



Government of **Western Australia**
North Metropolitan Health Service

SARC

SEXUAL
ASSAULT
RESOURCE
CENTRE

Care package

For adults who have
experienced sexual trauma



Introduction

Unwanted sexual contact can be a very traumatic experience. It is also a common occurrence, with many people of all genders, cultures, ages and abilities being sexually assaulted or abused by a stranger, a family member, a partner or someone they know.

Every person's experience of sexual trauma is different. It can affect how you think, feel, behave, relate to others and see the world. But recovery is possible.

This booklet is for survivors of any type of unwanted sexual contact who want to better understand their personal reactions to the trauma they have experienced, and are looking for some ideas to assist their recovery.



Self care and recovery are much like taking care of a plant. They require attention, effort, nurturing and patience. Over time, the plant will flourish and thrive. Over time, you will too, and the results will be worth it.



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Common reactions to trauma

Understanding your reactions

Any form of unwanted sexual contact can be a traumatic experience. When a person experiences a trauma, they often experience emotional and physical distress. You will respond to a trauma experience in your own unique way. You may, or may not, experience some strong emotional or physical reactions. Sometimes the reactions are delayed. Everyone is different and no particular reaction or lack of reaction is right or wrong.

The reactions may last a few days, a few weeks, a few months or years. This depends on a whole range of factors, such as how much support you have, whether you have experienced other trauma, how others respond to your experience, your beliefs about the sexual trauma, and any other stressors in your life at this time.

Some of the things you may experience include changes in your thoughts, feelings and behaviour. If you have experienced other traumas in your life, thoughts and feelings about these may resurface. You might notice changes in your mood or activity patterns, such as being tempted to increase your drug or alcohol intake, or to socially withdraw. You may just not feel like 'yourself'. These are all normal reactions to sexual trauma.

The important thing to remember is that most people who experience sexual trauma do lead full and satisfying lives despite their traumatic experience. And over time, they do heal.

Where there is life there is hope



Here are some common reactions that many people experience after a trauma.



Body

- Muscle tension
- Dry mouth
- Tight chest
- Headaches
- Diarrhoea
- Exhaustion
- Feeling dizzy
- Constipation
- Rapid heartbeat
- Sweating
- Loss of appetite
- Other pains



Thoughts and effects on the mind

- "It was my fault"
- "Nobody will ever love me now"
- Poor memory
- "I should have done more"
- Intrusive memories
- Confusion
- "I'm going crazy"
- Flashbacks
- Difficulty concentrating
- "I'll never be the same"
- Nightmares



Feelings and emotions

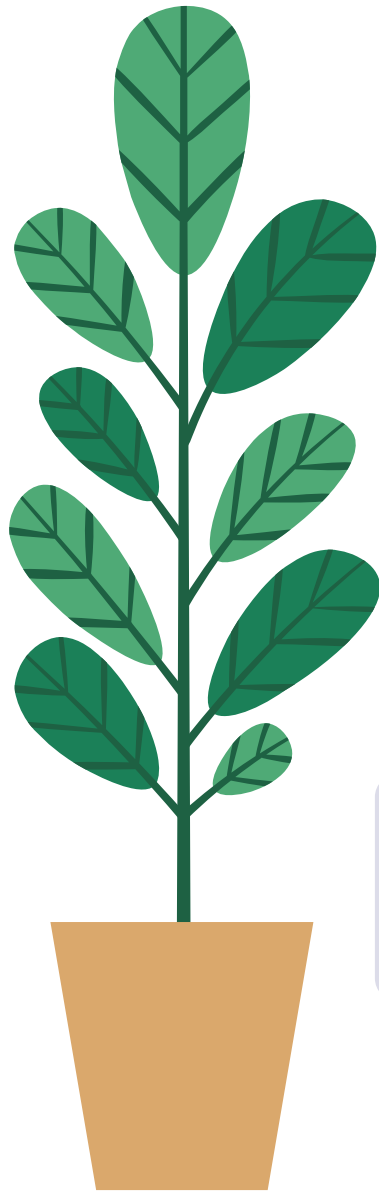
- Hopeless
- Ashamed
- Alienated
- Afraid
- Irritable
- Anxious
- Guilty
- Insecure
- No confidence
- Detached
- Hurt
- Alone
- Angry
- Inadequate
- Numb
- Depressed



Behaviour and actions

- Neglecting care of yourself
- Changes to eating
- Lack of interest in things
- Self-harming
- Easily startled
- Very alert
- Nail biting
- Avoiding people/ places
- Being impulsive
- Socially withdrawing
- Drinking/smoking

You may be experiencing some of these reactions, or you may be experiencing something completely different. There is no right or wrong way to react.



How our bodies respond to trauma

Many people who have experienced sexual trauma question the way they reacted to the danger at the time, and how they reacted afterwards. Often survivors blame themselves for not acting differently at the time of the trauma and may experience shame or guilt about it. Others are confused by the difficulties they experience in coping after the trauma ends.

When we learn more about how the body functions, our reactions usually start to make sense.



Our body's reactions to immediate danger

When we are under threat or in danger, our bodies have internal response systems that prepare us to fight or flee from the danger as a way of surviving. It happens like this . . . Once the brain has detected danger, it sends a signal to the body and muscles are then tensed, the heart beats faster and chemicals such as adrenalin are released into the blood. This response happens in less than a second. This response system has kept humans alive from predators for centuries and is the same system that attempts to keep us safe in modern times.

When the danger we face becomes overwhelming, we are terrified, and there is a sense of no hope of escape, the body can 'shut down' and 'freeze'. A person may pass out, go limp or take their mind elsewhere. The 'freeze' response is not a conscious decision, it is an automatic body response over which we have no control.

It is a natural response to situations in which we feel powerless or hopeless. A person may not feel the pain of the attack and may not have clear memories of the event. Memories from trauma are stored in the brain in a different way to other memories so often seem sketchy, confusing and disordered at a later date.

All of these reactions are common, normal, automatic and happen for both adults and children. They are designed for survival; to keep us alive.

When the danger has passed, there is another system in our body that is designed to 'reset' itself back to a calm 'baseline'. The brain tells the body there is no danger and it can relax now. Different chemicals are released into the blood to calm the body. Yawning, stretching and sighing are all part of the system to calm the body.

These systems are designed to work together in our bodies to keep us safe when there is danger and to relax us when there is no danger.

Our body's reactions over time

When we are exposed to major trauma experiences (including child sexual abuse and sexual assault), changes in the brain can occur and the fear response can become 'trapped' in our body. The brain can become 'stuck on', expecting something bad to happen, constantly looking out for danger and preparing the body to fight or flee. This can show up as anxiety, panic attacks, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), chronic pain and other challenges.

Or a person can become 'stuck off', which means the brain and body shut down. This can appear as depression, lethargy, exhaustion, chronic fatigue and other symptoms.

Some people can stay either 'stuck on high' alert or 'stuck off', while others can constantly swing between being on high alert to shutting off. All of these can be exhausting.

Small, everyday things in the environment can trigger the brain into a fight-flight-freeze trauma response. A trigger is a reminder of the original danger. It is like the original trauma experience is happening all over again. Different people are triggered by different things.

Some things are more predictable as triggers. For example, someone who was sexually abused as a child may find having a medical examination of their body to be a trigger. Other triggers are less obvious.

A trigger can be a sound, a smell, a time of year, certain words, being in a room alone with someone, physical touch or a range of other things.

Being triggered can cause someone to fight (become physically or verbally aggressive), to flee (run away), or to freeze (shut down, zone out). The person can react as if the original trauma experience is happening, even if there is no danger at all. It is an unconscious

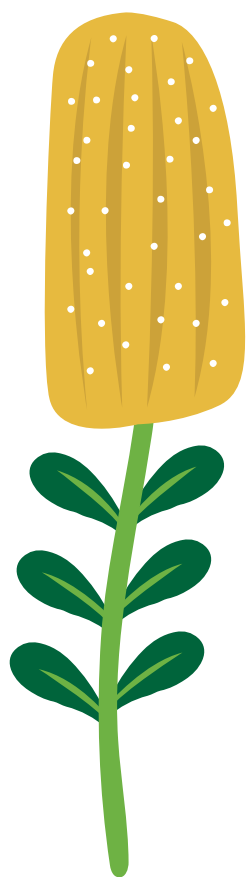
response and out of the person's control. It can be frightening for both the person experiencing it and any onlookers, particularly for those who don't understand how trauma affects the brain and the body.

Living life in this traumatised state can be both exhausting and debilitating too. Many people turn to taking alcohol and other drugs to try to cope. These attempts often result in adding other challenges, and don't resolve the real problem.

It can be a huge relief for people who have survived trauma to hear that their responses are normal and to learn more about why they behave the way they do. It is also reassuring to know that these challenges don't need to be permanent. People can change the way they function in everyday life.



Common difficulties after experiencing trauma

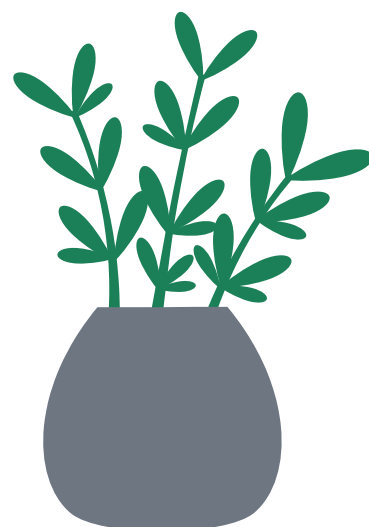


Although survivors have survived the original trauma, the experience can create other difficulties. Trauma that was caused by another person, especially a trusted person, can often lead to difficulties for the survivor in trusting others and forming long term, healthy relationships. Traumatic experiences that involved sexual trauma often lead to difficulties with intimacy and sex. Survivors sometimes experience low self-esteem, a range of mental health challenges and various health issues.

You will respond to the traumatic experience in your own unique way. You may, or may not, experience some strong emotional and physical reactions. Sometimes the reactions are delayed. Remember that no matter how much difficulty you are having dealing with the traumatic experience, it does not mean you're 'going crazy' or becoming 'mentally ill'. The recovery process may actually help you develop new abilities or recognise strengths that you never knew you had before.

Your reactions to the trauma may last a short time, or longer. Provided they are not too severe or last for too long, the symptoms are normal reactions to trauma. Although these symptoms can be distressing, they will settle quickly in most people. They are part of the natural healing process of adjusting to a very powerful event, making some sense of what happened, and putting it into perspective.

Healing from trauma can take time, but it is possible. It is important to be kind to yourself and patient with your progress. You will have good and bad times ahead. Healing and change takes time.



Consider how the trauma is impacting you. In what ways is it affecting your thoughts, feelings, behaviours (actions), or body?

Remember: these are normal reactions to an abnormal event.

Are your symptoms affecting your emotions, thoughts, body and/or behaviours?

Feelings and emotions

Anger, loneliness, emptiness, sadness...

Thoughts and beliefs

"Nobody understands"
"I'm no good"
"What's the point?"

Body

Headaches, aches and pains, irritable bowel, chronic disease...

Behaviour and actions

Push people away, drink, smoke, function on 'high alert'...



Thoughts and beliefs

You might find yourself thinking repeatedly about the rape or abuse. It can be very confusing and difficult to understand. It can also lead you to believe things about yourself that aren't true.

It is important to understand that your thoughts and beliefs directly influence how you feel. For example, people who feel guilty about sexual trauma, often have an underlying belief that they are to blame for the experience in some way, and this leads to their feelings of guilt. Sometimes, we need to talk things through with someone who understands, so they can help us to see that our beliefs are untrue or our thoughts are not logical.

“It was a counsellor who taught me to ask myself which thoughts were irrational. ‘What evidence do you have that you’re worthless?’ she said. ‘Well none when I look at it realistically’.”

- A survivor



“I always blamed myself for everything that happened, so I was in a downward spiral of self-loathing.”

- A survivor

Here are some common thoughts



I should have...



I shouldn't have...



I'm no good



Nobody will understand



I deserved it



I'm disgusting



Nobody will love me

However:

- It is normal for someone not to fight back during a sexual assault because usually they are so terrified their body automatically goes into freeze mode.
- It is normal for people's bodies to become aroused during a sexual assault or sexual abuse. This is a natural reaction to touch, NOT because the person enjoyed the act.
- Sometimes victims of sexual trauma attempt to befriend or please the offender. This is a survival strategy.
- It is understandable not to tell others about the sexual trauma earlier because of shame, fear that the offender will retaliate, fear that you won't be believed, concern that threats from the offender may be carried out, fear others will find out and a whole range of other reasons.
- It is unreasonable to expect that children can stop adults from perpetrating sexual abuse for many good reasons.

It is important to remember: you are NOT to blame.

The person who did the act made the choices.

And importantly, you survived and are alive now.

You may find that your memory and concentration is affected and that you sometimes experience a sense of disorientation or confusion.

Flashbacks and nightmares

Flashbacks and nightmares are common for survivors of traumatic experiences. A trigger can cause us to subconsciously switch into a flashback. It can be something like seeing someone who looks like the offender, hearing a word or a phrase that reminds you of the traumatic experience, driving past the area where the assault or abuse took place, birthdays or anniversaries, childbirth, or television shows. It can be anything. Each person has their own trigger or triggers.

A flashback can be a terribly frightening experience, involving all of the senses. Many people say that they can see, hear, smell and feel everything that happened to them during a flashback. Some people feel as if they are reliving the trauma. Identifying your triggers can help you to know why a flashback may occur.

Sometimes new memories or things that don't quite make sense may surface in a flashback. This means that your mind is still processing the trauma and trying to make sense of things. Human memory is not like a computer memory where things are straightforward and in a line, it is interwoven with emotions, thoughts and experiences.

A lot of people experience nightmares. A nightmare can be a replay of the trauma or may be quite bizarre and seem unrelated.

There are suggestions for managing flashbacks and nightmares in the section 'Managing nightmares'.



Feelings and emotions

After a trauma experience, some people feel a jumbled range of intense feelings while others feel empty.

There are no right or wrong feelings and everyone is different.

Let’s look at some common feelings experienced by sexual trauma survivors.

Anger

The pain, abuse, manipulation, and injustice associated with sexual trauma can make many sexual trauma survivors feel very angry. You have every right to feel angry towards the offender.

Anger can be useful to motivate us to express our needs and protect ourselves. But it can become harmful when bottled up internally, or when it is expressed as aggression, or when it feels like it is taking over your life.

Some thinking habits can be unhelpful and make you feel angry more often. We list some of these below.

If you are struggling with anger, it is important to talk with an experienced counsellor and look at helpful ways to address the situation so that your anger doesn’t wear you down.

Stewing/ruminating

When you keep rerunning an event over and over in your mind and often focus on why it was unfair or wrong or hopeless. It can cause you to feel frustrated and angry, without focusing on solutions or improving the situation.



Catastrophising

When plans don’t work out and you magnify them as if they are major life events. You may make sweeping statements using words like “always” and “never”. This habit usually leads to more anger and makes the situation harder to sort out.

- Things always go wrong.
- This is the last straw.
- Nothing is ever going to change.
- This is the end.

Avoiding

You may try to ignore things that are important to you so you can appear ‘relaxed’ and to avoid conflict and challenging thoughts.

But, by ignoring the issue and not focussing on what needs to be done to try and work things out in a helpful way, the situation repeats itself and nothing improves.

Loneliness

After sexual trauma, many survivors feel they can’t trust anyone. Their beliefs about life and people often shift and if the offender was someone they know, they may lose faith in their judgement of other people. They may feel alone and that no-one understands what they have been through or how they are feeling.

Sadly, these feelings can prevent people from seeking help and talking to someone about their experiences.



Shame

Many people who have been sexually assaulted or sexually abused feel intensely ashamed and embarrassed. They often feel in some way ‘marked for life’ and flawed. Shamed people feel bad about themselves. Shame can impact your beliefs about yourself and your relationships with others, including your sexual relationships. It can have a huge impact on your self-image.

Along with sharing your story with someone who understands, the other powerful approach for overcoming shame is practicing self-compassion. This encourages us to treat and talk to ourselves with kindness and care, similar to how we would a good friend or loved family member. It is an important part of recovering from the trauma experience.

Guilt and self blame

After a sexual trauma experience, many survivors feel that they should have done more to prevent it happening. Often these thoughts are linked to beliefs in society, and are reinforced by statements from people who have a lack of understanding about the issues. Sometimes family, friends and even professional workers can make unreasonable statements that are unhelpful to the survivor.

Talking the situation through with someone who is informed about trauma can help you to understand and see the situation in perspective.

In reality, no one asks to be abused, injured or humiliated. This line of thought blames the victim instead of the offender who chose to commit the crime. No victims ‘caused’ their offender to commit a crime against them.

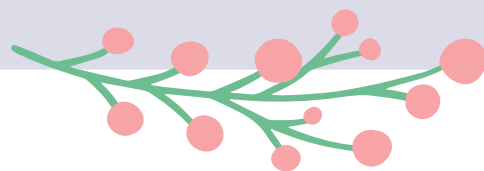
“Shame attacks the very core of our being and threatens to destroy our self-identity through self-loathing”.

Chistine Sanderson - Author



“If we can share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can’t survive.”

Brené Brown - Researcher



It is important for you to know and to keep reminding yourself:

There is nothing you did to deserve what happened.

It is NOT your fault and despite everything, you survived.



Emptiness

For some people, their feelings are so overwhelming that they bury them to cope. They cut off or ‘dissociate’ from their feelings, leaving them ‘empty’ inside.

Remember, feelings can’t kill you. They are smaller than you; they are inside you, not the other way around. It is possible to regain a sense of control over your life and not feel overwhelmed by the negative feelings. Dealing with your fears and feelings will help you to achieve that.

There are people who understand these feelings and can support you to process them (see the section on ‘Seeking professional help’). Over time, these feelings can be replaced with more positive, empowering feelings. You don’t have to feel this way forever.

“I felt alone but alienated from myself. Empty. Detached. It was hard to tell what was real.”

- A survivor





Behaviour and actions

When someone has experienced sexual trauma, it can affect the way they behave. This is quite normal.

It is useful to identify the thoughts and feelings behind your behaviours. This will help you to understand your behaviour.

Ask yourself

- What are the behaviours I find myself doing?
- What are the thoughts and feelings behind these behaviours?
- What are the effects of these behaviours?
- Are these behaviours helpful or unhelpful to me?
- Would I like to change these behaviours?

Let's look at some common behaviours and what is behind them.

Being constantly on edge

Being alert and on edge after a trauma is your body's way of being prepared to protect you. You may find yourself being startled easily by noises and looking around for danger. It is a survival instinct. It is often accompanied by sleep disturbances and muscle tension and can interfere with day to day life. Sometimes, it can result in you reacting as if there is danger when the situation is actually quite safe.

The section on 'How our bodies respond to trauma' can help you to understand this reaction to trauma. As you discuss your thoughts and feelings and start to make more sense of the experience, you will become less jumpy. Your brain and body need to learn that the danger was in the past; and to distinguish between safe and dangerous situations. There are many suggestions in this package to help you relax.



Drinking or smoking more

Some people drink and smoke to help numb their feelings, avoid their painful emotions and escape from the aftermath of the trauma.

Over time, and with help from others, you will find the need for escapism lessens and you can train yourself to use healthy options to relax and reduce your stress.



Avoiding reminders of the event

Many people avoid people, places and situations so they don't have to experience unpleasant emotions and memories. This may help in the short term, but often this leads to greater anxiety about being reminded of the event and a tendency to think the situation is unbearable or the danger continues. This leads to a greater need to avoid. Over time, this pattern can become problematic and doesn't help with recovery.

An important part of recovery is learning to manage triggers, memories and emotions without avoiding them. This leads to resuming a 'normal', healthy, fulfilling life. We have more information about triggers to come.



Social withdrawal, isolation and pushing people away

You may feel 'different' or 'damaged' from your experience and believe that others won't be able to understand your experience or how you are feeling. You may also feel betrayed, let down or ashamed as a result of the trauma.

It is normal to be cautious in trusting people after someone has harmed you. Isolating yourself and pushing people away can be an attempt to protect yourself from further harm or from being let down or disappointed.

Social connection is an important part of recovery from trauma. Finding people who you can talk with can help you to see things more clearly. Not everyone knows how to be helpful to someone who has experienced trauma. Sometimes it might be best to start with someone who has an understanding of trauma, and is going to listen and support you, such as a counsellor.



Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a set of reactions that can develop in some people after they have been through a traumatic event. There are four main types of problems associated with PTSD which are as follows.

- Reliving the event through constant memories, nightmares and flashbacks that are very upsetting.
- Avoiding people, places and events that may remind you of the traumatic experience, and avoiding talking about it.
- Feeling so 'on edge' that it means you have trouble concentrating and sleeping. You always feel tense and alert. You may self-harm, or you may take more risks than usual.
- Having persistent strong feelings and thoughts, lacking interest in usual activities, feeling 'cut off' from others and experiencing exaggerated self-blame.

If these symptoms persist for more than one month, it is likely that you are suffering from PTSD and it is advisable to speak to your GP or make an appointment with a professional counsellor for diagnosis and follow-up.

Difficulties with sexual intimacy

Many people who have experienced sexual assault or sexual abuse experience difficulties with intimacy and sex. This is completely normal following a sexual trauma. For some people, the difficulties start immediately after the abuse or assault, while others may start to experience difficulties weeks, months or years later, perhaps when they enter a relationship, or have children.

Some of the most common difficulties experienced by people who have been the victim of sexual assault or sexual abuse are listed below.

- Avoiding or being afraid of sex
- Approaching sex as an obligation
- Experiencing negative feelings such as anger, disgust, or guilt with touch
- Having difficulty becoming aroused or feeling sensation
- Feeling emotionally distant or not present during sex
- Experiencing intrusive or disturbing sexual thoughts and images
- Engaging in compulsive or inappropriate sexual behaviours
- Experiencing difficulty establishing or maintaining an intimate relationship
- Experiencing vaginal pain or orgasmic difficulties
- Experiencing erectile or ejaculatory difficulties



Reasons for difficulties

Many factors other than sexual trauma can cause difficulties with sex including: stress, alcohol, sleep difficulties, medication, body image, erectile dysfunction and other health related factors, low testosterone, depression, relationship difficulties and the impact of parenting.

Sometimes the difficulties experienced with sex are as a result of beliefs and attitudes that are formed about sex following a sexual assault or sexual abuse. It is important to examine the beliefs you have formed to see if they are accurate. Sexual trauma involves abusive sex, not healthy sex. Not all sex is abusive.

Below are some different beliefs/attitudes about abusive sex and healthy sex. Holding abusive beliefs about sex can lead to difficulties in sex and intimacy. Remember: healthy sex can bring enjoyment and pleasure.

Abusive sex beliefs

- Sex is unsafe
- Sex is about satisfying one person
- Sex is addictive
- Sex is uncontrollable
- Sex is essential to be loved

Healthy sex beliefs

- Sex is a choice
- Sex is respectful
- Sex is about sharing
- Sex is private
- Sex is intimate

Healthy sex and sexual trauma are not the same thing

Given time, most people are able to work through the difficulties and find pleasure in sex, touch and intimacy. There are some tips in the section 'Building a healthy sexual relationship'.



Body

Traumatic experiences can result in a range of everyday symptoms such as headaches, irritable bowel symptoms and neck pain. Other symptoms might include aches and pains that have no other cause, in addition to conditions such as chronic lung and heart diseases; liver disease, viral hepatitis, liver cancer; autoimmune diseases; and sexually transmitted infections. The symptoms linked to unresolved trauma can be diverse and are often not readily explained by health experts.

People who experienced childhood trauma are particularly at risk. Research indicates that the more adversities an individual experienced as a child (e.g. poverty, parental death or incarceration, witnessing violence in the home, abuse), the more likely that person will suffer from serious physiological disorders as an adult. Child abuse survivors are at increased risk of illness, hospitalisations, surgery and accidents.

In addition to having psychological benefits, processing traumatic experiences can also provide physical health benefits. Not all health workers are fully educated about the many impacts of trauma. However, increasingly GPs and other health professionals are becoming more aware in this field, and more sensitive to the needs of trauma survivors. Most trauma survivors have more positive experiences and outcomes when they see 'trauma-informed' health workers who are educated in trauma-related issues and have a supportive, respectful and collaborative approach with their patients.



Managing common reactions to trauma

Healing from trauma can take time. The brain needs to learn that trauma experiences from the past are no longer a threat. The body needs to learn new, healthier ways of coping when it feels stressed.

There are several things you can do to look after yourself and promote recovery from a traumatic event or situation.



General tips on managing

- Recognise that you have been through a distressing experience and give yourself permission to experience some reactions to it. Don't be angry with yourself for being upset.
- In order to heal from trauma, and find a solution to any difficulties you are experiencing, you need to be safe first. If you are currently at risk of violence of any kind, get help to find safety. The Sexual Assault Resource Centre website lists some support services available in Western Australia.
- Remind yourself that you are not abnormal and that you can cope.
- Avoid overuse of alcohol or other drugs to cope.
- Avoid rushing any major decisions or big life changes.
- Do not try to block out thoughts of what happened. Gradually confronting what has happened will assist in coming to terms with the traumatic experience. You can get help to do this.
- Positive connections with other people are important. Make sure you have some supportive, understanding people in your life.
- Find an experienced trauma counsellor to assist you. It is important that you feel safe with the worker and you connect with them. If not, it is okay to try a different worker. Think about what you would like to get out of counselling.

- Don't 'bottle up' your feelings.
- Consider sharing your experiences with others who you trust and who will understand. Carefully choose your moments to speak about this sensitive topic.
- Write your feelings in a private journal.
- Try to maintain a normal routine. Keep busy and structure your day.
- Allow yourself time to rest if you are feeling tired, and remember that regular exercise is important.
- Let your friends and family know of your needs. Help them to help you by letting them know when you are tired, need time out, or need a chance to talk or just be with someone. Let them know how they can help.
- Identify things/situations that trigger you. Minimise coming into contact with triggers while you are learning to cope.
- Practice calming strategies daily (e.g. grounding, breathing) and find some that work for you (see Practical tips for calming and managing anxiety).
- Take notice of your senses each day. For example, notice the taste of the foods you eat, the sounds around you, the feel of your clothing, the colours of the sky at sunset, the smell of the gardens.
- Notice the messages you tell yourself in your mind. Are they mostly negative or positive? Find some positive, encouraging messages you can tell yourself each day and in times when you are struggling. For example "I am strong, I can do this", "I am a good person", "I deserve to be happy", "I am safe".
- Consider connecting with other trauma survivors either in person (e.g. a survivors' group) or through an online forum.
- Take care of yourself on a daily basis. For example eat healthily, exercise regularly, do something relaxing each day.
- Be kind to yourself and patient with your progress. You will have good times and bad ahead. Healing and change takes time.

Remember:
You are important
and you can lead
the happy, fulfilling
life you deserve,
and heal from your
trauma experiences.



Practical tips for calming and managing anxiety

Many people who have experienced a traumatic incident or incidents can develop anxiety problems. These problems can be related to specific situations, for example going to the supermarket. Or they may be generalised to any and all situations.

Anxiety symptoms may include a rapid heartbeat, dry mouth, sweating palms, and rapid or shallow breathing. Some people may experience chest pain, confusion or nausea.

Anxiety symptoms do not mean you are going crazy. We all feel anxiety in particular situations, for example public speaking commonly causes anxiety for many people.

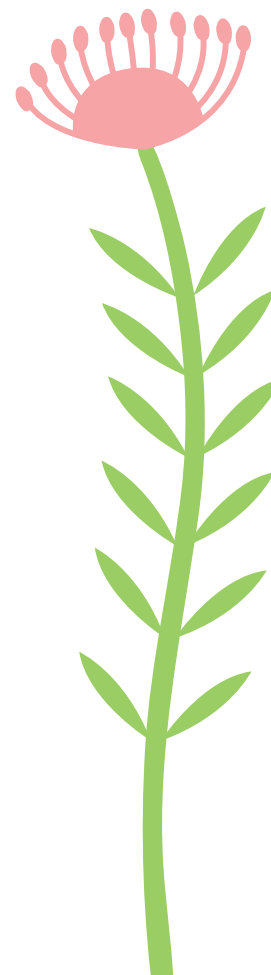
Anxiety is a physiological response to a fear-provoking situation. The body gets ready to fight or flee. However, chronic anxiety can cause difficulties in everyday life for people.

People often experience anxiety about experiencing anxiety. They worry that they will lose control or look foolish. Unless you tell them, people around you will probably not be aware that you experience anxiety. Fearing the anxiety reaction gives it more power over you than it deserves.



The following tips may assist you to deal with your anxious feelings

- Putting pressure on you to deal with anxiety RIGHT NOW is not a great idea. It makes anxious feelings worse. Try instead to give yourself permission to have these feelings wherever you are. Find a quiet place, go to the bathroom or go outside. Do whatever makes you comfortable.
- Rating your level of anxiety in a given situation may help you feel like you have some control over it and help you to monitor any improvements.
- If you are going to be in a stressful situation and fear panicking, it may help to visualise yourself going through the experience calmly before it actually occurs.
- Try to see why a particular situation makes you anxious. For example, going out at night may make someone anxious if they were assaulted when out at night.
- Discuss the anxiety symptoms with a trusted friend or counsellor.
- If anxiety symptoms are having a serious and continued impact on your life, you may want to consider speaking to a medical practitioner or health professional about these.



Minimise triggers

- Identify any things/situations that trigger you (remind you of the trauma). It could be a sound, smell, place, time of day, anniversary date or something else.
- Think about how you can reduce coming in contact regularly with triggers while you are developing your coping strategies.
- Make a plan about what you will do when you are triggered. For example:
 - Identify somewhere to go that you feel safe (or someone to go to).
 - Choose the strategies that you will use to calm yourself.
- After you have been triggered, follow your plan, then try to return to normal routine as soon as you feel you are able to.



Calm yourself

- Try different calming strategies and notice the ones that work best for you. Practice these daily. Monitor how you feel throughout each day. Tune into your body and notice how it reacts when it feels stressed (e.g. holding your breath, tensing muscles, dizziness, nausea). Whenever you notice that you are starting to feel stressed, or when you are becoming overwhelmed with distressing memories, thoughts and feelings, use calming strategies that you find most effective.



Controlled breathing 4-7-8

- Sit or stand comfortably with your back straight. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.
- Take a slow breath in through your nose, counting to 4. The hand on your stomach should rise. The hand on your chest should move very little.
- Hold your breath for a count of 7.
- Exhale through your mouth to a count of 8, pushing out as much air as you can while contracting your abdominal muscles. The hand on your stomach should move in as you exhale, but your other hand should move very little.
- Inhale again, and repeat the cycle until you feel relaxed and calm.

Progressive muscle relaxation

- Sit comfortably, loosen your clothing, take off your shoes and breathe slowly and deeply.
- When you're relaxed and ready to start, shift your attention to your right foot and notice how it feels.
- Slowly tense the muscles in your right foot, squeezing as tightly as you can. Hold for a count of ten.
- Relax your foot, notice the tension flowing away and the way your foot feels as it becomes limp and loose.
- After a few moments of slow, deep breathing, shift your attention to your left foot. Do the same process, squeezing and releasing.
- Gradually move through the muscles in your body, contracting and relaxing the muscle groups as you go.





Self-massage

- Sit comfortably and give yourself a five minute massage to relieve muscle tension.
- You can knead the muscles at the back of your neck and shoulders, or use your fingertips and thumbs to massage your face and scalp. It's possible to self-massage many muscles in the body, and can be particularly relaxing when combined with deep, slow breathing to the sound of soothing music.



Positive thoughts

When times are tough or when you find yourself in a difficult situation, it can be powerful to say positive statements to yourself such as:

-  "I'm okay"  "I'm a strong person"  "I can do this"
-  "The fact that I say 'no' to someone does not make me a selfish person"

- Practice some positive, empowering statements to have on hand whenever you notice negative thoughts creeping in.
- Write a list of your best qualities, abilities and other attributes: Are you kind? Are you a hard worker? Are you calm? Are you good fun?
- Write each quality down in a short sentence, starting with "I" and using the present tense. For example "I am warm-hearted", "I am generous", "I am a good parent." Say the sentences to yourself in the mirror.
- Repeat these statements to yourself throughout the day (either silently or out loud when alone). Use the statements whenever you feel anxious or you start to doubt yourself. Also, notice when negative thoughts start to come into your mind and override them with your positive statements.
- When you are faced with a challenging situation, you can also use positive, strengthening statements such as "I am strong, I can do this".
- Once a year, write a list of the things you have done in the past 12 months that you are proud of.



Grounding

Grounding is about using your senses to focus the mind and body on the present. It helps calm the body and mind and can be done anywhere. Grounding can be done using any of the senses- sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste.

It can be effective to use grounding when you:

- Have been triggered
- Are starting to feel anxious
- Are starting to relive the past
- Experience strong emotions
- Feel like using drugs or alcohol
- Feel like harming yourself.

Here are some different grounding strategies.

Try them, practice them and see what works best for you. The more you practice them, the more effective the techniques become. After a while they will become automatic and help you to stay calm and present most of the time.

Mental grounding

- Remind yourself of who and where you are now. Say your name, age, address, and where you are at this moment in time.
- Describe your environment in detail – name three things you can see now.
- Stop and listen to as many sounds around you as you can hear. Name the sounds.
- Describe an everyday activity in detail.
- Say a safety statement such as “I’m looking around me and I can see that I am here today, and not back in the past”.
- Hum a favourite tune.
- Read something, saying each word to yourself.
- Picture your favourite place in detail.
- Count to ten or say the alphabet very slowly.

It Is OKAY

To take time for yourself.

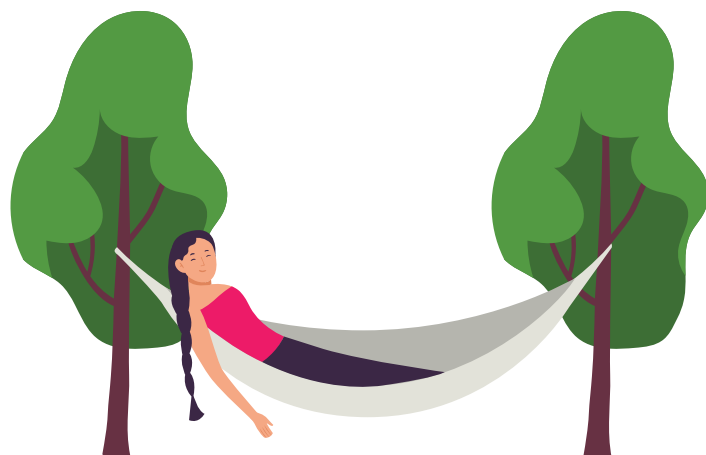
To have bad days.

To make mistakes.

To say “no”.

To forgive yourself.

To be kind to yourself.

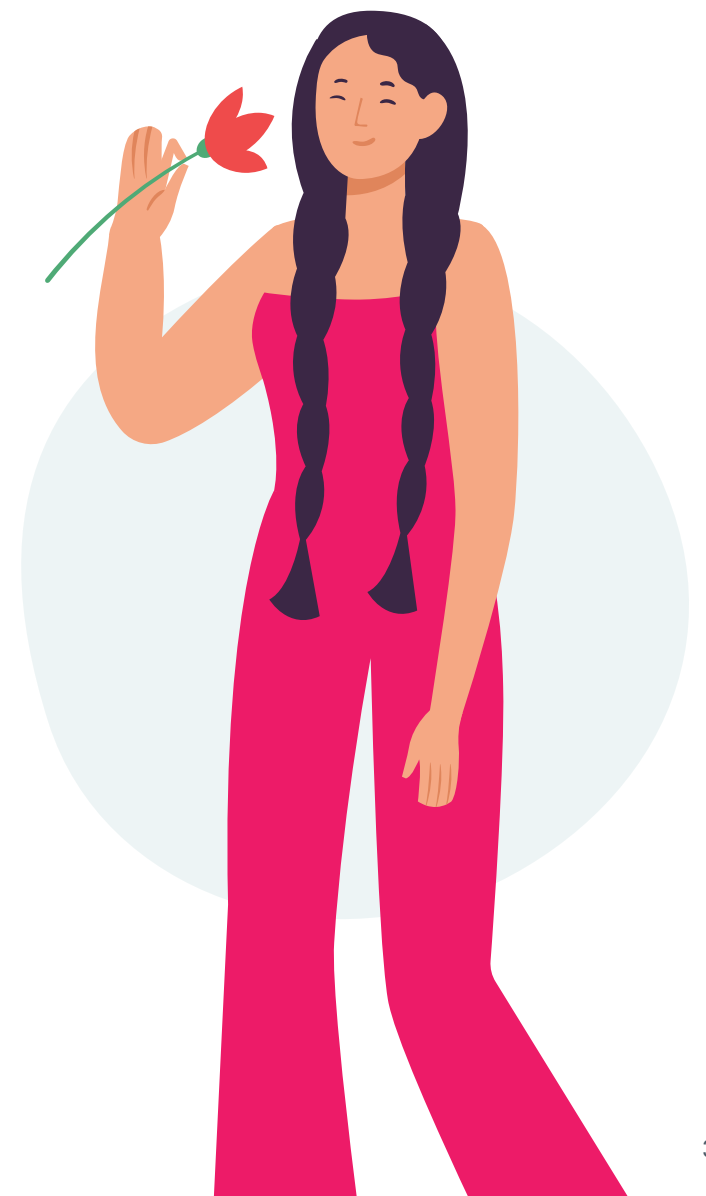


Physical grounding

- Run cool or warm water over your hands and notice the feeling.
- Splash cool water on your face and feel the sensation.
- Slowly make a cup of tea, concentrating on what you are doing each step of the way.
- Grab tightly onto your chair as hard as you can.
- Touch various objects around you and notice the feel of their surfaces.
- Dig your heels into the floor or stamp your feet – feel the power in your legs.
- Stand in bare feet on the ground or grass and feel yourself connecting to the earth, and all the stress draining out from your feet.
- Carry a grounding object such as a smooth stone or piece of jewellery and touch it when you feel the need.
- Jump up and down.
- Notice your body – the way your body rests in the chair.
- Stretch and notice how your muscles feel.
- Clench and release your fists.
- Walk slowly noticing each footstep.
- Eat something, describing the flavours.
- Focus on your breathing.

Self-soothing

- Talk to yourself in a very kind way–be your own best friend. Say kind statements “I am okay; I am safe now”.
- Think of favourites: holidays, people, TV shows, experiences, etc.
- Remember words to an inspiring song, quotation or poem.
- Remember a safe place.
- Plan a safe treat for yourself e.g. massage, swim, fruit smoothie.



Mindfulness meditation

- Mindfulness is purposefully focussing your attention on the present moment and accepting whatever you become aware of without judgement. Research in recent years has linked mindfulness with physical and psychological improvements and identified mindfulness as a key part of happiness.
- You can learn mindfulness and meditation on your own by following books, apps or recordings, or you can attend a class.



- Below is a basic mindfulness meditation to start. The more often you practice the exercises, the more effective they become. Some experts believe in building to 45 minutes, six days a week.
 - Sit on a straight-backed chair or cross-legged on the floor.
 - Focus on an aspect of your breathing, such as the sensations of air flowing into your nostrils and out of your mouth, or your belly rising and falling as you inhale and exhale.
 - Once you've narrowed your concentration in this way, begin to widen your focus. Become aware of sounds, sensations, and your thoughts.
 - Embrace and consider each thought or sensation without judging it as good or bad. If your mind starts to race, return your focus to your breathing. Then expand your awareness again.

Shift your feelings outside your body

Draw a map of your feelings on paper using a colour to represent each feeling. Make your stronger feelings a bigger size. Name each feeling. Think about the thoughts and beliefs behind each feeling and write them next to the feeling. Examine your thoughts and beliefs with the questions listed in the next section below.



angry

- My life has been stolen from me
- The attacker is still free



depressed

- I feel empty
- No-one really cares



worried

- I might lose my job
- I might have a panic attack in public



Your mind is a garden;
your thoughts
are the seeds.

You can grow flowers;
or you can
grow weeds.

Examine your thoughts and beliefs

When we examine our thoughts and beliefs, we find that many of them can be unfounded, limiting and self-destructive. Here are some questions to ask yourself once you have identified the thoughts and beliefs you have.

- “Is this thought helpful or unhelpful?”
- “What benefit do I get from holding onto this thought?”
- “What is the real evidence for this?”
- “Is it fair on me to think this?”
- “If I heard my story from another person, who would I blame?”
- “What are the other ways I could look at this?”
- “Is this logical thinking?”
- “What would a caring friend say?”
- “What would be a more helpful thought or belief for me?”

Build a ‘container’ for traumatic memories and thoughts

- If thoughts or memories of trauma come to mind at inappropriate times, imagine a container in which to put them.
- Create or even visualise a container that works for you such as an old spaghetti sauce jar or shoe box.
- Start writing disturbing memories on paper and putting them away into the container (or visualising doing this if you prefer).
- Feel your body being released from the stress of holding this memory as it goes into the container.



- It may be appropriate for you to access the container of memories when you attend counselling.
- It may be a good idea to use this container before sleep to get rid of unhelpful thoughts.

Tapping

The 'Butterfly Hug' is often used with success in trauma therapy.

- Cross your arms in front of you, with your right hand on your left shoulder and your left hand on your right. Close your eyes if you are comfortable to do so.
- Bring up an image of a safe or calm place along with a positive word that you associate with it. Let it fill your mind.
- Wait until you feel a state of safety or calm. Do not try to force this, but see if it comes naturally when you think about the safe or calm place and the associated word.
- When you feel safe and/or calm, tap your hands alternately on each shoulder slowly four to six times. Make sure you only do this when you feel calm and safe.
- Take a breath and see how it feels.
- Try the process once more.
- Open your eyes.
- If the positive state increases, once again just close your eyes, allow yourself to feel the feelings, and bring up the word. As you feel the positive sense arise, again alternately tap each side four to six times.
- You can use this technique to manage at times when you start to feel disturbed, but it's good to reinforce the good feelings every so often when you're in a calm and safe place. This keeps the technique strong for when you need it most.



Get physical



- Tension, excess adrenaline and cortisol can be held in the body when on high alert. Physical activity and movement will discharge the chemicals, release tension and help you to calm. Try to incorporate exercise into your daily routine and also have exercises on hand for when you feel especially stressed.
- As you exercise, focus your attention on your breathing and your body as it moves.
- Something that integrates physical and mental activity is ideal. For example, Wii sports, yoga, pilates, kayaking.

Rhythmic movement

- Rhythm helps our bodies calm and gives us a sense of control. Things that combine rhythm and movement are especially helpful.





Distract yourself

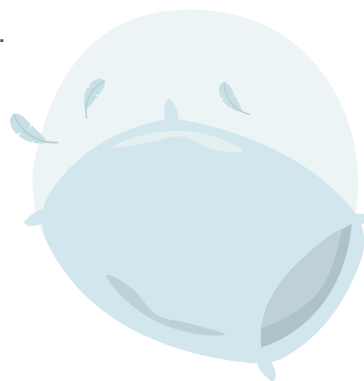
Have some distractions on hand for when you feel yourself starting to feel stressed or relive the past. Examples might include: crossword puzzles, playing an instrument, Sudoku, play dough, Rubik's cube, playing music, phone or iPad apps, colouring in, reading, watching a movie.



Release your feelings

Releasing internal feelings of anger, rage and hurt can be done in healthy ways. Here are some examples:

- Write a letter to the abuser expressing everything you feel. Don't send the letter - this is important. You may choose to destroy the letter in a symbolic way such as burning the letter safely and visualising your feelings disappearing with the letter.
- Punch a pillow, a punching bag, or water while swimming.
- Represent your internal feelings through drawings.
- Write about your feelings in poems or songs or in a diary.
- Shout into a pillow.
- Take boxing workouts or kick boxing classes at a gym.
- Scream under water.



Notice the positives

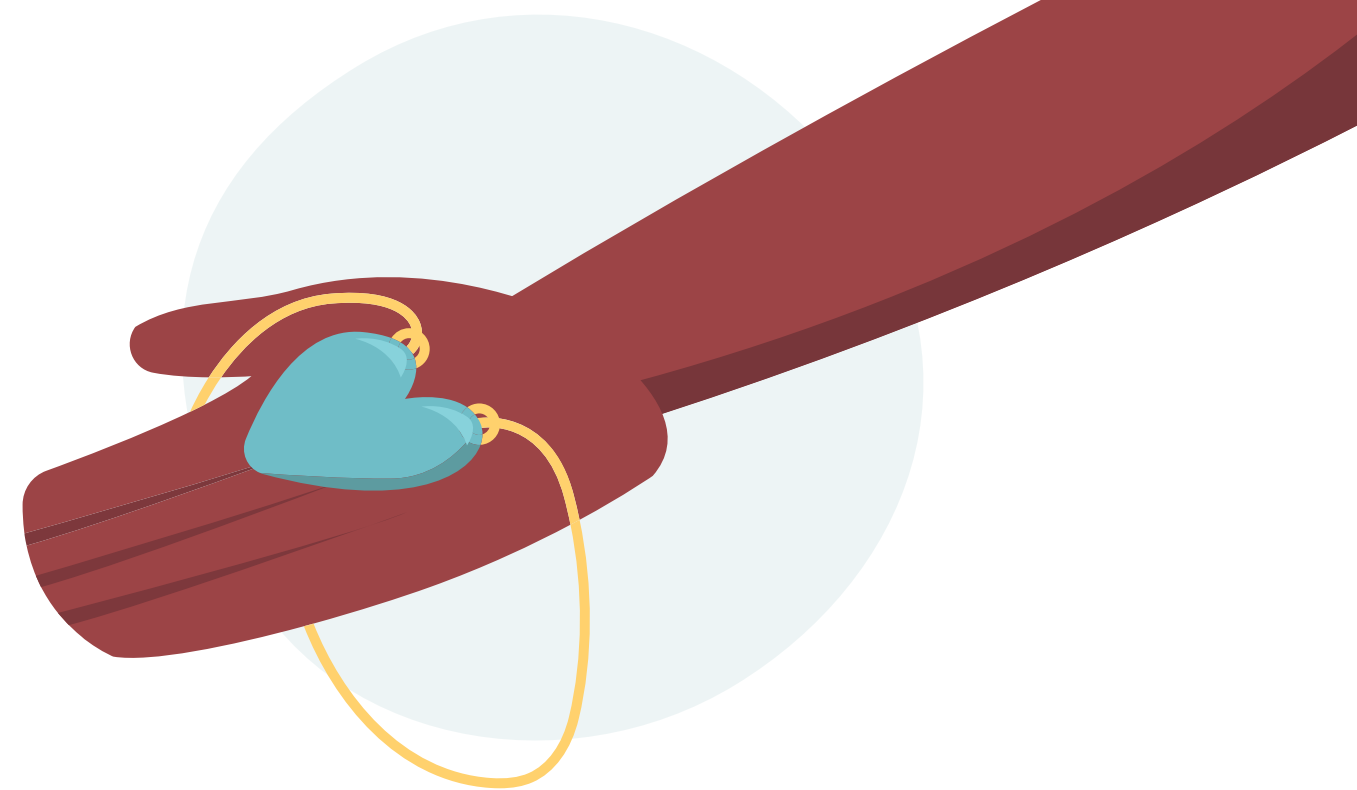
Start each day by mentally listing everything you are looking forward to for the day ahead.

At the end of each day, think about, or note down three positive things that happened. Sometimes they will be routine things such as 'I made it out of bed'. Other times they will be bigger things such as 'I went to a job interview' or 'I had a good conversation with someone I met today'. Notice and celebrate the positives. We all have good and bad days. Over time, the good days will outnumber the bad days. Every now and again, look back and notice how far you have come.

Managing panic attacks

People who chronically breathe too fast tend to sigh often, take deep breaths and feel short of breath. Slow, controlled breathing can relieve anxiety and prevent you from having a panic attack, if you do it as soon as you notice yourself over-breathing or becoming anxious.

It is a good idea to practice controlled, slow breathing regularly (refer to the activity mentioned earlier) so you can draw on the skill whenever you start to feel tense and when you need to face a situation that causes you to feel anxious.



Managing flashbacks

Many people use grounding to help manage flashbacks. Some people carry an item that they can grab hold of if they are feeling like they may be triggered, such as a piece of jewellery or a rock.

It is important that you remind yourself that you are safe and that you are not reliving the trauma, no matter how bad it feels. Remind yourself of where you are by looking around and saying what you see.

After the flashback is over, try to understand it. Perhaps write it down or talk about it with a trusted friend or a counsellor.

Sometimes it is helpful to rate the flashback with, for example, ten being the worst, zero being the best. It can help you get an idea of how things are going for you over time.

Managing nightmares

Some people experience disturbing nightmares. There are things you can do in the short term and long term to deal with them.

Things you can do to manage nightmares at the time

- Reassure yourself that you are safe and that the traumatic event that you are remembering is NOT happening now.
- Breathe slowly and deeply.
- Be aware of and understand your body's response as natural physiological reactions to a traumatic experience; try to slow these physical reactions by continuing to breathe deeply and slowly, try to see and imagine your muscles relaxing.
- Locate yourself in the present; check your present reality by looking around, touching things, stamping your feet, looking in the mirror or talking to yourself.
- Confirm your physical safety – turn on the lights, walk around the house, check the locks.
- Have a drink of water.
- Wash your face or have a warm bath or shower.
- Focus on something else: read a book or magazine, watch a movie, listen to the radio or relaxing music.
- Talk with a partner, friend or relative who is supportive.

What you can do if nightmares persist

- If a nightmare persists or becomes particularly disruptive or affects you in the morning, try the following exercise.
 - Write the unpleasant dream down in as much detail as you can. But change the ending to give it a more positive outcome. You may like to give yourself a superpower. Remember it is your choice to recall the dream and that you can stop writing or thinking about it and do something else any time you want.
 - Now, get to know this new different version of the dream, read it each night for about 5-15 minutes before going to sleep.
 - Once you have rehearsed the dream, do a relaxation exercise, one that you are familiar with and helps you to fall asleep peacefully. If you wake up, it can be useful to repeat this relaxation exercise, breathing deeply and slowly.
- When you are satisfied that you have rewritten the unpleasant dream to better suit you, you can choose to work on another nightmare. Don't work with more than two nightmares in one week. Also take care of yourself; you do not have to over describe the upsetting content within the dream. Remind yourself that you cannot get hurt or killed from a dream.

Other tips you might like to try

- Draw or paint the nightmare. It doesn't have to be a masterpiece.
- Try visualisation. Visualise yourself having a refreshing night's sleep or having a protective barrier around yourself or your door.
- Surround yourself with familiar things before you sleep e.g. holiday photos on the bedside table.
- Hang a dream catcher, or place something else symbolic near your bed, to 'catch' or 'ward off' the bad dreams.
- Talk about your dreams with a trusted friend or counsellor. Talking can make you feel your dreams have less control over you.
- Sleep with a lamp nearby so that if you wake after a nightmare you can turn on the lamp immediately and see your surroundings to help you relax more easily.
- Try to understand why you are having nightmares. Nightmares can occur as a result of triggers. If you have not had nightmares for a while or they are getting worse, there could be something happening in your life that may be triggering these nightmares.



Tips for better sleep

- Limit your caffeine intake. More than one cup of instant coffee a day can decrease the chance of you getting a good night's sleep. Don't have any caffeine after midday. This includes caffeinated energy drinks and tea.
- Try to get some exercise every day, but don't exercise immediately before going to bed.
- Use your bed only for sleeping. Don't read, listen to music, use the phone or watch TV while you are in bed.
- No matter how exhausted you are, try not to sleep in the daytime. You are trying to reprogram your body to sleep at night.
- Avoid using electronic devices at least four hours before going to sleep.
- Getting some daytime sunlight can help you to sleep better.
- Avoid going to sleep on a full stomach or if you are hungry.
- Try to establish a bed time routine. For example, have a warm shower, put your pyjamas on and turn back your covers 20 minutes before you plan to go to bed.
- Aim to go to bed and rise at the same time every day.
- Relaxation techniques before going to bed can help e.g. focusing on your breathing, stretching and yoga.
- Aim for a cool room (e.g. put a fan on, have fresh air) and a warm bed (e.g. flannelette sheets in winter, extra blankets). Many people find that a weighted blanket helps them to feel secure and to sleep better (search 'weighted blankets' online for further information).
- Lavender Essential Oil (not fragrance oil) can be great for relaxation. Add one or two drops to a warm bath or put one or two drops on your pillow at night.
- Chamomile tea and other (decaffeinated) herbal teas can be relaxing. Many are available in supermarkets.
- If you can't sleep after 20 minutes, get out of bed and do something else in another room for a while. Keep it gentle.



Building a healthy sexual relationship

A healthy, satisfying sexual relationship requires work for all couples. It's not necessary to have a partner to work through sexual healing, but if you do, try to involve them in the process. It can be a challenging time for them too.

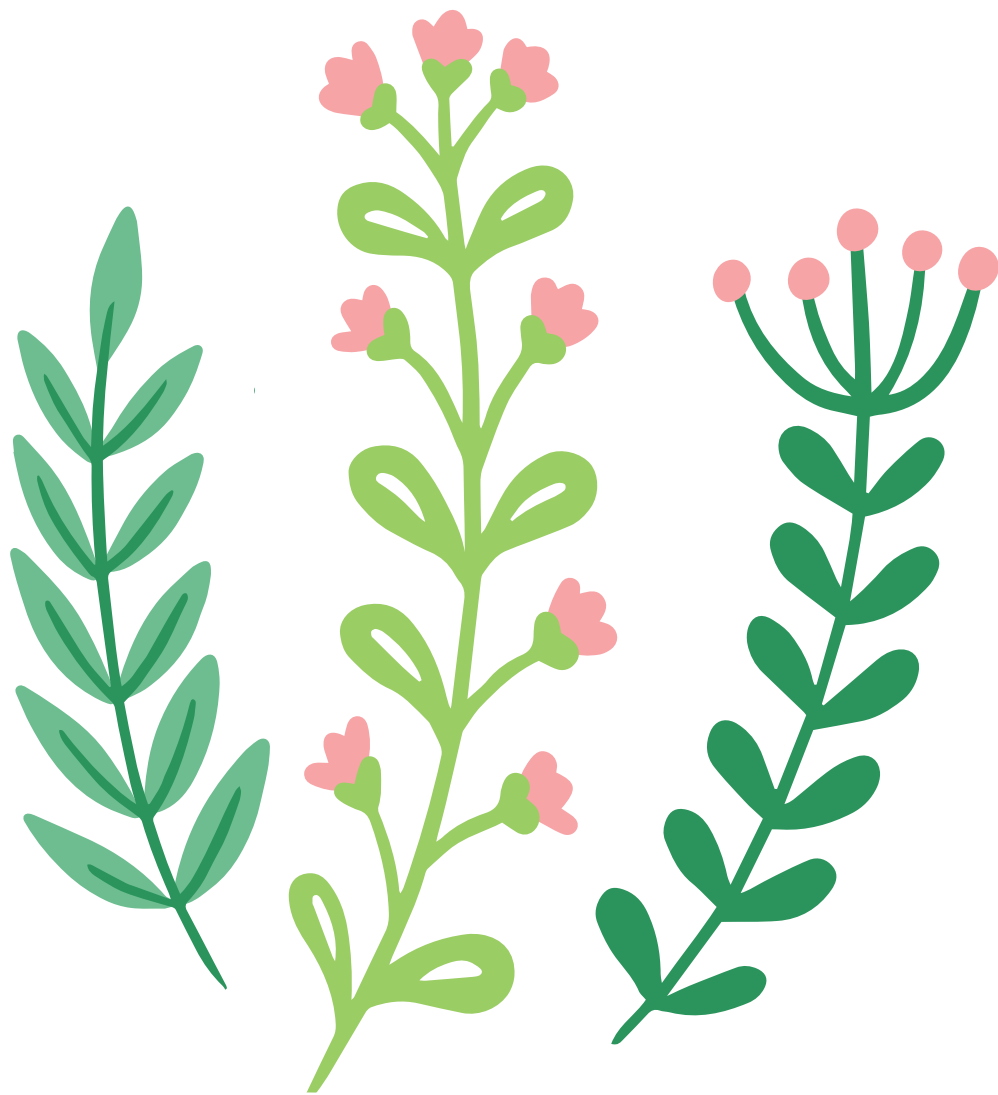
Tips for sexual healing

- Slowly become comfortable with your body.
- Talk with your partner about how you are feeling and what you each need. Work out what is sensual, playful, sensitive, joyful and fulfilling for both of you. Tell your partner what you like, what you don't like, what you would like to be able to do.
- It may be helpful to try some touching exercises to develop intimacy and trust.
- Remember to make sex playful and fun. Laugh with your partner and include the small things like cuddling, kissing and holding hands.
- Be really clear about your own and your partner's boundaries and limits. Make sure everyone feels safe. Everyone has the right to say no to things that don't feel comfortable or safe. Agree to respect each other's boundaries always. Agree in advance on what you will both do if you are triggered during sex. Have a word or signal to pause what is happening if you feel anxious.
- Consider using other avenues to assist with healing. These might include a sex therapist, books, and online forums and information. Remember that your partner is also impacted and may benefit from accessing information. Avoid using pornography because this usually depicts sex that is not equal and respectful for everyone.
- Everyone heals from sexual trauma at different rates. Try not to push yourself too fast or be too harsh on yourself. Many people find that if they work through other areas of healing, their difficulties with sex and intimacy start to lessen.
- Be gentle, kind and patient with yourself. Some days will be good and others not so good. When difficulties arise, reassure yourself that it isn't because you are unattractive or flawed. Persist, and over time, things should become easier and better.

People who have been sexually abused or sexually assaulted often experience difficulties with touch. For some, touch can trigger an automatic reaction such as freezing, flashbacks, zoning out (dissociation), feeling sick or panic attacks. These reactions can overwhelm the body. When this happens, it is important to stop what you are doing and calm the body. Take deep, slow breaths and focus on your surroundings so that you are aware of the present. Remind yourself that you are safe now and that the abuse/assault happened in the past. It can be helpful to try and identify what caused or triggered the reaction. Becoming aroused during sex can be a trigger for some people. It is helpful to talk with your partner about your reaction and try to identify what would make you feel safer during sex and intimacy.

If you are finding sex and intimate touch distressing, it may be helpful to agree with your partner on a no-sex period of time to allow you to work through the difficulties you are having as a result of the trauma. This can take the pressure and feelings of expectations off you and allow you to focus on healing first.

A summary of things to remember for healthy sex



Difficulties with intimacy and sex after sexual trauma are very common.



Healthy sex and sexual trauma are very different.



Healthy sex involves respect, equal control and safety for everyone.



Healthy sex is pleasurable, enjoyable and satisfying.



Take your time, be patient and kind to yourself.



Communicate with and involve your partner.



There are people, books and websites that can assist.



It is possible to achieve a positive sex life.

Seeking professional help

The effects of a trauma don't stop when the traumatic experience ends. They can have a huge effect on your daily life. It is important to seek help to cope with these effects so that they don't dominate your life and cause serious effects in the long term. Good mental health is just as important as good physical health.

It takes an enormous amount of courage to talk to someone about your experiences. But not seeking help can often lead to the situation becoming worse.

"I had a huge fear of telling such private things to a stranger. And huge embarrassment. I thought I alone suffered from those sorts of problems and it was my fault so I should deal with it. I was wrong on so many levels."

- A survivor



"I delayed going to a counsellor to get help because I didn't recognise what my mental health problems were. What would I say to them? Where to start? I had over 40 years of accumulated baggage...I felt like an idiot."

- A survivor



How do I know if I need help?

If you aren't already seeing an experienced professional, consider seeking professional assistance if your symptoms resulting from the trauma are too distressing or last for more than a couple of weeks. Warning signs may include the following:

- Being unable to handle the intense feelings or physical sensations.
- Feeling numb and empty.
- Withdrawing from people and activities.
- Continuing to experience strong distressing emotions.
- Continuing to have physical symptoms of being tense, agitated, and on edge
- Continuing to have disturbed sleep and/or nightmares.
- Having no-one to support you and with whom you can share your feelings and emotions.
- Having relationship problems with friends, family and colleagues.
- Increasing your use of alcohol or drugs.
- Having thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

How do I get help?

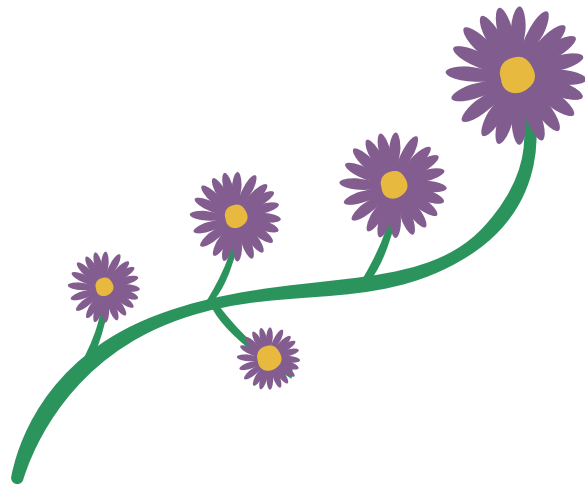
If you feel unable to cope following a trauma, you can seek help from a trauma therapist, Psychotherapist, accredited mental health social worker, clinical psychologist or psychologist. They are trained to assess trauma and to help you to better understand and manage your responses to the trauma by developing effective coping strategies and techniques.

A starting point is to speak to your GP about a referral to a psychologist, mental health social worker or therapist.



“Starting counselling was hard but it began the process of healing for me. It was about me, not about retribution or justice.”

- A survivor



You may be eligible for a GP Mental Health Care Plan which reduces the costs involved. The plan can allow people to access private sessions with psychologists or mental health social workers and receive a Medicare rebate. To get a Mental Health Care Plan, you need to make an appointment with a GP and discuss your situation.

The Australian Psychological Association provides a list of psychologists throughout Australia. You can find them online by searching ‘Find a Psychologist APA’ on the internet.

The Australian Association of Social Workers provides an online list of social workers through their website.

There are also a range of other services available in each state. You can read about most services on the internet, and you may like to phone and ask them some questions.

There is a list of services in Western Australia available on the Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC) website under ‘Client Information Handouts’.

Telephone counsellors are also available on 24 hour helplines. You might prefer this if you want to start by speaking anonymously to a counsellor about what you are experiencing.

If you are having thoughts of harming yourself or someone else, it is important to seek help as soon as possible. You can call a helpline or go to a local hospital emergency department.

Lifeline offers a 24 hour crisis telephone line. Call 13 11 14



“I was worried about what the counsellor would think of me when I talked about such private stuff, and how she would react. But after we started I realised she had heard lots of stories like mine. She wasn’t shocked or judgemental. She didn’t even want to know any details. We just focussed on how it had affected me and what I could do to recover. It was such a relief. And I did recover.”

- A survivor



“Being a bloke from the country, it was hard getting help. We are meant to be tough, to cope with everything. When things got really bad, I had to give it a go. I drove four hours to a town I don’t go to often, to see a counsellor. I didn’t want anyone to see me there. It took ages to get used to talking about that stuff, but turns out it was one of the best things I’ve ever done.”

- A survivor

Getting your needs met

It is important that you find a worker who you feel comfortable with. Sometimes it can take several sessions talking with the counsellor before you start to trust them. If you really don't feel comfortable with your worker, try someone different. Remember, people working in the trauma area hear trauma stories every day. They are familiar with the many feelings and challenges faced by people who have survived sexual trauma and they won't judge or blame you.

Some groups of people can feel more isolated and find it more difficult to speak about their trauma experiences, because of their circumstances or societal norms. These people might include men who have experienced sexual trauma, members of the LGBTI+ community (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersex), Aboriginal people, people who have been sexually assaulted by their partners, people with disabilities and people from non-English speaking backgrounds. There are increasing numbers of support services available for diverse groups of people. You may prefer to seek support from a service specific to your circumstances, or you may prefer to access a mainstream service.



“You will find joy and hope for the future. And you will find your confidence again which was robbed from you all those years ago.”

- A survivor

In getting your needs met, it is important that you let workers know how they can best support you. For example, if you need an interpreter but are worried about confidentiality, request a telephone interpreter from another part of the country; if you were sexually abused by a female and would prefer a male counsellor, request this.

You have rights when seeing a professional sexual assault worker, including the following:

- To be treated with dignity, respect and understanding.
- To be provided with a safe, confidential place for counselling.
- To make decisions about your own life.
- To have a support person with you if you choose.
- To have access to an interpreter.
- To express yourself without being judged.



“Learning skills helped me to understand and become more self-aware about controlling my triggers. This saved me a lot of grief. It was like-yes, I know where that train of jealousy, envy, self-destruction is leading and I choose not to get on it.”

- A survivor

A summary of tips for getting help

- Summon the courage to get help as early as you can.
- Ask questions and find the right sort of service for you.
- Let your therapist know if there is anything in particular that would be helpful to you.
- Give yourself a chance to get used to counselling, it may take time.
- Be as open to talk and work with your therapist as you can.
- Don't give up on yourself if the therapy becomes harder. Work through it.
- Believe that you will recover.



Getting help from a skilled therapist means you are not alone, and it can make the process of healing more effective.

Important aspects of healing

Create safety

Feeling safe is essential for recovery.

Ask yourself the following questions.

- Am I safe from further contact with the offender?
- Do I feel safe at home?
- What can I change to feel and be safe?

For people who have experienced sexual trauma from an intimate partner or someone they are living with, physical safety can be especially difficult. It is important to make a safety plan for yourself and any children living with you. A safety plan involves listing details about what you will do in case of dangerous situations, or if changes at home mean that it is unsafe. You will know best about your situation and what the risks are. There are also services available to assist people experiencing family and domestic violence. You can search the internet for options or contact 1800RESPECT for help with developing a safety plan or finding support, on 1800 737 732.

As well as physical safety, emotional safety is also important. This includes feeling safe in your relationships. Many survivors find that their relationships are affected after sexual trauma.

Show self compassion

In order to heal from trauma, you need to be able to be compassionate and kind towards yourself.

- Think about someone who has cared about you and has been kind to you. Notice how their care and attention made you feel. Now imagine having this own compassion and care for yourself.
 - What would you say to yourself?
 - What kind messages would you give yourself?
- Imagine hearing from another innocent person who has experienced what you have gone through and is now struggling with the feelings and effects that you are experiencing.
 - What would you say to them to reassure them?
 - How would you show them kindness?

Try to show yourself compassion and kindness in some way every day.

Talk to others

One of the greatest remedies for healing is to talk to someone supportive, understanding and empathetic. This may be a family member or friend, or it may be a professional specialising in trauma. For many people, it includes talking to both friends/family and a professional counsellor.

When thinking about who to tell, ask yourself if the person will . . .

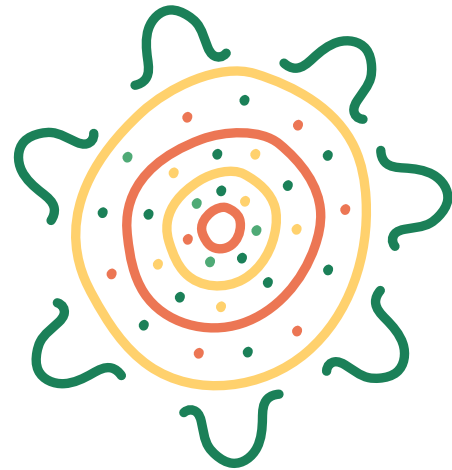
- Respect my privacy.
- Listen and not blame me.
- Be supportive.
- Let me decide what to do.

Many people are unsure about how to support someone who has experienced a sexual assault or sexual abuse. You may need to tell them what you need from them. You may also like to provide them with some information on how to help.

At the same time, it is important not to speak constantly about your experience with everyone you meet. This can drive some people away. Choose carefully who you will speak with and speak only when the moment is right and you are somewhere private. This way you feel safe, you have control over who hears the information and the person can give you their full attention.

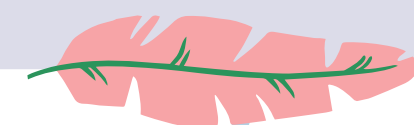
Some people find it very useful to share their story with others who have had a similar experience. If this is something you are interested in, there are support groups in the community for survivors of sexual abuse and sexual assault. There are also books and blogs written by survivors.

Some people find it difficult to talk to people they know about their experiences. Talking to a professional counsellor can be an important part of healing. Counsellors who work in sexual trauma services are trained to understand the many impacts of trauma. See the section in this booklet titled 'Seeking professional help'.



“Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it”.

Brené Brown - Researcher



Build connections

An important part of healing is to build trust and connections with people who do not hurt others. It can take time to trust again after being hurt. You can feel disconnected from others and you may be tempted to withdraw from other people and isolate yourself.

But it is important to stay connected with those who care about you. You may or may not choose to tell them what has happened, but stay connected, spend some time enjoying each other's company and have some fun. Avoid those people who are negative, blaming or cause you to feel stressed. And remember that positive relationships are two-way so take time to ask how the other person is feeling and listen to their stories too.

Socially interacting with other people (talking, listening, making eye contact, smiling) calms the nervous system and releases hormones that reduce stress. It also diverts your attention away from being overwhelmed by your internal and external environments.

Over time, it is important to build connections with new people in the community. This might include people you meet through volunteering or joining a club, and people working in the community. It might also include people you meet through friends, and old friends you choose to reconnect with. For some people, connecting with a faith, is important.

Remember, positive relationships and connection with others are powerful for healing. Having a good support system can be a key to recovery.



Do something you enjoy every day

It is important to nurture yourself, so make time every day to do something you enjoy. Set some time aside to relax each day, and plan bigger treats ahead of time so that you have something to look forward to.

It can be a good idea to make a list of things you enjoy and treats you value.

Here are some ideas:

- Walk on the beach
- Watch the sunset
- Book tickets to a sport event
- Light candles
- Read a good book
- Listen to music
- Book tickets to the theatre
- Plan a camping trip
- Soak in a bath
- Go for a picnic
- Swim in the sea
- Go for a bike ride
- See a live band
- Book a massage
- Plan a hike
- Cook your favourite meal
- Meet a friend for coffee
- Buy or pick fresh flowers



Take a stand

For some survivors, taking a stand for change can help clarify their beliefs about human rights and honour the fact that they have survived.

Taking a stand may involve speaking out publicly about child sexual abuse or sexual assault. Or it might involve actions like lobbying politicians for change, contributing to survivor forums, signing petitions, or joining protest marches.

Seek cultural healing

Some people find cultural practices and traditions to be very powerful for healing. They can help to make connections within, to give a sense of belonging, and to strengthen identity and purpose. It can be a safe way to explore and express yourself. Learning about your culture through language, traditions, art, dance, stories, traditional food and medicines can all be an important part of spiritual, emotional and social healing.

Aim for a balanced, healthy lifestyle

There are many factors to consider in achieving a healthy, well life. Achieving this will come after you have made sense of your traumatic experience. Avoid aiming to achieve perfection, this is not achievable to anyone. Try to get to a place where you feel at peace. Once you have done this, you can move on to building a better life after trauma.

Start with the most important things first, then gradually look at other areas of your life.

Take some time to complete the section 'Lifestyle strategies for healing and creating good health' towards the end of this booklet. This will help you to identify the things you want to work on for achieving a happy, healthy and fulfilling life. Make the effort to start some changes. Do it for YOU: you are worth it.

Manage your lifestyle

- Make sure you are safe.
- Seek professional help if needed.
- Limit your exposure to trauma stories and bad news.
- Find out more information about trauma and what you are experiencing.
- Manage your stress and anxiety.
- Connect with others.
- Get health checks.
- Exercise regularly.
- Challenge the brain.
- Practice meditation and mindfulness.
- Help others.
- Express gratitude for the good things.
- Have safe physical contact.
- Sleep well.
- Use positive self-talk.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Get some sunlight.
- Do something creative.
- Laugh regularly.
- Stimulate the senses daily.
- Break routines, try new things, learn new skills.
- Have a sense of purpose in life.

Practice gratitude

When we are stressed and struggling with life, we often forget to notice the positives in our lives and the beauty around us. Regularly practicing gratitude is a very simple way to introduce more balance and positivity into your life and has been linked to a range of changes including better sleep, increased happiness and improved relationships. You can introduce this into your life by spending a few minutes each morning and night thinking about things you are grateful for. However the more structured process outlined here is recommended.



“Keeping positive thoughts isn’t easy. Getting up again after being knocked down by dark thoughts, isn’t easy. I can lament about it and moan about the injustice, but in the end, having a fulfilling life is a choice. And with all choices, it takes courage and hard work.
All the time.”
- A survivor



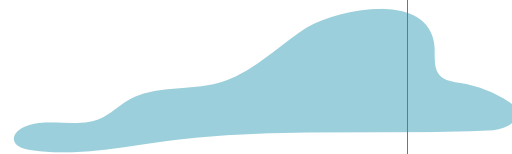
“Some days are definitely harder than others. When I’m having a really tough day, I say to myself ‘All I need to do today is breath. I’ll get to everything else tomorrow’. Somehow that helps me get through.”
- A survivor

Keep going

It can take a very long time to get to a point where you are happy with your life and even then, it requires constant monitoring, attention and effort, but it is worth it.
You will have good days and bad, like everyone. Remind yourself that it is your choice how you deal with negative feelings that arise.
Sometimes, when you are experiencing a particularly bad day, it can be helpful simply to put everything on hold for the day, try to get a good night’s rest, then face the world the following day.

Healing
doesn't mean
your past didn't happen.

It means your past
no longer controls
you or your
future hopes
and dreams.



Lifestyle strategies for healing and creating good health

Strategies that are helpful for healing from trauma and creating a healthy, happy life are listed below. You can choose to mark the strategies that you would like to work on and add your own ideas to the list.

Seek help if needed

Consider counselling, a support group or a lifestyle coach.

Be safe

Safety is paramount for healing. Make sure you are safe before making changes. Seek help for this if needed.

Limit your exposure to violence and bad news

Limit how often you read/watch/hear the news. Watch light hearted TV shows and comedies. Read uplifting books.

Connect with others

Positive connections with others is crucial. This could include family, friends and community.

Manage your stress levels

Practice exercises to help relax e.g. breathing, body awareness and muscle relaxation. Use phone apps if they help.

Break routines and try new things

Eat at different restaurants, plan new outings, learn a new skill, or book a holiday for the future.

Swear and curse privately

When alone or with a close friend, express your emotions by swearing and cursing. It can also be helpful to take your favourite curse words and draw, colour, sing, stitch or paint them! When doing energetic exercise, it can also make you feel better to swear (silently if in a public place) while you sweat.

Exercise

Create a routine of doing at least half an hour exercise every day. Stretch and move throughout the day.

Eat a healthy diet

Eat healthily and drink lots of water.

Sleep and rest

It's important to get enough sleep. If this is difficult, aim for enough rest.

Practice meditation or mindfulness

This helps to be more aware of the present moment and to calm the body.

Get health checks

Speak to a medical professional about any aches, pains and symptoms. Get full health checks periodically.

Stimulate the senses

Listen to music, smell different scents, taste spicy food, touch surfaces, look at pleasant things e.g. sunsets. Aim to do this every day.

Challenge the brain

Learn to play chess or bridge, do puzzles, play general knowledge games, or study something new.

Get some sunlight

Be sun smart but get some sunlight regularly or speak to a doctor about taking vitamin D supplements.

Have close, safe physical contact

Get massages, hug a friend/family member, or play with a pet.

Help others

Join a charity group, volunteer at events, become an organ donor, offer to help friends.

Express gratitude

Each day, identify the things that you are grateful for in your life.

Use positive self-talk

Identify when you start to have negative thoughts and self-talk. Replace these with positive, empowering statements.

Do something creative

Choose something that appeals to you e.g. woodworking, photography, poetry, dancing, gardening, drawing, cooking . . .

Find useful resources and information

Search for phone apps, books, websites, courses, chat lines, groups and other resources and give them a try to see if they are helpful to you.

Control your thinking

Create some positive, empowering statements. Monitor your thoughts and each time you notice negative thoughts creeping in, replace them with positive ones.

Show kindness and compassion to yourself

Speak to and treat yourself kindly. Plan special treats for yourself. Encourage and congratulate yourself. Forgive yourself.

Seek cultural or spiritual healing

Explore the options available and see if they meet your needs.

Do some planning

If you need to, spend time working on a safety plan, a plan for when you are triggered, a plan for when you notice yourself becoming stressed.

Have a sense of purpose

Know what your purpose in life is. Set short term and long term goals.

Positive and empowering statements and thoughts

Create your own statements and thoughts below to have on hand when you need them.



A final message

No matter what has happened to you,
you are still here, you are a survivor.

By reading this booklet, you are showing
that you are doing things to heal from
your experiences and to build the life you
want for your future.

You are strong.

You have control over your future.

You deserve happiness.

We wish you strength and determination
on your path ahead.

Produced by the Sexual Assault Resource Centre
(SARC) Western Australia

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Special thanks to the skilled trauma counsellors in
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