



A Guide to Self Care

SYNERGY

Synergy Essex provides information and support services for anyone who has been sexually abused or raped, or who has been affected by sexual violence at any time in their lives.

Synergy Essex is a partnership of three Rape Crisis Centres comprising SERICC, Rape & Sexual Abuse Specialist Services, Southend Rape Crisis Centre (SOSRC) and mid and north Essex Centre for Action on Rape and Abuse (CARA), offering an Essex wide service providing specialist emotional support, counselling, advocacy and other services to support adults, children, young people, their families and supporters.

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How can this guide help you?

If you only have a few minutes to go through this booklet, just look out for these boxes for some quick self-care suggestions.

We understand that sometimes it can feel very difficult to look after yourself properly or to think good things about yourself. This can be especially true when you are dealing with the consequences of sexual violence in your life. Sometimes it feels like you just have too much going on. How can you find the time or the quiet space to do something nice just for you? Or you might be feeling that you don't deserve to feel good or do nice things. If you have been used to people treating you badly for a long time, it can be extra difficult to get used to the idea that positive change and improvements are possible for you. This guide is designed to help remind you that, no matter what you have been through, there are things you can try which might sometimes help you to feel better. We hope the guide will help you to be more confident about coping with difficult situations and feelings and help you to be more hopeful about your future.

We know that there will still be times where it feels as if nothing will help at all. We hope that you will find enough useful ideas and suggestions here to get you through those difficult times too.

The information in this guide is provided to try to help you understand the possible impacts of sexual violence and to offer you some ideas of how you can manage those impacts. We believe that if you understand the way that sexual violence might affect a person's mind and body then the way you feel will hopefully begin to make more sense to you. Not everything in the guide will be relevant to you and some of the ideas may not work for you. The intention is for you to better understand why you feel the way you do and what you can do to make changes that help you cope.

A really important point for you to remember is that you have already survived and you are already coping in lots of different ways. Try to hold on to the thought that you have your own strengths, skills and resources which have helped you get this far and this booklet will hopefully help you build on those.

To try and help you make sense of what you have been through and how it makes you feel, the booklet looks at some of the myths which society has created around all forms of sexual violence. These myths can make it harder to recover from any experience of sexual violence so we will also cover the realities to help you recognise that the responsibility for sexual violence lies with the perpetrators who chose to assault or abuse someone. Then we are going to explore trauma and trauma responses. These are the ways in which trauma survivors often react to the world. Some of these might seem really familiar to you and others not so much.

Try to remember that everyone reacts differently to their experience of sexual violence, there is no right or wrong way to respond to what you have been through.

The same is true for ways of coping with how you feel. Everyone finds their own ways to deal with their experiences, memories, thoughts and feelings. The difficulties come when coping strategies seem to stop working or when they bring their own problems. The last section of the booklet explores coping strategies and will hopefully give you more ideas to look after yourself in the best possible ways for you.

What is sexual violence?

Sexual violence is a term that is used to cover all forms of sexual harm, including rape, sexual assault, child sexual abuse and online sexual abuse. Sexual violence is any sexual contact that is not consensual. The Sexual Offences Act 2003 says that a person consents to sexual activity if they agree by choice and have the freedom and capacity to consent.

Freedom to consent means that there are no forms of persuasion or coercion used that might lead someone to make a choice they would not otherwise make. The person must be free to agree to sexual activity or to decline it without there being any reward (financial or otherwise) or any negative repercussions.

Capacity to consent means that the person is fully able to understand what they are choosing, that they are mentally and emotionally well enough, mature enough and that they are not under the influence of any substances which would impede decision making. Lots of things impact our capacity including age (which is why we have an age of consent), alcohol, recreational drugs, prescription drugs, some mental health conditions, some learning disabilities and some neurological differences.

The law also says that the perpetrator is supposed to be really clear that you were giving your consent freely – if you were drunk, or asleep, or they had to persuade or threaten you, then they should have stopped what they were doing.

In this guide, we use the term ‘sexual violence’ to cover a whole range of experiences and to show that there may be no simple way of describing what has happened to you. All forms of sexual violence, including those that do not involve physical contact such as grooming, can have a significant impact on you. Human brains experience sexual violence as trauma and that means we might have unexpected or unpredictable responses to what we have been through.



Try to accept that, whatever responses you are experiencing, they are normal responses to an abnormal situation, a situation that should not have happened. It is really important to be kind to yourself and not judge yourself harshly for how you feel or how you respond to what is going on for you. We hope that the booklet will help you understand your thoughts, feelings and reactions, and begin to feel more in control.

Victim or survivor?

People who have experienced sexual violence may hear themselves referred to as a victim. This is the word the media and police most commonly use. In this guide, we are going to use the term 'survivor' because, no matter how you are feeling right now, you have survived what happened to you and you are more than what happened to you. We use the term 'perpetrator' to describe the person who has caused the sexual harm.

What do we mean by self-care?

The phrase self-care is often used to refer to any lifestyle choices or techniques that someone uses to help them manage mental health issues or to help them achieve positive emotional well-being. The term can also be used by those with disabilities to mean taking notice of how you feel and working with others to manage your physical and emotional health. Some types of self-care you can do for yourself and by yourself while other techniques might require support from others. Self-care isn't something you need to do alone and it is important to ask for support when you feel it would be beneficial. We understand that self-care means different things to different people and that you are probably the person who can best work out what is going to help you the most.



Myths and Reality

Many people have very complicated views of sex. It's something people often joke about and a lot of the adverts and media we see are highly sexualised. But we don't tend to have serious conversations about sex, sexual relationships and consent. This means there are lots of assumptions that are made about sexual violence which are not accurate and which place the blame for what happened with the survivor. This is sometimes called victim-blaming. These myths are so powerful, survivors can sometimes believe them too even though what has happened is definitely not their fault.

Here are some of the most common myths about sexual violence with explanations of why they are incorrect.

MYTH: Sexual violence happens because of the clothes someone was wearing, because they were drunk or high on drugs, because they were out late at night on their own or because of something they said or did.

FACT: The only cause of sexual violence is the person who chooses to commit the act of sexual violence. Clothes cannot make anyone harm someone else. People experience sexual violence in all kinds of outfits, from being dressed up for a night out, to being in their work clothes to wearing their school uniform. There is no such thing as a skirt length or the cut of a top that makes people commit sexual violence. Also, if someone is drunk or high on drugs, that does not make someone else harm them. The law says that consent in sexual acts must be freely given when everyone involved has the capacity to do so, which means that taking advantage of someone who is incapacitated or asleep is a sexual offence. Perpetrators of sexual offences are wholly and totally to blame for acts of sexual violence they choose to commit no matter what the survivor is wearing, no matter where the survivor was and no matter how the survivor behaved.

You did not do anything to make you responsible for what the perpetrator did to you.

MYTH: People would try to fight off an attacker and try to get away if it was really sexual violence.

FACT: When someone is experiencing a traumatic event, like sexual violence, they are not able to make decisions in the way they usually would. Trauma causes our brain to partially shut down so it focuses only on keeping us alive and it isn't concerned with what the longer-term psychological and emotional impacts might be. Very few people try to fight off a perpetrator, most will freeze and be physically unable to do anything except wait for the incident to end. You can find out more about how your brain might respond in the section on trauma.

Your nervous system did the best it could to get you through a traumatic experience alive and as unhurt as possible.

MYTH: If the experience was so bad, the victim would tell someone straight away and go to the police.

FACT: While some people do report sexual violence to the police straight away, many people don't tell anyone what has happened, sometimes for many years, and many people never report to the police. It can be very difficult to find the right words, the right time and the right person to tell. There are many understandable reasons people may feel unable to share

their experiences: they may fear they will not be believed, they may risk losing their home or job or they may worry about the impact on their family and friends. Not telling people what has happened does not mean that it didn't happen.

It is your right to decide whether to tell anyone about what you have been through. If you do decide to tell someone, it is your right to decide who to tell, as well as when and how to tell them.

MYTH: Sexual violence is perpetrated by strangers.

FACT: Lots of reports of sexual violence in the media are about sexual offences committed by strangers and this can give the impression that most sexual violence is perpetrated by someone the survivor does not know. While sexual attacks by strangers do happen, the majority of sexual violence (around 90%) is perpetrated by someone the survivor knows. This would include someone they are in a romantic or sexual relationship with, someone they are friends with, a work colleague, or someone in their family.

All sexual violence can be experienced as traumatic regardless of whether the perpetrator is someone you know or a total stranger. Whether or not you knew your perpetrator does not make your experience more or less bad than someone else's experience. Try not to compare your situation to that of others because everybody reacts differently and all survivors are entitled to support.

MYTH: People, especially women and children, lie about sexual violence.

FACT: When people, especially women, say they have experienced sexual violence, it is common for others to question them on this. As well as

being asked victim-blaming questions like “what were you wearing?” or “why didn’t you just leave?”, they may also be accused of making up an allegation to get revenge or to ruin a man’s life. In reality, it is very, very rare for someone to lie about sexual violence. Research by the Crown Prosecution Service in 2013, found that only 0.6% of rape allegations that made it to them for a charging decision were found to be false or malicious allegations.

We believe you.

MYTH: People who have experienced sexual violence go on to become perpetrators.

FACT: There is no evidence of there being a link between someone experiencing sexual violence going on to perpetrate sexual violence. Some children who experience sexual violence may exhibit sexualised or harmful sexual behaviour when they are a child but this is not the same as being a perpetrator. Women and girls are more likely to be survivors of sexual violence so, if this myth were true, we would expect to see lots of female perpetrators and, in fact, perpetrators are more likely to be men. People who experience sexual violence are more likely to never commit a sexual offence because they know the harm it can cause and they are kind, considerate and caring people.

The sexual violence you have experienced is not going to turn you into a perpetrator.

MYTH: Men have uncontrollable sexual urges.

FACT: Some people argue that men who commit sexual offences do so because they cannot help themselves, that men have sexual needs that they have to meet and, if they are not met, they have no choice but to rape someone. This is absolutely incorrect. The vast majority of men manage to control their sexual desires and never commit any acts of sexual violence. This myth makes women accountable for men's behaviours and suggests that women must always submit to men's sexual desires because they may be harmful otherwise. The truth is that men who commit sexual violence are totally responsible for the choices they make and the things they do and there is absolutely no medical evidence to support the idea that sexual urges are uncontrollable.

Both men and women are capable of controlling their sexual urges. Sexual predators choose not to.

MYTH: Talking about what happened will make it worse.

FACT: When you have experienced sexual violence, sometimes people close to you will find it very difficult to hear you talk about what happened. You may not even want to talk about it. Having to recount exactly what happened might not be helpful or something you want to do and being made to do so can be re-traumatising. However, talking about the impact of your experiences, the changes it has had on your day-to-day life and the emotions it has caused is more likely to help you feel better. Counselling can be a safe space for you to be able to have these conversations in a way that is managed and private.

Specialist sexual violence counselling helps empower you to process the traumatic events you have survived whilst feeling safe and in control.

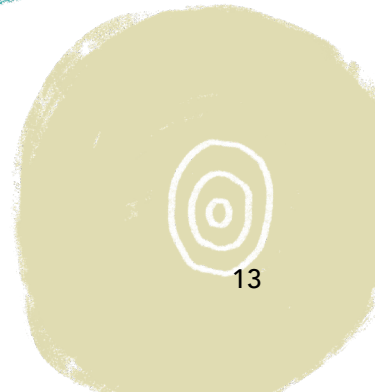
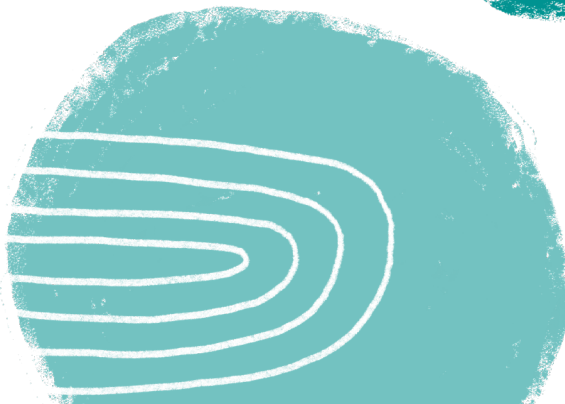
Trauma

Sexual violence is a type of trauma.

The word 'trauma' can be used to describe any event which:

- threatens a person's safety
- is unexpected or not normal in their experience
- is beyond their perceived ability to cope
- impacts on their daily life and functioning

Different people will experience different events as traumatic and what is traumatic for one person may not be for another. We all have different experiences of life and different ways of managing so it is impossible to say what will or will not be traumatic. Sometimes people will say you should be able to "get over it" or that "it could have been worse" but that's not how our brains work. When our safety is threatened, it is natural and normal to find that challenging to cope with and for it to impact on how we manage everyday life. Anything which feels traumatic to us can be overwhelming.



Trauma and the Brain



reptilian brain

mammalian brain

prefrontal cortex

Very simply speaking, our brains can be divided into three parts: the reptilian brain, the mammalian brain and the prefrontal cortex or thinking brain. Each part serves a different function. The reptilian brain is responsible for keeping us alive. It makes sure we breathe and digest food without having to think and it takes over when our brain perceives we are in danger. The mammalian brain processes the information we get from the world around us through our senses (taste, touch, sight, hearing and smell) and the prefrontal cortex does all our logical thinking and reasoning.

When a person experiences a traumatic event, the reptilian brain takes over and the parts of the brain that manage our senses (the mammalian brain) and logical thinking (the prefrontal cortex) tend to be shut down. The reptilian brain is only concerned with survival and responds instinctively to danger.

Lots of people talk about feeling the urges to fight (for example push, kick, punch) or flight (putting physical distance between you and the person causing you harm by running away, for example). The reptilian brain can also cause a person to freeze (stay still and do nothing), flop (your body

goes like a ragdoll) or friend (try to create a bond with the person causing harm to reduce the chances of further harm). These are the 5 Fs.

If a particular response works (it keeps you alive on that occasion), the brain will default to using that response again in any future traumatic situations. This is especially true if you experience repeated trauma, like a child who is sexually abused on a regular basis or an adult who is often raped by their partner. A survivor might know that they always freeze when someone touches them, even if that person is safe, and this might seem difficult to understand. What it tells us is that this person's nervous system still does not feel completely safe so, even though the thinking brain knows that this is a safe and good person, and the sensory information gives clues of safety (for example, the other person is calm and gentle), the nervous system is picking up on signs of danger for some reason. The signs of danger might be completely unrelated to the situation, like a car door slamming outside or a certain kind of light, but the nervous system reacts as if under threat again. There is more information about these kinds of triggers further on.

There are ways of retraining your nervous system to recognise when you are safe. Grounding techniques are especially useful for helping you stay in the present and not get triggered into an 'old' response such as freezing.



Trauma Responses

People who have experienced trauma, including the trauma of sexual violence, will often find they have trauma responses. These may last for a short time or may last for much longer and have a significant impact on the survivor's life. Trauma responses are ways of coping with what has happened and they are often attempts by your brain to protect you, though they may not feel that way. For example, fear is a protective feeling which seeks to make you aware of potential harm, forgetfulness is a protective cognitive process which seeks to keep difficult thoughts at bay and isolation is a protective behaviour which seeks to avoid further harm being perpetrated against you by staying away from other people.

It can help to remind yourself that your nervous system will always be trying its best to keep you alive and safe. If past traumas mean that your nervous system keeps jumping in when it doesn't need to, you might begin to feel really frustrated. Try to be extra kind to yourself with your thoughts and your actions to help your nervous system learn to recognise when you are safe.

Common trauma responses include:

- **Guilt, shame and self-blame**

People who have experienced the trauma of sexual violence may feel that they are in some way to blame or responsible for what happened to them. They may think that there was something they could have done to stop the sexual abuse happening either beforehand or during the incident. The feeling that they did something to cause the sexual violence, combined with the fact that sex is typically something that is not openly spoken about, means the survivor may also feel shame around what happened to them. They may also feel guilty about the impact of the incident, even

though it was the result of the perpetrator's decisions and actions. They may feel that they have caused distress to their family or friends or even that they have caused problems for the perpetrator. All these reasons add to the difficulties children, young people and adults may have in speaking about sexual violence of any kind.

Perpetrators will often deliberately say things designed to increase feelings of guilt and shame so that they do not have to take responsibility for their own actions. Try to deliberately remind yourself that you are not responsible for what the perpetrator did.

- **Avoidance**

Avoidance includes behaviours and responses that are an attempt to remove yourself from the feelings the trauma has caused. This might include behaviours such as isolating yourself from family and friends and spending time alone or using drugs, alcohol or self-harm to try to numb the feelings or replace difficult feelings with different ones. Other avoidance responses include suicidal thoughts and ideation (thinking about killing yourself or forming a plan of how you would do so), depression (feelings of severe despondency and dejection) and dissociation (disconnecting from everything around you, like an intense daydream). After traumatic experiences, these are understandable responses, but avoidance does not usually feel very good to us. It's important to think about how being around others safely might start to feel manageable to you.

Being on your own can sometimes feel like the only way of being safe so try not to give yourself a hard time for feeling like this. Try to be aware of the clues which might tell you when you feel ready to be around others or which person or people it might feel safe to be around to begin with.

- **Re-living**

Re-living covers trauma responses that involve the brain going through the experiences of trauma again and again as it tries to make sense of what happened. This might include nightmares, flashbacks (being awake but feeling like the traumatic incident is happening again), intrusive thoughts (negative or unhelpful thoughts connected to the traumatic incident that pop into your head, often without warning) and hallucinations or hearing voices (seeing things that are not there or hearing voices of people who are not there, usually saying negative or unhelpful things). Often, these thoughts are your mind's way of trying to make sense of what you have been through so having a safe space to process the memories and feelings can be very helpful.

These experiences can feel scary and disorientating so learning techniques to manage them can really help you feel more in control. Some people find drawing or writing things down helpful, others need to say things out loud in a safe place with a safe person. Learning what works for you is an important part of your recovery.

- **Physical Responses**

Trauma is likely to affect your body and physical well-being. It is sometimes said that the body remembers, which means that experiences of trauma can have a long-lasting impact on how your body feels or works. You may find that you have:

- headaches or dizzy spells
- stomach problems
- tense muscles or physical pain
- sleep problems, tiredness and exhaustion
- weight gain or loss
- lack of energy or hyperactivity
- increased heart rate

Trauma may also have an impact on your cognitive abilities. For example, you may struggle to concentrate and feel like your head is 'fuzzy' or feel confused. This might mean it feels more difficult to make decisions, even on things that would typically require little thought. You might forget things or find memories are triggered and come back without warning, bringing up thoughts and feelings that feel unmanageable.

You, or other people, may also notice changes to your behaviour. For example you may be more verbally or physically aggressive, find yourself drinking or smoking more than usual, your attitude to work or chores may change and you procrastinate or fill your time with overworking or excessive cleaning, and you may find that you are more critical of other people in your life.

- **Hyperarousal and Hypoarousal**

These are two extreme states our nervous system can be triggered into. Neither of them is good for us as they both mean we are in a state of dysregulation and our nervous system is getting muddled messages about danger and we cannot calm ourselves down.

When our nervous system activates too much, it is called hyperarousal and this often involves feelings of anxiety which may be intense enough to lead to panic attacks. You may feel on edge constantly, unable to sit still or breathe calmly. Survivors may also be hyper-vigilant, which means they are conscious and acutely aware of their surroundings, what people are doing and saying and all movements, which is exhausting to maintain. Unsurprisingly, if your nervous system has been triggered into hyperarousal, you may seem jumpy and fidgety and your heart might feel as if it is hammering out of your chest. This is not a healthy or tolerable state to be in for any length of time so it is really important to find ways of calming everything back down again.

When our nervous system is triggered into shutting down, it is called hypoarousal and this will often make us feel unable to move and unable to speak. We may hardly breathe at all and feel as if our heart is slowing right down. We may seem unaware of what is going on around us and we might not react to sounds or situations around us. This is also an intolerable and unhealthy state for us to be in for long so it is really important to find ways of stimulating everything back into action, firing everything back up again so that we have energy and can think properly again.

You can learn ways of bringing yourself back into a regulated state from hyperarousal and hypoarousal. You may need someone like a counsellor to help with this at first, which is called co-regulation. When you can get your nervous system back in a calm state yourself after being dysregulated, this means you can auto-regulate. Being able to auto-regulate is a big step in your recovery.

Triggers

Triggers are things that remind you or your nervous system of something else, such as a past traumatic experience, and that can lead to overwhelming feelings. If you are triggered it becomes difficult to distinguish the past from the present so you may feel the emotions you did when the sexual abuse was happening, such as panic or fear. This is your nervous system taking control because it senses a threat, even if the threat was in the past and is no longer there.

Triggers are involuntary and may be:

- actions or acts – such as someone behaving in a similar way to the perpetrator
- smells – such as aftershave, alcohol or a cleaning product
- sounds – such as music or songs that are connected with that experience or any sudden noise like a door slamming or a car starting

- words – such as pet names used, derogatory terms or phrases the perpetrator used
- tone of voice – such as raised voices or shouting, male voices, screaming
- sensations – such as the feeling of certain fabrics or being touched
- colours, places or sights – such as similar wallpaper, colour schemes or locations to where the sexual abuse took place

Identifying your triggers can help to reduce your responses to them, either by minimising contact with that trigger or by developing tolerance to it over time. You can do this by paying attention to what is going on around you when you unexpectedly become distressed. You may not immediately know so talking through where you are and what triggers there might be with someone else can be helpful. Talking in the present moment will help your nervous system calm down again. Sometimes just being consciously aware of possible triggers can help your nervous system learn to recognise safety more quickly.



Coping Strategies and Self-Care

Sometimes when we feel really distressed, there isn't anything that can be done to remove the problem instantly or permanently. In this sort of situation, it can be really useful to have some coping skills which help us manage the way we feel so we can find ways to keep going.

Even when we are safe, our lives will still contain difficulties and having a range of ways of coping can help us deal with all sorts of problems without becoming overwhelmed.

Any instance of sexual violence is likely to cause difficult thoughts and emotions that sometimes feel unmanageable. You may feel overwhelmed and unable to live your life as you normally would or how you want to. It is important that you don't give yourself a hard time for finding things a struggle – try to remind yourself of the things and people which have helped you get through in the past, and be kind to yourself as much as you can.

Sometimes there is so much going on in our lives that we forget to take time to look after ourselves. Because we want to make sure other people feel happy or are not irritated with us, we might prioritise what they want over what we need. Self-care is a way of making sure you stay physically well enough and emotionally well enough to be able to manage everyday life. You are a really important person and self-care is a way to remind yourself that you think you are important and worth spending time on.

The following skills and techniques are things you can try in those moments when you feel really upset or angry or when you feel like you can't contain your emotions. They won't solve the problem forever, but they may help you tolerate the feeling for long enough to stop the situation getting worse. Not every technique will work for every person so you might need to try several and persevere with some before you see

positive results. You may already be doing these things already, so we hope you can find some new things on the list too.

- Break time down into hours, days or weeks and focus on getting through each bit at a time. Thinking about the whole day stretching out in front of you can feel challenging so just plan what you need to do to get breakfast done, then just the school run, then to lunchtime and so on.
- Give yourself permission to feel angry, hurt, upset and sad about what has happened so those emotions are focused on the incident rather than those around you.
- You may have lots of people contacting you and you may have to attend appointments with different people. This can feel confusing and overwhelming so try keeping a diary or calendar and reminders and/or notes in your phone so you know where you have to be, when you have to be there, the purpose of the appointment or meeting, who the appointment is with and their contact details so you can let them know if you are running late or are unable to attend. Being organised can help you feel more in control.
- If you feel unwell or are having suicidal thoughts, make an appointment to see your GP and let them know what you are feeling and what is going on for you. If you are having counselling, you can talk these feelings through with your counsellor.
- It is often helpful to have someone who is non-judgmental to talk to in confidence about what has happened so you may want to access counselling, which provides a space for you to focus on your own emotional well-being. Even if you can talk really honestly with good friends and/or family, it can be useful to have the opportunity to talk things through with someone who is completely separate from your everyday life.

Eat, sleep and move

Trauma responses can feel impossible to manage and it might feel like they take over your life making it difficult to do the things you need to or want to. There are things you can try that can help. Some of these you can do alone and others involve other people supporting you.

When you feel low or you are feeling demotivated, it can be really difficult to get yourself up and moving. It can sometimes feel much easier to stay in bed or hide away from everyone. One good way of trying to lift your mood and to make you feel more emotionally able to deal with the day is to remember that you need to eat, sleep and move.

Make sure you eat regular, nutritious meals and make sure you take time to have drinks throughout the day, even if you do not feel hungry or thirsty. You need to have energy and be properly hydrated. Think about how different foods impact on how your body feels and the mood you are in. When you have a lot of junk food does your body feel different to when you have fresh fruit and vegetables? What about your mood? Think about how your body feels when you are hungry. Do you ever ignore that feeling and not eat when you need to or do you ever eat when you are not hungry at all?

Work out a sleep routine so you can try to get enough sleep. This might include setting yourself a bedtime and sticking to it, having a bath or using scented candles to relax, reading or listening to soothing music. Try to avoid using screens (TV, tablet, phone etc.) for at least half an hour before going to bed. Think about how not getting enough sleep, or sleeping too much, makes your body feel. What kind of mood are you in when you are tired? Do you feel refreshed after a really long sleep or do you still feel like you could sleep more?

Think about how your body feels when you have done exercise, whether that's going for a walk, playing around with a ball or a full-on gym session. Does exercise change your mood?

At the end of the booklet there is a table to help you make a coping skills toolkit. Why not give it a try now that you have begun to think about taking care of yourself?

The better you know yourself, the better you will be at knowing what you need to help you get through any given situation.

Get to know your nervous system

Your nervous system is the part of your body that makes sense of information coming in through your senses which is then used to react to whatever situation you are in. When you feel distressed for any reason, your sympathetic nervous system kicks in. Its job is to prepare your body for frightening or stressful situations. It does this by increasing your heart rate and the blood flow to your muscles so you can run or fight if you need to. A trick you can use is to try to activate your parasympathetic nervous system so that your sympathetic nervous system can calm down. Some quick ways you can do this include:

- Put your wrists under a cold tap, splash cold water on your face or hold an icepack or some ice cubes in a bag on your face.
- Try and do a really big sigh three or four times.
- Practice circular breathing. For example, breathe in for the count of four, hold your breath for the count of four and breathe out for the count of eight.
- Try breathing into your belly instead of your chest three or four times.
- Clench your fists as hard as you can, hold for the count of four and release.
- While sitting on a chair or lying down, breathe in and tense all your muscles. Hold your muscles tense, hold your breath and count to 5. Release the tension in your muscles while breathing out.

- Stretch your arms above your head or in front of you as far as you can, hold for a count of four and relax.
- Sit down with your feet flat on the floor and push hard down with them, then release. Notice how it makes different muscles feel and notice whether anything changes about how the soles of your feet feel on the floor.
- Do some intense exercise for a short amount of time. For example, 10 enthusiastic star jumps or running on the spot as fast as you can for 30 seconds.
- Feel the texture of different objects around you. For example, the covering on your chair, cushions, mugs or glasses, your hair.
- If you have a pet, notice how time with your pet makes you feel.

All these examples help your brain to focus hard on what your body is feeling, this gives information to your nervous system that you are safe and makes it easier to stay calm and in control.

Grounding techniques

We can sometimes convince ourselves that every thought we have is important and true. If we think something bad about ourselves we may then assume, just because we thought it, it's a fact. The real fact is that some of our thoughts are not worth paying much attention to. Plus, we don't have time to dwell on every single thought we have, but our brains sometimes feel as if they are trying to do that. It can feel chaotic, noisy and endless in our minds when this happens.

Grounding techniques are ways of slowing down our minds and managing anxiety or other difficult emotions. They can be done anywhere at any time and no one needs to know you are doing one! You can use grounding whenever you feel like you need to manage your anxiety levels or emotions. Grounding focuses on the here and now and is more than just a relaxation strategy, it can be used to help you manage extreme

feelings. Grounding techniques can train our nervous systems to stay calm. This helps us manage all sorts of difficult situations and emotions. If our nervous system can sense that we are staying grounded, it is less likely to trigger a reaction which feels unmanageable.

Mental grounding

- Imagine the unhelpful thought in a bubble, floating in your mind. Say to yourself: "I see that you are trying to get my attention but you can't have it right now" and then imagine the bubble floating away or being blown away by a breeze. If it is a very persistent thought, imagine pushing it away with more enthusiasm, for example with a quick shove.
- Describe your physical environment to yourself in detail. For example, I am sitting in a waiting room, there are magazines on the table in the corner of the room, there are posters on the wall . . .
- Follow a well-known journey in your head. For example, the route from your home to school when you were a child.
- Follow a recipe in your head, for example, go through step by step from taking ingredients out of the fridge to chopping vegetables to the stages of cooking.
- Have an affirmation you repeat to yourself. For example, 'this too shall pass' or 'I am safe, I am here now'.
- Concentrate on a mental challenge. For example, say the alphabet to yourself backwards or go through times tables.
- Imagine a safe place or somewhere you would like to go. For example, a tropical beach or mountain hideaway. Think about textures, smells, feelings and sounds to help your thinking brain work hard.

All these examples help your brain to focus hard on thinking about what you have chosen, so it is less likely to spiral off into intrusive thoughts or overthinking.

How other people can help us cope

Humans are designed to be sociable even if we do not always feel this way. Think about the people around you and how they can support you. Some people may have a much more significant role than others but even those whose contribution is saying 'hello' are important. Even when it feels like you have no one, there may be people around who can support you in some way. Try and work out who the safe and good people are in your life. We don't have to have loads of friends; the evidence suggests that even one safe person we trust can make a huge difference in our lives. Remember as well, that quality is more important than quantity; it can be more damaging for our well-being to have a big group of fake friends who use us and take advantage of us than it is to be alone for a while or have one person we can trust.

The same is true of family members. Just because someone is related to us does not mean that we have to allow them in our lives. Sometimes families are the least safe place for a person to be. This can be really difficult to manage because society is very family focused and people make lots of assumptions about our relationships with family members. In the same way as with friends, we are better off without family members who use us, put us down, let us down or try to control us. Do not feel that you have to maintain contact with your family if your family is what makes life difficult for you.

Aside from genuine friends and trusted family members, you might have professionals who can help with specific things, for example your GP, counsellor, advocate or support worker. It is important to allow yourself to ask for help if you need it.

When you are not in a good place, it can be difficult to remember who might be able to help so maybe write yourself a list which might be useful at a difficult time. You could include anyone who is in your support network

and even remind yourself what support they can give you. Are there any things you need that you don't get at the moment? Who could support you with those things? If you can't think, is there maybe someone you can ask to help you work out the best place to get that support? Remind yourself that it is alright to ask for help. People can be helpful without necessarily knowing all the details of your trauma.

You may have friends and family members who you want to have in your life, but you feel you need to have a difficult conversation with them to enable them to better understand what is going on for you. There are tips on how you can manage this below. You can use these ideas to help you talk to people whose behaviour towards you you want to challenge. They might have been insensitive or judgmental and you want to talk this through so it doesn't happen again. Or you might want to talk to someone you trust about the sexual violence you have experienced and the ideas below might help this feel less scary. It can be tempting to want to avoid those conversations but the problem is unlikely to go away on its own. Taking control of how the conversation happens can help make it feel more manageable.

Having difficult conversations

Before the difficult conversation, it can be helpful to think about the following:

- **What outcome do you want?**

Do you want someone to understand some information you want to give them? Do you want someone to change their behaviours? Do you want someone to help you to achieve something or to support you to manage a problem?

- **What barriers are there to being able to communicate properly?**

Is it difficult to get quiet time with the person you need to speak to? Are you worried about a hostile reaction that might be dangerous? Will the other person be open to having a conversation with you?

- **What strengths do you have?**

Are you able to explain clearly what you want to say? Are you able to show the other person that you are responsible and sensible? Can you show that you are aware that you need help and you are asking for that support?

- **Who can help you if the topic is really difficult?**

Is there a trusted person you can talk to before speaking with the person you need to? Is there anyone you can practice the conversation with? Is there anyone who knows the person you need to speak to really well who can advise you on how to approach them?

When you have planned what it is you want to say and thought about the barriers to communication and the strengths you have, you can use these tips to have the conversation itself.

Before you go to the other person, remember the tricks to keep your sympathetic nervous system calm. Try some controlled breathing into your belly, for example.

Let the person know you need to speak to them at some point within a given timeframe and a basic idea of the topic. This means they have an opportunity to prepare themselves, which might mean they are less resistant or defensive. You could say something like: "I need to speak to you in private about something important before I have to go home".

Have the conversation in a neutral place that the other person is able to leave if they want to. For example, speaking in the kitchen at home rather than someone's bedroom.

Use something the person will already know about as a way to start the conversation. For example, you may say: "You may have noticed I have been quiet lately" or "Do you remember I told you about . . ."

If the topic is complicated, share the information in small chunks rather than trying to explain everything in great detail straight away. If the other person interrupts you, you can say that it would be easier to let you speak and then you'll try to answer their questions.

If the other person asks you questions you can't answer or that seem to be judgemental, you can say: "This is difficult for me to talk about and I need some time to think about what you've said".

You may need to re-visit the conversation if it is a complicated issue.

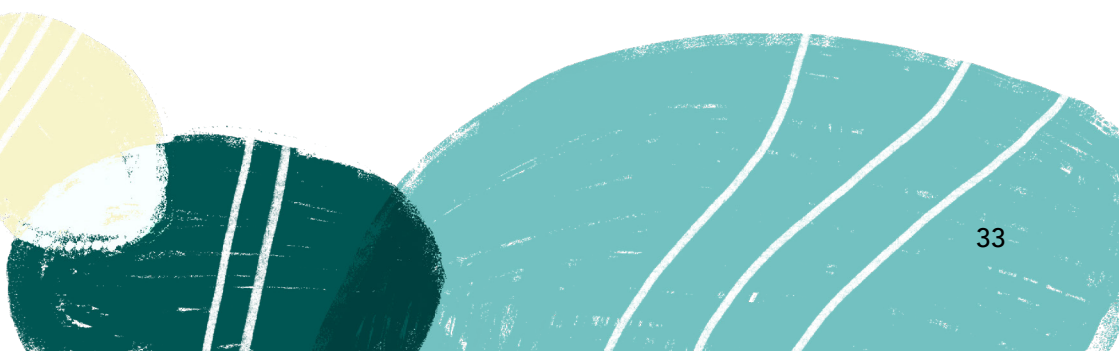
Throughout all of this, talk to yourself in the same way you would speak to someone you love. Above all, be kind.

Coping Skills Toolkit

A Coping Skills Toolkit is a collection of techniques and activities that you can use to try to better deal with difficult emotions.

Activity	What to do
<p>Self-soothing Babies and toddlers are very good at self-soothing. When they get upset they ask for a cuddle, get their favourite teddy, have a dummy or a bottle and like to have someone make comforting noises or sing to them. As we get older, we tend not to do those things but there are others ways to create the same effect.</p>	<p>Make a 'nest' based on your senses, which feels comfortable and safe.</p> <p>Include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • something comfortable or comforting to touch (like a blanket or favourite pyjamas) • things to look at (like photos of good times with friends and family, pictures of famous people you admire, a favourite TV programme) • something cheering or calming to listen to (like a playlist of your favourite songs or white noise) • something you like the smell of (like perfume or aftershave a loved one uses or candles) • something that refreshes your taste buds and tastes good (like mint or brushing your teeth, eating some fresh fruit or having some juice)
<p>Distractions These are things you can do to take your mind off difficult thoughts or worries.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Art, drawing, colouring, crafts • Watching TV, Netflix • Spending time with friends/family • Going for a walk, spending time in nature • Sports or exercise (Some people need calming and strengthening activities like yoga, other people need to use up lots of energy so might prefer a run or the gym, and team sports can provide a sense of belonging as well as healthy exertion.)

Activity	What to do
<p>Affirmations These are words or phrases that have a positive message and mean something personal to you.</p>	<p>You can find affirmations anywhere, they might be inspirational quotes, song lyrics, quotes from your favourite book or story or things that people in your family or friendship group say. You can pick a couple, or make up your own, and draw them or write them out and put them up on the wall to look at when you need a boost.</p>
<p>Movement Any kind of movement is likely to help you feel differently and shift your mood.</p>	<p>If you can build some kind of movement into your daily routine, you will probably start to notice some differences within a fortnight. To help your nervous system, movement does not have to be a full on gym workout or a 5 mile run, even some gentle stretching can get your blood moving around and a bit more oxygen into your muscles and your brain. If you don't already know what sort of exercise you enjoy, try and find something gentle to begin with. Maybe ask someone you know and trust if they can suggest anything they think you might like to try.</p>



Below is a blank version so you can fill it out with ideas that would suit you.

Activity	What might I be able to do that fits in with my life?
Self-soothing <ul style="list-style-type: none">• touch• see• hear• smell• taste	
Distractions	
Affirmations	
Movement	
What else might work for you?	
Anything else?	

We hope that you have found this a useful resource and that the ideas you might have taken from it will help you keep taking really good care of yourself.



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services across Essex