatory anxiety begins with the thought of doing something that you feel is beyond your control. Sometimes, anticipatory anxiety exceeds what the actual situation presents. Instead of saying 'what if' try saying 'so what'.
- As panic and anxiety materialise in physical ways, you can often worry that you have a physical illness which causes more stress. You may find it helpful to visit your GP for a check over. Explain to your GP how you are affected. The more you understand about panic attacks and flashbacks, the less mystery and power they will have over you.



What is dissociation?



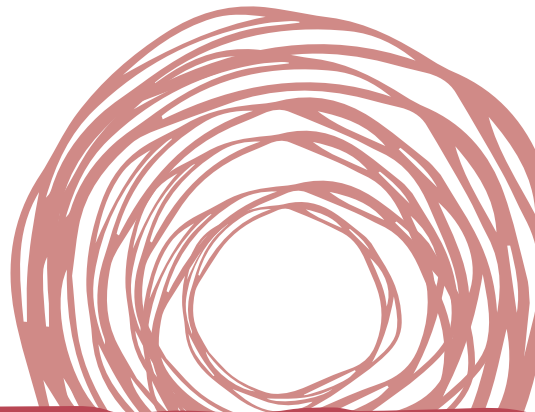
Dissociation is a way of coping with too much stress, of blocking traumatic events in order to feel safe. It may have been a strategy you used in childhood or at the time of your abuse because you couldn't otherwise remove yourself from the situation you were in. You may continue to use this strategy in later life at times of stress if you have no other means of coping. You may feel disconnected from the world around you and from yourself.

Some dissociation is part of everyday life; we often dissociate when we are driving our car on a well-known route and cannot remember how we got to our destination. However, others can experience more profound effects such as having gaps in their lives or 'switching' between multiple personalities.

Like flashbacks, dissociative episodes can be 'triggered' by a sight, sound, smell, etc. Some people live quite contentedly with dissociation and even find it a comfort. However, if you feel it is adversely affecting your life, talking therapies are the recommended treatment. As with flashbacks and panic attacks, you will be able to explore traumatic events, learn more about why

you dissociate and discover new ways to cope.

If you would like to find out more about dissociation, visit the PODS website (Positive Outcomes for Dissociative Survivors).



About self-harm

Self-harm is a tool people use to deal with overwhelming feelings. This can help in various ways, for example, as a means of distraction, in order to feel 'alive', or to release the body's 'feel good' endorphins. Self-harm can take the form of cutting, burning and scratching, or less obvious ways such as putting oneself in risky situations or not taking essential medication.

If you are supporting someone close to you who self-harms, you may be alarmed by the behaviour and want to stop it happening. Try to remember that it's a way of coping and is serving a purpose. Better to accept their actions, encourage them to dress any wounds safely and provide space for them to talk about their feelings generally without focus on the self-harm itself. Physical contact through hand holding for example can sometimes be helpful if there is a trusting relationship.



Talking therapies can help you work through your feelings which in turn reduces their power over you. On a day to day basis many people find the following helpful:

- Keeping a diary to identify triggers and patterns so that you can recognise warning signs in advance
- Concentrating on another task such as making a cup of tea
- Physical release like taking a walk, hitting cushions or putting on your favourite music and dancing/singing
- Writing down your feelings, then ripping it up or burning it
- Having a cold shower
- Relaxing techniques such as modulated breathing, yoga or sleeping
- Remember, it will pass

How can therapy help?

Therapy offers an opportunity to talk in confidence and to reflect upon anything that is causing you distress. Therapy does not offer instant cures, but provides you with time and space to explore your feelings with an impartial, non-judgemental listener in order to work towards a better understanding of yourself, acceptance of your feelings and ultimately to let go of those feelings that are dragging you down.

Making changes takes time. You may make some progress then go back a step. This is not failing, it's simply part of the process. Even if you cannot yet pinpoint a problem, a trained therapist can help you work it out.

Safeline can provide Art and Creative therapies for people who prefer to express their feelings using art making.

If you are close to someone who has suffered abuse and feel you may benefit from some support yourself, Safeline Services are also available to you too.



For families & carers...

How can you help someone you care about who has been abused?

Recognise

the courage it takes to talk out loud
about abuse

Believe

what they are saying,
there is no reason to lie

Listen

to what they have to say

Respect

their feelings and
decisions

Remember

it's not their fault

You may be very shocked when someone close to you first tells you about abuse. We tend to think it's something that only happens to other people. Sadly, abuse is more common than people often realise but the right empathic support often makes it easier for people to come to terms with their experience, carry on to enjoy life to the full and not be defined by what has happened.

You may feel you want to 'fix' the situation and 'do' something. By telling you, the survivor probably doesn't want you to react in this way. Don't underestimate the value of these simple guidelines, given time and patience, they really work.

Safeline is a member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) and abides by their code of ethics and practice such as working in a confidential and non-judgemental way. All counsellors and staff undertake Safeline's Specialist Accredited training and are DBS security checked.

Contact Us

If you need help please get in touch:

Call our office **01926 402 498**

or email **office@safeline.org.uk**

Call our Warwickshire and Coventry Survivors Helpline
0808 800 5008

Call our National Male Survivor Helpline
0808 800 5005

For more information about our services: Visit our website at
www.safeline.org.uk

Or ask for our Information Leaflets:

- Our Services
- Independent Sexual Violence Advocates
- Information for Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse & Rape.

Support Safeline

To make a donation or fundraise for Safeline please visit our website, safeline.org.uk. You can make a one-off or regular donation of any amount. Alternatively, post us a cheque payable to "Safeline". If you'd like to organise a fundraising event in aid of our charity, you can create a fundraising page.

Thank you for supporting Safeline.



safeline



believe
in you