



*"I'm moving
forward"*

Information booklet

My crisis worker is:....

Name:

Contact:

What is rape or sexual assault?

Sexual assault/rape is any type of sexual act which occurs without the consent of one of the people involved. There are a variety of legal definitions of sexual offences.

Who is raped or sexually assaulted?

It can happen to any person of any age, gender, class or background.

The person who has attacked you is often a known person such as a relative or partner, but they may also be a stranger or someone little known to you.

The attack may happen indoors or outdoors. The attacker may break into your home, may be invited in, or may force you to enter their home. There may be more than one attacker.

About Solace

Solace Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs) provide local communities with a safe, discreet and caring environment to support victims of rape and sexual assault.

Our integrated approach ensures that you are in control of the services you receive and supported in the immediate aftermath of an attack. At any time, you can stop the process; you are in full control. Our aim is to help you put your life back together.

Our services:

- Crisis intervention after recent sexual assault
- Ensuring professional standards and the prompt availability of forensic examinations
- Providing medical care and follow-up tests
- Short-term counselling
- Supporting victims before, during and after forensic medical examinations

If you've been the victim of a rape or sexual assault, we hope this booklet can help answer the many questions you will certainly have about your experience, and help provide you with reassurance and support.

It gives information about rape and sexual assault and explains what we can do for your physical and emotional welfare. Because it is aimed at both men and women, there may, of course, be some information that is not relevant to you.

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"you are not
to blame"

If you have been raped or sexually assaulted

It is important to remind yourself that you are not to blame.

Nothing that you did made a person rape or sexually assault you. You are not responsible for someone else's actions.

There is no right or wrong way to respond in situations of sexual attack. Common feelings after rape or sexual assault include self-blame, guilt, fear, anxiety, shame and anger. These are naturally emotional responses and usually reduce gradually over time, more information is available from **page 11**.

When your safety has been violated, it is important that you get back to feeling secure again and able to make your own decisions.

But you must do it in your time. At Solace, you can choose to take the process at your own pace, stopping if you feel you need to. There may be times when you don't understand what is happening – please don't be afraid to ask if you're in any way confused.

"it helps
to talk"

How you might feel

Each person responds differently to a sexual attack.

Sexual assault is traumatic and recovery can take time. Support and understanding are important for recovery and it can help to talk about your feelings and concerns. Friends and relatives can provide valuable support, however many people also find it helpful to talk to a counsellor. If you think that this may help, you can access these services through the Solace Centre.

What would you like to talk about?

It may help to write down some of the things you would like to talk about with your Crisis Worker here:



"Why do I feel
like this?"

Emotional reactions to sexual assault

Following a sexual assault you may experience a wide range of emotions that can be distressing, surprising and difficult to cope with.

Each person reacts differently: you may feel tearful, withdrawn, depressed or just numb. You may also feel very anxious and panicky, or have nightmares and flashbacks of the assault.

For many people these emotions pass. If they persist you may need professional help to overcome them. Learning to recognise these responses and realising that they are normal is very helpful. On the following pages we have highlighted some of the reactions you might experience.

Writing down your feelings and thoughts can help

We have also provided some blank note pages towards the back of this booklet, where you might want to write down your feelings, thoughts and reactions. Some people find this very helpful. A place to express them privately can help bring a lot of bottled-up frustration, anger and fear to the surface which can be a great relief.

Anxiety

We all experience anxiety at certain times, for instance you may recall feeling anxious when going for a new job interview. Your heart beats faster, you breathe more quickly, and your skin becomes clammy and sweaty. You may feel dizzy or shaky and have “butterflies” in your stomach. If you are really anxious, and in a state of near panic, you may feel as though you are having a heart attack and hyperventilate or over-breathe. If you do experience these symptoms they will usually pass.

After an assault many people feel anxious and afraid that something might happen again, and see the world as a dangerous place with no one they can't trust. You may find you are always watching out and constantly on edge, waiting for something else to happen. You may be jumpy, especially if someone is too close or touches you unexpectedly. Anything that reminds you of the assault can trigger anxiety including smells, colours, sounds, as well as more specific reminders.

What can I do about anxiety?

First try to notice what is making you feel anxious. Is it what you are thinking or doing that is a reminder of the assault?

Our body usually reacts to what we are thinking so if you can distract yourself, or think more positive thoughts, this can help stop the panic rising. You could try counting objects, listening to music, or thinking of a favourite place. Relaxation and deep breathing exercise may also help. If the anxiety begins to be overpowering then seek help to prevent it becoming a major problem.

How have you managed to tackle anxiety?

Try writing down some situations in which you have felt particularly anxious...

Did you manage to combat your anxiety? How?
Perhaps you might be able to use this technique again?

Nightmares and sleeping problems

Nightmares, which can be replays of the assault or other distressing images and dreams, are common and can really affect your sleep. Nightmares are only one way your mind tries to make sense of what happened.

You might also find yourself waking up suddenly feeling very afraid and anxious. If you then try and avoid sleeping, for fear of having a nightmare, lack of sleep can affect your mood: you may become irritable, have difficulty concentrating and feel depressed. Even if your sleep is not being disturbed by nightmares, you may find that you have trouble getting to sleep, wake early, or experience restless sleeping.

What can I do if I can't sleep?

It is important to try and maintain a normal routine so go to bed at your usual time and get up at the same time even if you haven't slept. Avoid napping in the afternoon to catch up on your sleep, as this will make it harder to sleep at night.

Try relaxing before going to bed; have a bath or listen to music that will distract your mind. Try not to go over and over what has happened, or force yourself to recall what you can't remember, or worry about what you should or should not have done. This can make you more upset and may make it harder for you to get to sleep. If you do wake up during the night, don't lie in bed tossing a turning. Instead get up and have a warm drink, as long as it is not tea or coffee, which contain caffeine and will make you more alert.

Try noting down your nightmares when you wake

You could keep this book by your bedside and write down your dreams at night. This might release some fear.

Flashbacks

These are very clear images that make you feel as if the assault is happening again. Flashbacks occur because a traumatic experience is so shocking so different from your everyday experience that you cannot fit it into what you know about the world. Your mind keeps bringing the memory back in order to understand what has happened.

You will probably try and push these images away as they are distressing and very uncomfortable. Unfortunately this can increase the power of the images. Instead try and focus on where you are and bring yourself back into the here and now; remind yourself that you are safe, not still being assaulted. Flashbacks should become less frequent, but if they do not, psychological therapy can help.

Guilt

People sometimes feel guilty or ashamed. These feelings are related to you taking personal responsibility for the assault, the feeling, "I did something to deserve this". You may also feel guilty for how you are feeling, "I should just get over this", or guilty that others are upset or angry. Remember you are not to blame for being sexually assaulted.

Anger

Many people who have been assaulted feel angry, not only with their attacker but also with themselves and others. You may well feel that the world is not fair. If you are not used to feeling angry this can seem scary and confusing, particularly if your anger is directed at those who are closest to you. Although being angry can be a positive sign in the healing process, it can sometimes mask sadness.

Try not to block up your anger as this may result in it spilling out when you don't want it to. Try and talk about how you are feeling or write it down, as we have suggested. And remember – anger is a normal reaction.

Irritability

After your assault you may experience significant physical and emotional stress, but not be fully aware of it. As a result you may find you become irritable very easily, reacting to things that normally wouldn't have bothered you. With both anger and irritability, it is important to try and look after yourself. Use the support of others and try and relax. Moderate exercise can also help to release some of the tension.

Depression

This is a common reaction to sexual assault and can include feeling down, sad, hopeless or despairing. You may cry more often or find it difficult to cry at all. You may lose interest in people and activities you used to enjoy. Plans you had for the future don't seem to matter anymore and you feel life isn't worth living. You may also be grieving for what you have lost because of the assault.

If you feel like this, try and discuss it with someone, either staff at the Solace Centre or someone you trust. Focus on the reasons why life is worth living; you can overcome depression. If your feelings lead to thoughts of wishing you were dead, or doing something to hurt or kill yourself, please go to your GP as they will be able to help.

"Take
your time"

Sexual relationships

Many people find it difficult to feel sexual or have sexual relationships after the assault, partly due to a lack of trust that can arise, but also because sex itself can be a reminder of the assault.

You may also have negative feelings towards yourself and your body, such as feeling 'dirty'. Some people react differently and you may find yourself having more sex with different partners, or having sex you otherwise would not have wanted because you no longer care about yourself or your body.

Give yourself time. Remind yourself that you are not dirty, that you are a worthy person and being intimate is different to the assault.



"Why me?"

Things you may be doing

Avoiding situations, especially those that remind you of the assault, is a common way of managing trauma and related pain. These situations can seem unconnected and initially confusing.

For instance, if you are wondering why you can't go out in the evenings it may be because the assault happened at night. You may find yourself avoiding being with other people, or on the other hand, wanting to be with someone all the time. These are all subconscious attempts to keep yourself safe. They can be helpful in the short term, but may become problematic when you try and get on with everyday activities that you enjoy.

Worrying or bottling things up can make you feel anxious and depressed – leading to further stress. You may find yourself repeatedly asking questions such as “why me?”

This bottling up can make you more irritable and more likely to explode with anger or become upset. Try and talk about how you are feeling and remember it is normal to be on a roller coaster of emotions after the assault.

Using alcohol and/or drugs may seem like a good way of blocking out the difficult feelings, thoughts and images, or the only way you can get to sleep. You may also have used alcohol or drugs before, to cope with difficult things in your life, and find yourself going back to them. Unfortunately they only offer a very short-term solution. The problems and emotions will still be there when you wake up, and if you use alcohol or drugs excessively you will create even more problems for yourself.

What can help me?

Overall, take care of yourself. Give yourself time to absorb the shock of the experience. Try to get enough rest and sleep, eat regularly, and take moderate exercise.

Talk to friends or family if it helps, although you may decide not to tell them, or only tell certain people. However, not telling anyone and putting on a brave face or pretending that everything is alright, can be exhausting. Try telling others what will help you, as they may not know how to react. Or they may want to protect you from further distress by not asking you.

If you find that problems continue, and you are finding it difficult to manage, you may benefit from seeing a clinical psychologist or counsellor who will look at all the difficulties you are experiencing and help you develop ways in which to cope. There are also local and national help lines you can contact for emotional support and the staff at Solace can advise you on these.

Below we have suggested a way in which to keep a diary of your experiences, noting anything which has helped you.

Diary

Event/situation	How did it make you feel? <small>(you could score your feelings e.g: 0-5, with 0 representing very bad and 5 moderate)</small>	How did you cope, and what helped?

"What
can I do"

Advice for families, partners and friends

Anyone can find themselves supporting a relative, a friend or partner who has been raped or sexually assaulted. Rape and sexual assault are terrifying experiences and everyone reacts differently.

Some common reactions are described in the previous section. Please read this information to help you understand how the person you care about may be feeling.

What can I do?

It can be hard to know how to support someone who has suffered an assault, and difficult to know what to say. There is no guaranteed right response: listening and being there are the most important things you can do.

Telling the person to try and forget the assault can seem logical but it can be unhelpful. If they could forget what happened and get over the assault, they would have done this already. In fact, feeling not able to get over it is something that many people worry about, and it can increase feelings of guilt or shame. Unfortunately the recovery process can take months, even years.

Talking about the assault

Try and let your partner, relative or friend know that you are there to listen when they are ready. She or he may not want to tell you everything that has happened, and some people never disclose all the details to their family or friends. This doesn't mean that they don't trust you.

Try not to ask why the rape or sexual assault happened, or why your loved one didn't stop the assault. Many people seem to initially blame themselves, and you need to help them realise that no one is to blame for being assaulted.

Understanding emotions

Encourage your partner, relative or friend to express how they are feeling, whether this is sad, hopeless, angry or just numb. Allowing her or him to naturally experience these feelings can be very positive – many people tend to block out these emotions as they can be too uncomfortable or they don't want to distress you.

If you find that you want to hug your loved one, but they appear to reject you, try and respect this. Even though they know you care, they may be experiencing significant anxiety and touch can trigger memories of the assault. However, many people do want to be hugged so it is important that you ask what they want and need.

If you are in a sexual relationship with a partner they may now view sex as frightening and find it difficult to be intimate with you. It is important that you work together on re-establishing your sexual relationship. This can take time. If you find that you need additional support or advice, ask your GP to refer you to a counsellor or healthcare professional.

Reporting the sexual assault

The decision to report the assault to the police is up to your partner, relative or friend. Only involve the police yourself if they have given you their permission.

The decision of whether to report the crime to the police is a very difficult one. Many people decide that they do not want to face the consequences of going through a possible court case. They may be ashamed of revealing what actually happened and prefer to cope with the effects of crime without police help. They may also feel unable to face their attacker and find the idea of going to court traumatic. If your loved one is unsure, it may be useful for them to talk to a specially trained police officer.

Whatever your partner, relative or friend decides, give practical support where possible. For example, offer to accompany them to any appointments such as to the Solace Centre or to the police.

Consider your own reactions

Anger is a common reaction if you are supporting someone who has been assaulted. Make sure your partner, relative or friend knows that you are not angry with him or her. They may already think that they are to blame for what happened and could be even more sensitive to your reactions and thoughts. You may feel so angry that you want to threaten the attacker or seek revenge. This is not going to help and will probably add to the worries and concerns that your loved one has already.

You may well feel hopeless because you were unable to prevent the assault from happening, or protect your loved one. Recognise that you cannot put things right, although you may really want to. Over time people experience a number of changes, especially regarding their feelings towards themselves and others, so your loved one may appear to be exactly the same person as before. Just be patient, find out what would help them and this will help you cope with your own feelings.

Follow these three steps:

- 1** Try talking to your loved one in a safe confidential environment where they will feel at ease.
- 2** Listen to what they have to say. Try not to interrupt or ask too many questions.
- 3** Let them make their own decisions. It's important that your loved one feels that they have support, whether they decide to involve the police or not.


Finding help

For your partner, relative or friend

Talking to someone in confidence could help your partner, relative or friend. However, if you think that your loved one needs counselling, and they are unwilling to speak out, allow them to decide what they would like to do about seeking help-don't pressurise them.

For you

You may feel particularly distressed and unable to cope with the situation yourself. There are many support organisations which can help you and offer practical advice. We have listed some useful contacts at the back of this booklet.



"Will I
go to
court"

Legal and court proceedings

Many people are worried about reporting rape or sexual assault to the police and having to go to court.


If you have any questions or concerns about the police procedure or going to court, you can discuss them with the Solace Centre team, or your specially trained police officer (if you have already involved the police)

Criminal injuries compensations

If you have been raped or sexually assaulted you may be entitled to criminal injuries compensation. Usually the crime must have been reported to the police, but it may be worth asking if you are entitled even if the police were not involved. You can find more information from your local victim Support or by contacting –

www.cica.gov.uk

0800 358 3601



"Your
notes"

Planning for the future

Using these notes pages to write down your feelings, thoughts and plans for the future

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Can you help us with some feedback?

If you feel able, it would help us help others if you could answer these few questions about your experience at the Solace Centre. Your answers will be anonymous.

How did you hear about the centre?

.....

How did you first contact us?

.....

Were the staff helpful and sympathetic?

.....

Are you male or female? Male Female

Age:

Are you still visiting the centre?

.....

Are you now visiting the contacts that you were given to you by the centre?

.....

Did you find the advice and information you were given useful and helpful?

.....

Can you think of any ways to improve our service?

.....

My nearest Solace Centre is:...

Location:

Tel:

Email: