

A Trauma Stabilisation Guide



This Trauma Stabilisation Guide is designed to support you after experiencing domestic abuse, sexual assault or rape.

It's important to remember that the thoughts and feelings you're experiencing are normal reactions to a traumatic event.

This guide is here to help you understand these responses and offer suggestions for managing them.

In this guide, we use the term 'sexual assault' for both sexual assault and rape. It is a term that acknowledges the trauma you've endured.

First Light

Understanding Your Reactions:

You may be feeling a wide range of emotions, such as confusion, overwhelm, anger, shame, or fear. These reactions are normal after experiencing sexual assault or rape. This guide will help you understand the psychological, emotional, and physical responses you might have.

Acknowledging Your Feelings:

This guide might not cover every response or symptom you're experiencing, but it aims to be a valuable resource. Consider jotting down your personal thoughts and feelings as you work through the guide. Use a notepad or this guide itself – it's yours to use as you see fit. Keep a pen or pencil handy.

Self-Care After Reading:

Choose a time to read this guide that suits you best. Afterward, remember to look after yourself. Engage in activities that bring you joy, whether it's taking a leisurely walk, listening to uplifting music, or chatting with a friend. Your well-being is a priority.

We are here to support you throughout this process.

You are not alone on this journey.

Take your time and remember that your feelings are valid.

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Understanding Sexual Assault and Rape

Sexual assault is any unwanted sexual act where consent is not given.

Rape is when someone puts their penis in another person's mouth, anus, or vagina without their consent.

These are serious crimes that can affect your physical, psychological, and mental well-being.

What Is Consent?

Consent means agreeing to a sexual activity willingly and with the freedom to make that choice. According to the 2003 Sexual Offences Act, you cannot freely consent if you feel pressured, coerced, controlled, or threatened.

You also cannot freely consent if you are not conscious, afraid to say "no," or unable to understand the consequences.

Reaching Out: Who to Talk to and How

Opening up about your experience is a brave step towards healing, and we are here to support you. Whether you're considering telling someone for the first time or seeking additional support, it's important to think about the following:

What Kind of Response Am I Hoping For?

Think about the support you'd like to receive. Whether it's empathy, understanding, or practical help, your feelings are valid, and you have the right to express your needs.

How Can I Prepare the Person I'm Talking to?

Taking a moment to prepare the person you're confiding in can help create a more supportive environment. You can share what you're comfortable with, let them know if you need their advice or simply a listening ear.

How Can I Look After Myself After Sharing This?

Your well-being matters. Take time to prioritise self-care. This may include engaging in activities that bring comfort and practicing self-compassion.

Managing Expectations:

It's important to remember that some people may struggle to respond in the way you hope. They might not know how to react or support you, which can be difficult for both of you. If you feel let down, upset, or isolated, it's okay to express your feelings. Keep in mind that friends and family may make mistakes in trying to support you. Listen for their kindness, love, and intention to help. Communicate what you need from them, especially if they are a partner.

Your voice matters, and sharing your experience is a powerful step toward healing. Remember, you have the right to seek the support you need, and you are not alone in this journey.

Supporting Your Loved One: A Guide for Family and Friends

Discovering that someone you love has experienced sexual assault or abuse can be overwhelming and distressing. It's natural to have various thoughts and feelings during this challenging time. This section is designed to help you support your loved one in the most caring and understanding way possible.

The Most Important Thing: Listening Non-Judgmentally

The foundation of support is listening. Be there for your loved one in a non-judgmental way. Let them know that you care deeply, believe in them, and do not blame them for what happened. Give them the space and time to talk about their experience in their own words. It's essential to respect their boundaries; they may not want to disclose all the details, and that's okay. Encourage them to make their own decisions and regain control over their life.

Understanding the Healing Process

Sexual violence often leaves survivors feeling powerless. Part of their healing journey involves reclaiming a sense of control. It's crucial not to take away this control, even if you don't always agree with their decisions. Your support plays a vital role in helping them regain that control.

Taking Care of Yourself

Supporting a survivor can be emotionally challenging. It's essential to look after your own well-being so that you can provide the best support possible.

Your support can make a significant difference in your loved one's healing journey. By listening, respecting their choices, and seeking resources, you are playing a crucial role in helping them regain control and find strength in their recovery. Remember, there is help and support available for you as well, so you can continue to be the loving and supportive person your loved one needs.

Setting Up Your Emoji System


Discuss this system with your trusted person or people, whether they are friends, family members, or professionals. You can use this system for a daily well-being check-in or to indicate when you are comfortable talking about the assault. It's a flexible tool that allows you to express your feelings without the need for words.

Remember, this system is about helping you to communicate at your own pace and in a way that feels right for you. Your emotions may change from day to day, and that's perfectly okay. Your trusted person will appreciate your openness and will be there to support you, no matter which emoji you choose.


Using the Emoji Traffic Light:

This system involves using three emojis to express your feelings and readiness, you can use the emojis below or choose your own.


Smile Emoji:

 The 'Smile' emoji represents feeling open and comfortable. Use this emoji when you are ready to talk or share your thoughts and emotions. It signals that you are feeling positive and willing to engage in conversation.

Expressionless Emoji:

 The 'Expressionless' emoji indicates that you may be uncertain or need some time. It means you are not entirely ready to discuss certain topics or emotions. This emoji signals that you appreciate the support but need a bit more time.

No Mouth Emoji:

 The 'No Mouth' emoji represents when you are not ready to talk or share your feelings. It signals that you need space and time to process your emotions. It's a clear sign that you may not be comfortable discussing certain aspects of your experience at the moment.

Reactions to Experiencing Rape or Sexual Assault

Experiencing sexual assault or rape can bring about a range of emotions, thoughts, and physical reactions. It's crucial to understand that there is no right or wrong way to feel after such a traumatic event.

Your Emotions:

Please tick any of the following experiences that you have had recently, and feel free to note down any others in the empty boxes.

Panic attacks

Shame

Disgust

Anxiety

Shock

Loneliness

Anger

Loss of
self/identity

Stress

Guilt

Sadness

Your Thoughts:

Consider the thoughts you've been having recently, and know that these thoughts are natural responses to a traumatic experience. You are not alone in experiencing them. Please tick any of the following thoughts you've had, and feel free to add your own if they're not listed.

☐

It was my fault

☐

I am dirty or contaminated

☐

I did something which caused this

☐

I am overreacting to this

☐

I should have done something differently

☐

Why me?

☐

Difficulty thinking about the future

☐

Did it really happen?

☐

Others are untrustworthy

☐

Difficulty remembering/talking about what happened

It's crucial to understand that your reactions are normal responses to an extraordinarily distressing event. Everyone copes differently, and there is no right or wrong way to feel. You are not to blame for what happened, and you are not alone in your experiences.

Your Physical Symptoms

Please check any of the following physical symptoms that you have experienced recently

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Flashbacks | <input type="checkbox"/> Poor concentration | <input type="checkbox"/> Panic attacks |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nightmares and difficulty sleeping | <input type="checkbox"/> Stress | <input type="checkbox"/> Tiredness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Breathlessness | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxiety | <input type="checkbox"/> Headaches |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Change in appetite | <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling sick | <input type="checkbox"/> Sweating |
| | | <input type="checkbox"/> Low motivation |

Your Behaviour:

Consider your recent behaviours and actions. It's important to recognise that your responses are normal reactions to trauma. Please check any of the following behaviours that apply to you.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Difficult sexual relationships | <input type="checkbox"/> Worrying |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Avoiding reminders of the assault | <input type="checkbox"/> Using alcohol/drugs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not wanting to do things | <input type="checkbox"/> Self-harming |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Isolating yourself | <input type="checkbox"/> Smoking |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoiding thinking about what happened |

These reactions are your body's way of responding to a traumatic event. It's important to understand that they are normal responses, and you are not to blame for them. You are not alone in experiencing these physical and emotional changes.

General Coping Strategies for Healing

Recovering from sexual assault is a journey that takes time, but remember that you are strong, and healing is possible. This section offers practical coping strategies to support your healing process.

Talk About Your Feelings:

Talk to others about how you are feeling, when you feel ready. Bottling up emotions can intensify the pain. Sharing your thoughts with someone you trust can be a relief.

Seek Support:

Spend time with friends, family, or peers who offer support. Connection and understanding from loved ones can be comforting and empowering.

Acknowledge Your Strength:

Remind yourself that you are alive and you survived the assault. Celebrate small victories and accomplishments, such as "I spoke with a friend" or "I went outside."

Positive Self-Talk:

Practice positive self-talk when you're feeling low. Remind yourself that healing takes time, and you have overcome challenges before. Reflect on what has helped you in the past.

Face Reminders:

Try not to avoid reminders of the assault entirely. While avoidance may provide short-term relief, facing your triggers is essential for long-term healing.

Maintain Routines:

Return to your usual routines. Consistency in daily life can provide a sense of stability and control.

Self-Care:

Take extra care of yourself each day. Engage in self-care activities like bathing, moisturising your skin, and brushing your hair. Pay attention to your safety and surroundings.

Balanced Nutrition:

Eat balanced meals each day. Be mindful of overeating as a coping mechanism and try to maintain a healthy diet.

Avoid Drugs and Alcohol:

Avoid using drugs and alcohol to cope with your feelings. These substances may provide temporary relief but can worsen your emotional state in the long run.

Stay Active:

Keep moving your body. Exercise, even in small amounts, can release feel-good hormones and reduce stress.

Meditation and Rest:

Take time to rest and clear your mind. Guided meditation, available on platforms like YouTube, can help calm racing thoughts.

Quality Sleep:

Ensure you get a good night's sleep. Consider using lavender sachets or pillow spray to aid relaxation.

Physical Health:

Look after your physical health, as it can impact your mental well-being. Don't hesitate to seek medical attention for any health concerns.

Face Difficult Emotions:

Challenge difficult emotions. Instead of reacting in anger, walk away from triggering situations. Confront fears and anxieties gradually, and stay engaged in activities and social interactions.

Avoid Hasty Decisions:

Be cautious about making major life decisions immediately after a sexual assault. Emotions can be overwhelming, and you may regret hasty choices.

Find Joy Daily:

Commit to at least one enjoyable activity each day to build positive experiences and rediscover your sense of joy.

Remember that healing takes time, and it's okay to seek help and support along the way. You have the strength to overcome this, and with time and self-compassion, you will regain control of your life and find your path to recovery.

Coping with Flashbacks and Nightmares

After experiencing sexual assault, it's normal for your mind and body to go into shock. This shock can manifest as symptoms such as nightmares, flashbacks, and emotional numbness. These experiences can have a significant impact on your mood and concentration. It's important to understand that these reactions are your brain's way of processing trauma and are a normal response to an abnormal event.

What are Flashbacks?

Flashbacks are vivid and distressing memories that can make you feel as if you are back in the traumatic situation. They often occur suddenly and unexpectedly and can be triggered by various stimuli like sights, sounds, smells, or even emotions. It's essential to remember that flashbacks are unprocessed memories and that trying to push them away can make them more challenging to deal with in the long run.

Coping with Flashbacks:

When you experience a flashback, here are some steps you can take to cope with the distressing memories:

Pause: Stop what you are doing and acknowledge that you are experiencing a flashback.

Relax: Engage in calming activities such as taking deep breaths or listening to soothing music to help ground yourself in the present moment.

Mindfulness: Try a mindfulness exercise to focus your attention on your immediate surroundings. Describe what you can see, smell, touch, hear, and taste to ground yourself in the present.

Seek Safety: If possible, go to a place where you feel safe and secure.

Talk to Someone: Reach out to someone you trust and share your experience with them. Talking about the flashback can help you process it.

Write It Down: Consider writing down what happened during the flashback. While this may be painful, it can be a constructive way to process the memories.

Remind Yourself: Reiterate that flashbacks are entirely normal responses to an abnormal event. Remind yourself that you are not currently in danger.

Flashback Halting Protocol: Try using the flashback halting protocol to remind yourself that you are not back in the traumatic situation and that you are safe.

Remember, coping with flashbacks can be challenging, but with time and practice, you can develop strategies that work best for you. You are not alone in experiencing these reactions, and seeking support from professionals or loved ones can also be incredibly helpful.

Flashback Halting Protocol

Right now I am feeling (emotionally):

[Describe the emotion you are experiencing during the flashback.]

I am sensing (in my body):

[Share any physical sensations you are aware of during the flashback.]

This is because I am remembering:

[Name the traumatic event that is causing the flashback.]

At the same time, I am looking around where I am now on:

[Specify the day, date, and year.]

here in (name the place)

And I can see:

[Describe some of the things you can see right now, in your current surroundings.]

So I know: [Name the traumatic event again.]

is not happening now or anymore.

This protocol is a tool to help ground yourself during a flashback. By acknowledging your present surroundings and emphasizing that the traumatic event is in the past, you can regain a sense of safety and control.

Use this protocol whenever you experience a flashback to remind yourself that you are not reliving the trauma and that you are in a safe place.

What Are Nightmares?

Nightmares are vivid and distressing dreams that occur while you are asleep. They can be similar to flashbacks but typically happen during sleep. Unlike flashbacks, nightmares may not always be directly about the sexual assault. They can also relate to abstract feelings of fear or unsafety. Nightmares often cause you to wake up suddenly, feeling panicked or anxious.

Coping with Nightmares:

Many of the coping strategies for dealing with flashbacks can also help with nightmares. Additionally, you can try the Nightmare Halting Protocol to regain control over your dreams and reduce their distressing effects.

Nightmare Halting Protocol

Identify Your Common Nightmare:

Write down the details of your most common nightmare.

Identify the Most Frightening Parts:

Determine which aspects of the nightmare are the most frightening or distressing.

Plan Changes:

Devise changes for these distressing elements in the dream so that it concludes with you feeling safe and protected. Remember, it's essential to remind yourself that it's just a dream, and you can alter it in any way that makes you feel comfortable.

Include Protective Figures:

Consider incorporating protective figures into your altered dream. These can be people, animals, or anything that makes you feel safe and secure.

Write Down the Altered Script:

Create a script for the new, modified dream in which you are safe and protected. Write this script down in detail.

Read the Script:

Read the scripted dream every night before you go to bed. This can help rewire your subconscious and reduce the occurrence of distressing nightmares.

By actively participating in altering the content of your nightmares, you can regain a sense of control and reduce the distress they cause. Remember that you have the power to change your dreams.

Grounding

Grounding is a technique that can help you stay connected to the present moment, particularly when you are experiencing flashbacks or nightmares. It involves using your five senses to anchor yourself in the "here and now." The beauty of grounding is that you can do it anywhere, at any time, and it's something you can do discreetly without others even knowing. This makes it a practical and effective tool for managing distressing moments.

Here are some grounding techniques using different senses:

Sight:

Look around and name five things you can see. Pay attention to their colours, shapes, and details. This can help bring your focus to your immediate surroundings.

Hearing:

Listen carefully and name four things you can hear. It could be the sound of traffic, birds singing, or even the hum of a fan. Concentrating on these sounds can anchor you in the present.

Touch:

Pay attention to three things you can physically touch. It could be the texture of your clothing, the sensation of your feet on the ground, or the warmth of a mug in your hand. Touching these objects can help you feel grounded.

Smell:

Identify two things you can smell. It might be the scent of a nearby flower, a familiar fragrance, or the aroma of your surroundings. Focus on these scents to stay present.

Taste:

Finally, name one thing you can taste. It could be a sip of water, a piece of food, or simply the taste of your own saliva. Paying attention to your sense of taste can help you connect with the current moment.

Use these grounding techniques whenever you feel overwhelmed or when you notice yourself slipping into a flashback or dissociative state. They can help you regain a sense of control and stay grounded in the here and now, even during challenging moments.

Trigger Techniques

Triggers are reminders that can bring back difficult feelings or memories. It's important to have strategies in place to help you cope when triggers arise. Here are some techniques that can help you to navigate these moments:

Identify Your Triggers:

Take some time to recognise what specific things or situations trigger difficult emotions or memories for you. This self-awareness is an important step towards managing them.

Breathing Exercises:

Deep, mindful breathing can help ground you when faced with a trigger. Try inhaling deeply for a count of four, holding for four counts, and exhaling for four counts. This can help calm your nervous system.

Self-Compassion:

Remind yourself that it's okay to feel triggered. Be kind and gentle with yourself. Acknowledge your feelings without judgment.

Use Your Senses:

Engage your senses to reconnect with the present moment. Focus on things you can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste. This can help shift your attention away from the trigger.

Positive Affirmations:

Have affirmations ready that remind you of your strength and resilience. Repeat these to yourself when you feel triggered.

Grounding Objects:

Carry a small object with you that you can touch or hold when you feel triggered. This can serve as a physical reminder of safety and strength.

Create a Safe Space:

Identify a physical space where you feel secure. This could be a room in your home or a specific spot outdoors. Visit this space when you need to feel grounded.

Distract Yourself:

Engage in activities that capture your attention and focus. This could be reading, drawing, listening to music, or any hobby you enjoy.

Connect with Support:

Reach out to someone you trust when you're feeling triggered. They can provide comfort, reassurance, and understanding.

Set Boundaries:

Give yourself permission to say no to situations or conversations that you know might be triggering. Prioritise your well-being.

Changing Thinking Patterns

It's common to experience various thoughts after a traumatic event like a sexual assault. These thoughts can range from negative to neutral to positive.

Helpful Thinking Styles

Balanced Perspective:

Challenge the negative mental filter by acknowledging both positive and negative aspects of a situation. Avoid fixating solely on the negative.

Question Assumptions:

Instead of jumping to conclusions about what others might think, ask them or seek clarification. Avoid predicting negative outcomes without evidence.

Realistic Reflection:

Understand that hindsight bias isn't accurate. You couldn't have predicted the assault, and blaming yourself is unhelpful.

Avoid Catastrophizing:

Counteract catastrophic thoughts by considering more realistic scenarios. Most often, things are not as dire as they seem.

Individual Accountability:

Avoid over-generalising. Recognise that one person's actions don't represent an entire group. Not all people are dangerous, and you are not responsible for someone else's actions.

Remember, these are tools to help you shift toward more empowering thinking patterns. It's natural to have a mix of thoughts, but consciously working on positive and balanced perspectives can help to your healing process. You are resilient, and your thoughts can empower you to move forward.

YOUR NOTES

Managing Mood Changes

Experiencing a wide range of emotions is entirely normal after a sexual assault. You may find yourself feeling sad, hopeless, or overwhelmed. Tears may come easily, or you might struggle to express your emotions. Your interest in people and activities you once enjoyed may change, and your future plans may seem unimportant.

These emotions can have a significant impact on various aspects of your life, including motivation, appetite, sleep, concentration, and even your desire for intimacy.

One effective way to start improving your mood is by gradually reintroducing activities into your daily routine. Engaging in activities can help elevate your mood and provide a sense of accomplishment. Here's how you can begin:

Action Plan for Improving Your Mood

Set Achievable Goals:

Start with small, manageable tasks like doing laundry or cooking a meal.

Connect with Others:

Reach out to friends or family members. Consider meeting a friend for a meal or having a heart-to-heart conversation.

Find Enjoyment:

Rekindle your interests by watching a film, reading a book, or engaging in a hobby like gardening.

Remember, it's essential to follow your action plan, even when your mood may not align with it. By acting according to your plan rather than your mood, you'll gradually notice an improvement in how you feel.

YOUR NOTES

Keeping a Self-Care Notebook

Having a self-care notebook can be a powerful tool on your journey. This notebook is a safe space where you can record your thoughts, feelings, and progress. It's a personal resource designed to help and support your well-being.

Here's how to create and use your self-care notebook

Getting Started: Choose a Notebook: Select a notebook that you feel a connection to. It could be plain or decorative, large or small—whatever feels right for you.

Personalise Your Notebook: Make it your own by decorating the cover, writing an empowering quote, or adding anything that resonates with you.

Using Your Notebook: Journal Your Thoughts and Feelings: Write down your thoughts and emotions as they arise. Don't hold back; this is a judgment-free space. Express yourself honestly.

Track Your Progress: Document your journey. Note any positive changes, no matter how small they may seem. Celebrate your achievements.

Self-Care Strategies: List self-care activities that bring you comfort and peace. Include things like taking walks, listening to music, or practicing mindfulness.

Goals and Aspirations: Set goals for yourself, both short-term and long-term. Your notebook can help you visualise and work toward a brighter future.

Why It Helps

Emotional Outlet: Writing can be cathartic, providing an outlet for difficult emotions.

Self-Reflection: It allows you to gain insight into your thoughts and feelings, helping you better understand yourself.

Progress Tracking: Seeing your progress can be motivating and affirming.

Self-Care Resource: Your notebook is a go-to resource for self-care ideas and techniques.

Empowerment: Taking control of your healing process and documenting it can be empowering.

Remember, your self-care notebook is entirely personal, and there's no right or wrong way to use it. It's a tool for your healing and well-being, and it's here to support you on your journey. Be kind to yourself, and use this space to nurture your inner strength.

Sleep Problems and How to Improve Your Sleep

Sleep problems are a common challenge after experiencing sexual assault. Your brain's threat system may be on high alert, making it hard to relax and sleep peacefully. Here are some practical tips to help you improve your sleep:

Do Try:

Establish a Routine: Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, even on weekends. This helps regulate your body's internal clock.

Create a Relaxing Bedtime Ritual: Develop calming activities before bed, such as reading a book, taking a warm bath, or practicing deep breathing exercises.

Limit Screen Time: Avoid screens (phones, tablets, TVs) at least an hour before bedtime. The blue light from screens can disrupt your sleep cycle.

Create a Comfortable Sleep Environment: Ensure your bedroom is cool, dark, and quiet. Invest in a comfortable mattress and pillows.

Mindful Relaxation: Practice mindfulness or relaxation techniques before sleep. Focus on your breath and let go of stressful thoughts.

Limit Caffeine and Alcohol: Avoid caffeine and alcohol in the hours leading up to bedtime, as they can interfere with sleep quality.

Stay Active: Regular physical activity during the day can promote better sleep. However, avoid strenuous exercise close to bedtime.

Watch Your Diet: Don't go to bed hungry or overly full. A light, balanced snack before bedtime can help.

Try to Avoid:

Napping: While a short nap can be refreshing, long or late-day naps can disrupt your sleep at night.

Stimulants: Avoid stimulants like nicotine, which can interfere with your sleep.

Excessive Fluids: Minimise the consumption of liquids close to bedtime to reduce nighttime awakenings for bathroom trips.

Heavy Meals: Large, rich meals close to bedtime may cause discomfort and disrupt sleep.

Clock Watching: Constantly checking the time can create anxiety about not sleeping, making it even harder to fall asleep.

Worrying About Sleep: It's natural to have some nights with poor sleep. Don't stress about it; it will improve over time.

Alcohol and Sleep Medications: These may help you fall asleep but can lead to disrupted sleep patterns later in the night.

Remember that improving your sleep may take time, so be patient with yourself. Experiment with these strategies and see which ones work best for you. A good night's sleep is essential for your overall well-being, and these steps can help you regain control over your sleep patterns.

Taking Care of Your Nutrition After a Trauma

Your eating habits can be greatly affected after experiencing sexual assault or rape. It's important to be mindful of your nutrition during this time to support your overall well-being. Here are some practical tips:

Eating Well

Regular Meals: Try to have regular meals each day, even if you don't feel like eating. Skipping meals can make you feel worse.

Balanced Diet: Aim for a balanced diet that includes a variety of foods from all food groups: fruits, vegetables, grains, protein, and dairy.

Small, Nutrient-Rich Snacks: If you're struggling with large meals, opt for smaller, nutrient-dense snacks like nuts, yogurt, or fruit.

Stay Hydrated: Drink plenty of water throughout the day to stay hydrated. Dehydration can affect your mood and energy levels.

Managing Food-Related Challenges

Loss of Appetite: If you're not feeling hungry, try to eat small, frequent meals rather than large ones. Eating with a trusted friend or family member can make the experience more enjoyable.

Emotional Eating: Coping with difficult emotions by turning to food can be common. Be mindful of emotional eating and seek healthier ways to manage your feelings.

Avoiding Certain Foods: You might find that certain foods trigger negative feelings or memories. It's okay to avoid these foods for now and focus on what makes you feel comfortable.

Consult a Dietitian: If you have specific dietary concerns or struggles, consider consulting a registered dietitian for personalised guidance.

YOUR NOTES

Understanding Anxiety and How to Cope

Anxiety is a common and natural response to trauma, such as sexual assault or rape. It's your body's way of reacting to a threat, and it can manifest in various ways. Here's some helpful information:

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of unease, nervousness, or worry, often about something that might happen in the future. After a traumatic event, like sexual assault, anxiety can become more frequent and intense. It's your body's way of trying to protect you.

Common Symptoms of Anxiety:

Racing heart or palpitations

Sweating

Shaking or trembling

Feeling tense or on edge

Rapid breathing or shortness of breath

Nausea or stomach discomfort

Restlessness

Difficulty concentrating

Sleep disturbances

Coping with Anxiety

Breathing Exercises: Practice deep breathing exercises to help calm your body's stress response. Inhale through your nose for a count of five, hold for two, and slow exhale counting to eight. Repeat this three times.

Grounding Techniques: Grounding exercises can help you stay connected to the present moment. Try naming five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation: Tense and then relax different muscle groups in your body. This can help reduce physical tension caused by anxiety.

Positive Self-Talk: Challenge negative thoughts with positive ones. Remind yourself that you are safe now, and the anxiety will pass.

Routine and Structure: Establishing a daily routine can provide a sense of stability and predictability, which can ease anxiety.

Seek Support: Talk to a trusted friend, or family member about your feelings. You don't have to go through this alone.

Avoidance and Its Impact:

After a traumatic event, you may find yourself avoiding places, people, or activities that remind you of what happened. While avoidance can provide temporary relief, it can also reinforce anxiety in the long term.

Facing Avoidance: Take Small Steps: Gradually expose yourself to the things you're avoiding. Start with less triggering situations and work your way up to more challenging ones.

Challenge Negative Beliefs: Identify and challenge beliefs that are keeping you stuck in avoidance. Try to reframe your thoughts in a more balanced way.

Professional Help: If avoidance is significantly impacting your life, consider seeking help from a therapist or counsellor who specialises in trauma.

Remember, it's okay to feel anxious, and you're not alone in this experience. With time and support, anxiety can become more manageable, and you can regain control over your life.

Mindful Breathing Exercise: Finding Calm in the Moment

Mindful breathing is a powerful tool to help you stay grounded and manage anxiety. It's a simple practice that you can do anytime, anywhere.

Here's how to do it:

Find a Comfortable Position: Sit or lie down in a comfortable position. You can close your eyes if it feels comfortable, but it's not necessary.

Take a Deep Breath In: Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose, counting to four in your mind. Feel your lungs fill with air, and let your abdomen rise as you breathe in.

Hold Your Breath: At the top of your inhalation, hold your breath for a brief moment, counting to four again.

Exhale Slowly: Exhale slowly and completely through your mouth, counting to four once more. Feel the tension leaving your body as you release your breath.

Pause: At the end of your exhalation, pause for a moment before starting the next breath cycle.

Repeat: Continue this mindful breathing cycle for several minutes or as long as you need to feel more relaxed and present.

Understanding Guilt and Self-Blame:

It's common for survivors of sexual assault or rape to experience feelings of guilt and self-blame. These emotions can be overwhelming, but it's important to remember that the assault is never your fault. Here's some insight into why these feelings may arise and how to cope with them:

Why You Might Feel Guilty or Self-Blame

Survivor's Guilt: You might question why you survived when others have experienced similar trauma. Remember that everyone's experiences are unique, and your survival is not something to feel guilty about.

Fear of Negative Reactions: Concerns about how others will react when you disclose the assault can lead to guilt. You may worry about causing pain or distress to loved ones.

Societal Pressure: Society often places blame on survivors, questioning their actions, choices, or behaviors. These messages can contribute to self-blame.

Loss of Control: Feelings of guilt can stem from not being able to prevent the assault or feeling that you should have done something differently.

Coping with Guilt and Self-Blame

Acknowledge Your Feelings: It's okay to feel these emotions, but remember that they don't reflect the reality of the situation.

Challenge Negative Thoughts: Try to identify and challenge negative or self-blaming thoughts. Ask yourself if these thoughts are based on facts or simply perceptions.

Seek Support: Talk to someone you trust about your feelings. Sharing your thoughts and fears can help alleviate guilt and provide emotional support.

Self-Compassion: Be kind to yourself. Treat yourself with the same compassion and understanding you would offer to a friend in a similar situation.

Self-Care: Engage in self-care activities that promote your well-being, such as mindfulness, exercise, journaling, or spending time with loved ones.

Remember that healing takes time, and it's a journey unique to each individual. Be patient with yourself and seek help when needed. You are not alone, and there is support available to help you overcome feelings of guilt and self-blame.

Understanding and Overcoming Feelings of Shame:

Experiencing shame after sexual assault or rape is common, but it's essential to recognise that you have nothing to be ashamed of. These feelings often arise from misplaced blame or societal misconceptions.

Why You Might Feel Shame

Misplaced Blame: Survivors sometimes mistakenly blame themselves for the assault, thinking they could have prevented it. Remember, the responsibility lies solely with the perpetrator.

Stigmatisation: Society can stigmatise survivors, reinforcing feelings of shame. It's important to challenge these societal attitudes and recognise them as harmful and untrue.

Violated Boundaries: Experiencing a breach of personal boundaries can lead to feelings of shame and vulnerability.

Judgment: Fear of judgment from others can contribute to shame. Concerns about how friends, family, or the legal system will perceive you may arise.

Overcoming Shame

Self-Compassion: Practice self-compassion by treating yourself with the same kindness and understanding you would offer to a friend in a similar situation.

Challenge Negative Thoughts: Identify and challenge negative thoughts related to shame. Ask yourself if these thoughts are based on facts or societal misconceptions.

Seek Support: Talk to someone you trust about your feelings of shame. Sharing your thoughts and fears can help alleviate shame and provide emotional support.

Community Resources: Connect with support groups, survivor networks, or advocacy organisations. These communities can provide validation and a safe space to discuss your experiences.

Mindfulness: Engage in mindfulness exercises to stay present and reduce shame associated with past events.

Remember, healing is a personal journey, and it's okay to seek help when needed. You are not alone, and many individuals and resources are available to support you in overcoming feelings of shame.

Speaking to Yourself in the Mirror:

Sometimes, offering yourself the same support and compassion you would give to a friend can be incredibly powerful. Stand in front of a mirror, look yourself in the eyes, and imagine you're speaking to someone you care about who has experienced what you have. Here's what you might say:

"I believe you." Start by acknowledging the validity of your own experience. Just as you would believe and support a friend, believe in yourself.

"It's not your fault." Remind yourself that you are not to blame for what happened. No one deserves to experience sexual assault or rape.

"You are strong." Recognise your resilience and inner strength. Surviving such a traumatic event shows your incredible courage.

"You are not alone." Understand that there is a network of support available to you, from friends and family to professionals and advocacy groups.

"Seek help when you're ready." Encourage yourself to reach out for support when you feel comfortable doing so. There is no rush, and it's okay to take your time.

"Healing is possible." Believe in your ability to heal and recover from this experience. Many survivors find their path to healing and happiness.

"Self-care matters." Prioritise self-care and self-compassion. Treat yourself with the same kindness you'd offer to a loved one.

"You have a future." Your life is not defined by this traumatic event. There are opportunities for growth, joy, and happiness ahead.

"You are worth it." Emphasise your self-worth and value. You deserve a life free from the burden of shame or guilt.

Now, consider turning that same compassionate and supportive voice towards yourself. Just as you would care for a friend, it's important to treat yourself with the same understanding and gentleness. You deserve the same empathy and support that you would offer to someone you care about.

Anger and Irritability

Experiencing anger and irritability after a sexual assault is entirely normal. It's a natural response to a traumatic event. Here are some ways to cope with these feelings:

Acknowledge Your Emotions: It's okay to feel angry. Don't judge yourself for these emotions; they are a natural part of the healing process.

Express Your Feelings: Find healthy ways to express your anger. This might involve talking to a trusted friend, writing in a journal, or even engaging in physical activity like jogging or punching a pillow.

Deep Breathing: Practice deep breathing exercises to help manage intense emotions. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach. Inhale through your nose for a count of four. Make sure your stomach is expanding and not your chest. Exhale through your mouth for a count of four. Repeat as many times as needed.

Mindfulness and Meditation: These techniques can help you stay present in the moment, reducing anger and irritability. You can find guided mindfulness exercises online.

Self-Care: Make time for self-care activities that you enjoy and that help you relax, like taking a bath, reading a book, or listening to music.

Set Boundaries: It's important to set boundaries with people who may trigger your anger or irritability. Let them know what you need to feel safe and respected.

Professional Help: If anger becomes overwhelming and interferes with your daily life, consider seeking help from a therapist or counsellor who specialises in trauma.

Remember, your feelings are valid, and it's okay to seek support and help in managing them. You are not alone in this journey, and there are people and resources available to assist you.

Relationship and Intimacy Problems

Survivors of sexual assault may encounter challenges in their relationships and intimacy. These issues can be distressing, but it's important to remember that they are common reactions to a traumatic experience. Here are some ways to cope with relationship and intimacy problems:

Relationship Problems

Difficulty Trusting: After a sexual assault, it can be hard to trust others. This can make it challenging to form new connections or maintain close relationships.

Sexual Difficulties: It's normal to find it difficult to engage in sexual relationships after a sexual assault. Sex may trigger memories of the assault, and survivors may struggle with negative feelings about themselves or their bodies.

Varied Sexual Responses: Survivors may react differently to their sexual experiences. Some may withdraw from intimacy, while others might engage in risky sexual behaviors.

Sexuality: Sexual assault can happen to anyone, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. It's essential to understand that sexual assault is about power and control, not the survivor's sexuality.

Coping Strategies

Take Your Time: It's crucial to give yourself time to become comfortable with the idea of physical intimacy and close relationships.

Positive Self-Talk: Remind yourself that the assault was not consensual sex; it was an assault. You are not dirty; you are a survivor.

Safety First: Ensure you feel safe and comfortable in sexual situations. Trust your instincts and establish boundaries.

Open Communication: Talk to your partner about your feelings and concerns. Let them know that finding sex difficult is a normal reaction to sexual assault.

Alternative Intimacy: Initially, focus on non-sexual physical contact like cuddling or massage to rebuild intimacy.

Shared Activities: Spend quality time with your partner doing activities you both enjoy, like dining out or watching movies.

Remove Triggers: Eliminate reminders of the assault from your bedroom to create a safe space.

Remember, a survivor may experience sexual arousal during an assault. Sexual arousal is an automatic physiological response to stimulation and cannot be consciously controlled.

It does not indicate enjoyment or consent.

Your feelings and reactions are valid, and healing takes time. Seek support from professionals and consider joining support groups to connect with others who have faced similar challenges.

Suicidal Thoughts and Self-Harm

Experiencing a sexual assault or rape can lead to overwhelming emotional pain and distress, which may sometimes result in suicidal thoughts or self-harming behaviours. It's essential to address these feelings and seek help immediately.

Remember: You Are Not Alone

If you are having suicidal thoughts or urges to self-harm, please seek help immediately.

Call Emergency Services: If you are in immediate danger or have harmed yourself, call 999 or go to your nearest Accident & Emergency department.

Contact a Helpline: Reach out to helplines like Samaritans at 116 123 or other local crisis hotlines. They are available 24/7 to provide support and a listening ear.

Talk to Someone You Trust: Reach out to a trusted friend, family member, or mental health professional. Let them know what you're going through so they can support you.

Remember These Important Points:

You Are Not Weak: Experiencing these thoughts or urges does not make you weak or a burden to others. It is a normal reaction to an extraordinary situation.

Seek Help: It takes courage to ask for help. Reach out to professionals who can provide you with the support and guidance you need to heal.

Safety First: If you are in immediate danger or have harmed yourself, call emergency services right away.

Reach Out: Talk to someone you trust about what you're going through. Sharing your feelings can provide relief and understanding.

Professional Support: Consider seeking help from a therapist, counsellor, or mental health specialist who is experienced in trauma and sexual assault.

Self-Care: Practice self-care techniques like deep breathing, grounding exercises, and relaxation to help manage distressing emotions.

First Light

Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Support for All



www.firstlight.org.uk

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