

Survivors' survival guide

The importance of counselling

People come to counselling for sexual abuse for many different reasons. You may be dealing with childhood sexual abuse or you may be dealing with a more recent experience as an adult. You may be living with the effects every day, trying to cope with feelings of dealing with shame, anger or guilt.

Sexual abuse can effect self- esteem and personal power, anxiety, body image, intimacy, sexuality, children and parenting.

Counselling can provide you with useful techniques and skills that you can use now. It might help you think about your current behaviours and feelings in a different way. It might stop stress and triggers before they affect your whole life.

If you are not already receiving counselling, please contact your nearest Centre Against Sexual Assault so that you have support and guidance through the healing process.

Anxiety and PTSD

Counselling can be helpful particularly if you are experiencing ongoing impacts. Some people develop anxiety, depression or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after being sexually assaulted, and the symptoms can be experienced months or years after the event. Some of these symptoms and impacts include;

Disturbed sleep

Survivors of sexual assault often experience sleepless nights and/or nightmares. The nightmare may involve reliving the assault/s which indicates that you have unresolved issues pertaining to the assault. As the healing process continues, the nightmares or sleepless nights will become less frequent.

Surviving nightmares

Surround yourself with familiar things before you go to sleep. This could be a soft toy or something that comforts you. (You may want to hold a cuddly toy or an object that helps you feel safe while you sleep). Perhaps someone you trust could sit with you until you fall asleep.

Sleep with a lamp/light on so that if you wake up after experiencing a nightmare, you will be able to look around the room and see the familiar things that comfort you, helping you to relax more quickly. If you wake from a nightmare and it is dark turn on a light or lamp. This helps chase away the shadows.

Concentrate on breathing deeply and slowly. Sometimes when people are stressed they forget to breathe, and freeze up. When this happens it is easier for the nightmare to take hold of you.

Remind yourself that the nightmare is just a dream. It cannot hurt you even though it may feel scary and painful. Remember that it is a memory of the abuse that is not happening now.

Seek out a support person, someone you feel safe with, who you can sit with while you calm down.

Imagine a safe place. This can be anywhere or anything that helps you to feel safe. It may help if you draw or write it down before a nightmare occurs, so that you can have it ready beside your bed if you wake up from a nightmare.

Remember positive encouragement given by your support people. Imagine that person is there with you, encouraging you. Think of what he/she would say to you to help you feel stronger.

Write the nightmare down and change the ending. At the point where the dream becomes a nightmare, rewrite the parts which are distressing so that for example, the abuse does not occur, you get rescued or that you overcome the abuser. Over time you are rewriting the actual dream so that when it happens you will dream the new version that you have written about. Tell someone you trust your new version of the nightmare helps to reinforce the 'new' dream into your mind.

Dealing with sleepless nights

Insomnia is when you regularly find it hard to fall asleep or stay asleep. You may have trouble getting to sleep initially or if you can fall asleep, you may find it hard to stay asleep during the night. Sometimes poor sleep habits can contribute to insomnia.

Try to go to bed and get up at the same time each day

Before going to bed, spend some time winding down and doing something relaxing

Avoid going to bed on a full stomach or hungry

If you are not asleep after 20 minutes in bed, go to another room until you feel tired again and then go back to bed

Many poor sleepers spend too long in bed

Avoid having things in the bedroom that distract you from sleep

Getting sunlight during the day will help you to sleep better at night

Naps in the evening can make it hard to sleep at night

Be sure to get counselling to treat the underlying causes of your insomnia.

From: <http://www.epworthsleepcentre.com.au>

Flashbacks

Memories of the assault often return without warning. Sometimes these flashbacks will be so vivid that you will feel as if you have re-lived the experience of assault. This is not the result of irreversible psychological damage or an indicator of insanity. They represent a trauma response which, like nightmares, will decrease as issues are resolved and the healing process progresses.

Surviving flashbacks

Remind yourself that the abuse is not happening now. You are remembering the abuse and that can be very painful. But, no matter how painful, it is still just a memory. Tell yourself that this feeling will pass and that you will be alright

Focus on your breathing. Wherever you are try to concentrate on breathing deeply and slowly. Count your in and out breaths

Get yourself a glass of water. Don't get someone to get it for you

Touch something. Hold onto a something like a chair or table to help ground you in the present. Breathe.

Become aware of your feet on the ground. Wiggle your toes, shake your body, stretch your arms. Breathe.

Become aware of your surroundings. Look around you. Notice your environment, take in where you are and what is around you. Become aware of the here and now.

Try to get to a place where you feel safe. That may be somewhere in your house or yard, or it could be somewhere at school or work. Try to concentrate on breathing deeply and slowly while you are getting there.

Seek out a support person, someone you feel safe with. Share your experience with that person. It can make it less powerful because you are not dealing with it on your own

Remember positive encouragements given by your support people. Imagine the person is there with you, encouraging you. Think of what he/she would say to you to help you feel stronger

Hold on to a cuddly toy or an object that helps you feel safe

Fear and anxiety

"I'm constantly jumpy. A sudden noise, an angry voice, moving bushes and I am afraid."

During an assault many victims fear for their lives. Often this fear is a direct result of the offender's threats. After the assault, a victim may be fearful of the dark, being alone or going out by themselves. They may experience fear generated by the possibility of pregnancy or STD's or live in fear of running into the offender again or facing them in court. All of these fears are very real concerns.

Fears of future attacks and other harm can follow sexual assault. You previously experienced the world as basically a safe place. This assumption has been shattered. You may now experience the world as being untrustworthy and unsafe. You may find yourself withdrawing from friends, family and the community. You may find that when you are in a group situation, for example a party, you become hyper-vigilant and jumpy. Your awareness of your surroundings and in particular people may feel a bit unreal.

You may also experience severe anxiety which may manifest in physical symptoms such as difficulties in breathing, muscle tension, nausea, stomach cramps or headaches. These symptoms can be eased as you gradually deal with the issues underlying the stress, and employ relevant stress management strategies.

Surviving Panic Attacks

Remind yourself that your feelings are not dangerous or harmful and are an exaggeration of your body's normal response to stress

Try not to fight your feelings - the more you are willing to face the feelings, the less intense the panic will become

Remember to breathe slowly, as not doing so will lead to dizziness and breathlessness

Replace negative thoughts with more realistic ones. For example say to yourself "This will pass and I will be OK"

Breathing exercise

Try breathing in slowly for 4 seconds, then slowly out for 7 seconds. Continue breathing in and out in this manner until the anxiety has passed.

Awareness exercise

Stay in the present. Be aware of your surroundings. Notice your feet on the floor, place them firmly on the ground, and wriggle them about. Focussing your awareness on one sense at a time and;

1. Say to yourself gently: *I can see...* [name any object in your field of vision] and repeat for 5 different objects.
2. Then say to yourself: *I can hear...* [name any sound you can hear] and repeat for 5 different sounds.
3. Then say to yourself: *I can feel...* [name any feeling or sensation you experience] and repeat for 5 different sensations.

Repeat the above 3 steps for 4 things, then 3 things, then 2 things, then 1 thing. They may be the same or different each time. Stop when the anxiety has passed.

Physical exercise

Taking care of your body is a powerful first step towards mental and emotional health. The mind and the body are linked. When you improve your physical health, you'll automatically experience greater mental and emotional well-being. For example, exercise not only strengthens our heart and lungs, but also releases endorphins, powerful chemicals that energise us and lift our mood.

Exercise is a powerful antidote to stress, anxiety, and depression. Look for small ways to add activity to your day, like taking the stairs instead of the elevator or going on a short walk. To get the most mental health benefits, aim for 30 minutes or more of exercise per day.

Sunlight lifts your mood, so try to get at least 10 to 15 minutes of sun per day. This can be done while exercising, gardening, or socialising.

Yoga and Meditation

Both yoga and meditation have been found helpful in controlling anxiety and other symptoms of PTSD.

Although many forms of yoga practice are safe, some are strenuous and may not be appropriate for everyone. In particular, elderly patients or those with mobility problems may want to check first with a doctor before choosing yoga as a treatment option.

But for many who are dealing with depression, anxiety, or stress, yoga may be a very appealing way to better manage symptoms. Indeed, the scientific study of yoga demonstrates that mental and physical health are not just closely allied, but are essentially equivalent. The evidence is growing that yoga practice is a relatively low-risk, high-yield approach to improving overall health.

Alienation/isolation

Feelings of differentness, alienation, isolation and despair are often experienced by sexual assault survivors if they are unable to share their experiences with others. Survivors have good reason to fear what others may do to them.

Talking about the assault and developing a network of support can be a very important part of the healing process. A counsellor can help you to build a support network and consider the ways in which the people in your life can be helpful.

It is good to have friends or family to whom you can talk openly about your healing journey as much as it is to have people that you can just hang out with and have a good time.

If you find it too threatening to deal with people in the real world there are online alternatives which you may find to be a good introduction to trusting in a controlled and limited fashion. With online options you can always turn the computer off if it gets too much.

See the Resources section for online bulletin boards and online chat support options for survivors.

Creating a safety plan

It can be hard to remember to what to do when you are in the middle of a flashback or panic attack. A safety plan is a list of what you can do in various situations. It can be small enough to fit in your handbag or wallet so that you can have it with you always.

Write down one of the symptoms you experience, for example 'Nightmare', and then 2 or three things to do when you experience this. Eg. It is only a dream. Breathe slowly. Ring (name and phone number).

Do this for each symptom you experience regularly. If you are involving others (for example by phoning them when you are in crisis) be sure to discuss it with them to ensure they are OK with it.

You may find that your symptoms change as you progress through your healing process. Update your safety plan as things change.

Where to get help

Call 000 if you are worried about yours or someone else's safety

Sexual Assault Crisis Line: 1800 806 292

Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria Web: www.dvrcv.org.au/support-services/national-services

1800 RESPECT (National Sexual Assault, Family and Domestic Violence Counselling Line)

Phone. 1800 737 732 (24 hour information and support) Web: www.1800RESPECT.org.au

Lifeline Phone: 13 11 14

Web: www.lifeline.org.au

MensLine Phone: 1300 78 99 78

Web: www.mensline.org.au