



KSAAS

**Kent Sexual Assault
& Abuse Service**

(formerly East Kent Rape Crisis Centre)

TAKING CARE OF
YOURSELF AFTER
TRAUMA



CONTENTS

- Self-Help Guide - 3
- Introduction and Welcome - 4
- Understanding Trauma - 5
- Examples of Typical Reactions After Trauma - 6
 - Common Thoughts After Trauma - 7 & 8
 - Common Feelings After Trauma - 9
 - Ways to Manage Difficult Thoughts - 10-11
 - Ways to Deal with Emotional Reactions - 12
 - Grounding - 13-16
 - How Your Body Responds To Trauma - 17
- Ways to Look After Yourself After Trauma - 18
 - How Your Mind Responds To Trauma - 21
 - Behavioural Responses To Trauma - 22-23
- Building Positive and Healing Behaviours - 24
 - Relationships & Rebuilding Trust- 26
- Key Reactions to Trauma: Flashback, Triggers & Self-Harm - 25-28
- Your Journey to Healing: Support, Strength, and Self-Care - 29-32
- About KSAAS and Contact Details - 33

SELF-HELP GUIDE

This self-help guide is for anyone who has experienced rape, sexual abuse or trauma. No matter your age, gender, or background, we hope this will help support you in understanding and processing your feelings and reactions. Experiencing rape or sexual abuse can impact how you think, feel, behave, and view the world.

Everyone's experience of sexual abuse is unique but the emotional and physical reactions that follow can be similar. It's normal and okay to experience a mix of emotions e.g. confusion, anger, sadness, fear, or anxiety. All your feelings are valid and with time, healing is possible. Be patient and kind to yourself as you navigate these feelings and focus on ways to feel safer.



This guide hopes and aims to help you:

- Understand how your mind and body are reacting.
- Learn new ways to manage your difficult thoughts and emotions.
- Find grounding techniques and everyday coping tools.
- Know where to turn for further help and support.

The best ways of coping and healing are finding what works and feels right for you.

You may find it useful to make notes, highlight ideas that resonate, or think about situations where these strategies could help.

INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME

After trauma,, your body and mind react automatically as a way of protecting you and keeping you safe. Feelings like fear or anger, mistrust, forgetfulness, or withdrawing from others are natural survival responses and may continue even after the danger has passed.

This guide will help you recognise which of these reactions helped you cope and supported you at the time and which might be getting in the way of your healing.

Healing is **POSSIBLE**. It often takes time, courage, and patience but there is no right way to feel or recover. Be gentle with yourself and avoid putting pressure on yourself to “get better” quickly.

Whether what has happened was recent or some time ago, you’ve taken an incredibly brave step by opening this guide. How you’re feeling right now matters and you do not have to face it alone.

Take things are your pace, have breaks when you need to and be kind to yourself along the way. If at any point you feel overwhelmed while reading this guide, it’s okay to stop and take a break. You can reach out to someone you trust or contact KSAAS for confidential support.

Remind yourself that your reactions are normal responses to an abnormal situation, this was not your fault and you’re not to blame.



UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

Trauma can affect you both physically and emotionally, often shaking your sense of safety, trust, and control. Everyone responds differently. Some might feel numb or detached, others anxious or angry. There is no “normal” or “right” way to react. These reactions are your mind and body’s natural way of protecting you. Even after the danger has passed, your body may still act as if you’re unsafe, but with time and the right support and care, these reactions can ease.

How the Brain Reacts to Trauma

- When faced with danger, the brain’s survival system takes over. The amygdala in the brain scans for threats. This triggers the release of stress hormones, leading to instinctive responses: Fight, Flight, Freeze, Friend, or Flop. In situations like rape or abuse, fight or flight may not be possible, so freeze, friend, or flop are common ways to reduce harm.



- If a response leads to survival, the brain stores it as successful. Next time you face a stressful or threatening situation you are more likely to use the same response. Sometimes, this reaction can appear in situations that are less dangerous. This can cause anxiety, hyper-alertness, or numbness. Remembering, you are not broken, your body did what it needed to do to survive something that should never have happened

EXAMPLES OF TYPICAL REACTIONS INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCE AFTER A? TRAUMA

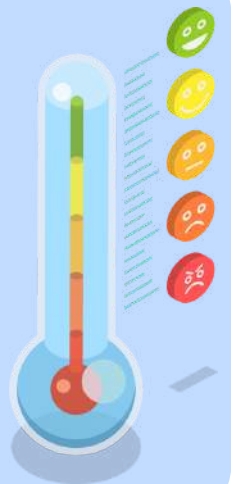


Behavioural

- Smoking, drinking, or using substances more than usual
- Avoiding work, study, or social situations
- Throwing yourself into work or keeping overly busy
- Changing your eating or sleeping habits
- Engaging in self-harm or other coping behaviours
- Feeling restless — fidgeting, nail-biting, or tapping
- Neglecting your own care or appearance

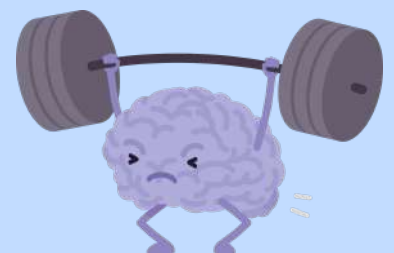
Emotional

- Feelings of sadness, guilt, or hopelessness
- Anxiety, panic attacks, or difficulty relaxing
- Irritability or sudden mood changes
- Nightmares or intrusive memories
- Low self-confidence or insecurity
- Trouble concentrating or remembering things
- Feeling detached, numb, or on edge



Physical

- Muscle tension or body aches
- Headaches or dizziness
- Fatigue or exhaustion
- Changes in breathing, such as feeling short of breath
- Tightness in the chest or a racing heartbeat
- Sweating or a dry mouth
- Stomach problems, such as diarrhoea or nausea
- Feeling restless or, at times, lacking energy or motivation



COMMON THOUGHTS

It can be very difficult to stop thinking about what happened. Trying to make sense of it can be confusing, and you may find yourself thinking things about yourself that aren't true.

Self-Blame

It's normal to have thoughts like:

- "I should/ shouldn't have..."
- "I deserved it because..."

Remember: the person who abused you made the choices, you're not to blame. Your reactions were your body and mind's way of surviving an abnormal situation.

Difficulty Concentrating

Problems focusing due to:

- Sleeplessness or disturbed sleep
- Feeling confused or disconnected
- Dissociation

These are normal reactions while your mind processes trauma. With time, they usually become easier to manage.

Self-Loathing

You may have thoughts like:

- "I'm dirty or disgusting"
- "Nobody will ever love me"

What happened to you doesn't define you. You are still you.

Fearful Thoughts

You may worry about:

- What others will say
- The abuser being around
- Not being believed
- Feeling trapped in panicky thoughts

Abusers often rely on fear to silence their victims. You're safe now, and there are people who will believe and support you when you choose to talk.

Feeling Different

You may feel:

- "Nobody understands me"
- "Things will never be the same"

It's normal to feel changed. Every experience can shape us, and with time, many survivors find ways to grow stronger.

Helplessness

Thoughts like:

- "I can't go on..."
- "I'm not coping..."

These feelings are understandable. By being here, you're showing strength.

Difficulty Talking About the Abuse

You might feel:

- “I can’t say that word...”
- “Nobody will believe me...”

It’s normal to feel scared or unsure about talking about rape or sexual abuse. Take your time.

Speak in your own words. It’s never too late to access support.

Anger

Anger is a natural response when someone has violated your trust or sense of safety. Thoughts may include:

- “They should have protected me”
- “No one can be trusted”

Anger is healthy, but try to focus on who is truly responsible, the person who abused you.

Memory and Trauma

Survivors are often distressed not only by the event but also by how they remember it. Trauma triggers the release of powerful hormones that can disrupt memory and temporarily preventing the brain from properly storing or recalling experiences or linking them to a specific time or place. .

Brain activity during trauma affect how memories are stored and later recalled. As sexual abuse and rape are extremely traumatic, these memories can resurface as:

- **Fragmented** - only parts come back rather than a clear sequence.
- **Intrusive** - memory reappear unexpectedly and are hard to control.
- **Sensory** - memory returns via sensory experiences e.g. images, sounds, smells or feelings, as if the event is relived by one or more senses.
- **Non-sequential** - difficult to recall the order in which things happened.
- **Non-verbal** - hard to describe in words, despite the emotions or images feel strong.
- **Non-contextual** - main details of the memory might be clear but harder to remember when or where it happened.
- **Buried** - memory may stay hidden for years, resurfacing later in dreams, flashes or vivid fragments can be difficult to believe or accept.

COMMON FEELINGS

Understanding Your Emotional Reactions

When coping with trauma, your emotions can feel: like numbness, where you feel very little or like a flood of feelings that are hard to separate or understand.



You may become overwhelmed by emotions that are hard to name or explain. These feelings can sometimes show up physically e.g. as heavy feeling in the stomach, or tension in the body. When you look more closely at these emotions, you may notice individual feelings within it. Naming and exploring these can help you understand what lies beneath them and how they connect to your experiences.

Anger - is a healthy and protective emotion, not your enemy. It can show that something important to you was threatened or disrespected. It shows when a boundary has been crossed and helps you protect yourself.

Shame - one of the most painful and damaging emotions. It can make you feel not good enough or at fault. For survivors, it can silence you and make it hard to seek support. Shame belongs to the person who caused harm. You did not deserve what happened to you.

Loneliness - Many survivors feel isolated and struggle to trust others, fearing judgement or feeling misunderstood. These feelings are completely understandable. You are not alone and connection is possible over time.

Emptiness - Sometimes emotions can feel so intense, so the only way to cope is to shut them down, which can leave you feeling empty or disconnected. You deserve support to find safer ways to cope and feel connected again.

Remember: it was not your fault. Sexual abuse is always the responsibility of the abuser, never the survivor. There are people who understand these feelings and want to support you. You don't have to face them alone.

WAYS TO MANAGE DIFFICULT THOUGHTS

1 Bringing your thoughts outside

If you write down your thoughts it can help move them from inside to the outside world. By looking at them more clearly and decide whether they are helpful or unhelpful.

2 Focus on what's important to you.

Create a list of things that give you strength and help you keep going, This may include:

- **Inner resources** – positive memories, past successes, personal strengths etc.
- **Outer resources** – supportive people, pets, meaningful objects, safe places etc.

3 Notice your triggers.

Identify what, when, where, or who might set off a flashback or anxious thought. Keeping a trigger record may help find patterns, manage/avoid triggering situations, and feel more prepared.

4 Letters of your name.

Use each letter of your name to describe something positive about yourself: a skill, quality, or interest. Then create a name poster to remind yourself of your strengths.

5 Positive things diary.

Before going to bed, write down three positive things that happened during your day, big or small. When you're struggling or can't sleep you can look back at all you've achieved.

6 Draw an image or make a collage

When you're feeling down or sad, you could also draw or create a collage that represents these feelings. Keep it somewhere you can see when you need comfort or motivation.

7 Finding Your Mantra

A mantra is a short, positive statement that builds strength and calm. Repeat it daily, especially when you need encouragement e.g. "I am strong"



8 My Best Person

Think about someone who has supported and believed in you. Someone who has been kind, encouraging, or safe to be around. Keep a photo or small symbol of this person nearby. When you're struggling, use it as a reminder that you're cared for and believed.

9 My Best Person's Words & Response

When you have a difficult thought or experience, ask yourself what you'd say to someone you care about in the same situation. Try offering those same kind words to yourself.

10 Helpful Distractions

Distractions can give your mind a break and help you feel grounded. Try making a list of activities that soothe or uplift you, e.g. calling/ messaging a friend, watching a favourite film/ TV show, doing something creative, exercise, visiting a safe or calming place etc.

11 What would I say?

What would you say if someone close to you said the same thing as you were thinking, what would you say to support them?

12 Creating a Calming Sleep Routine

Evenings can feel overwhelming after trauma, and sleep may be disrupted by intrusive thoughts or nightmares. A simple routine can help — keep a small light on, listen to gentle music, and avoid alcohol or caffeine. If you wake, remind yourself: “I am safe now. This will pass.” If sleep continues to be difficult, your GP can offer support.

13 Letting Go of Self-Blame

It's common to have thoughts like “Why didn't I...?”, “It was my fault,” or “I should have...”. When these thoughts appear, gently question them: what is the evidence? If a friend told me the same story, would I blame them?

DEALING WITH EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

Healing takes time, and overwhelming emotions are normal after trauma. You may feel on edge or disconnected even when you are safe. This is your body trying to regain balance and safety. Healing isn't about moving on but gently reconnecting with yourself.

Small steps can help, such as grounding emotions with a physical object, expressing feelings through writing or movement, naming and accepting emotions, and noticing whether they relate to the past or present.

Grounding Through Listening



Close your eyes and notice sounds around you. Start with distant ones e.g. traffic or birds, then move to closer ones e.g. your breath or heartbeat, to help calm your body.

Mapping Your Feelings

Create a “feelings map” using colours to show different emotions. Give them space based on strong they feel. Reflect which feelings are strongest and the thoughts attached to them.



Using Alone Time

If being around others feels hard, gentle time alone can still help. Try hobbies that bring focus and help such as crafting, learning a language, exploring music, or YouTube tutorials.

Power Quotes

Collect inspiring quotes or words that help you feel strong. Display them somewhere visible on your phone, mirror, or wall. Read them often, to remind yourself of your resilience.



Seeking Support

Counselling or one-to-one emotional support can help you process feelings such as fear, anger, guilt, sadness, or shame. Talking with a trained, non-judgmental professional or trusted person can help you feel understood, and supported as you begin to value yourself again.

GROUNDING

- Grounding helps bring your focus back to the present when memories, flashbacks or anxiety feels overwhelming.
- There are no rules - you can do it anytime or anywhere and no one needs to know.
- Grounding may take some trial and error to find out what works for you.
- You can use grounding whenever you notice a trigger, strong emotion, an urge to use substances, self-harm or when you feel disconnected or not present.
- Check in with yourself by rating how you feel before and after grounding from 0-10.
- Keep your eyes open and gently shift your attention away from distress and into the here and now.
- Remember, grounding is more than relaxation. it's a way to help manage intense emotions and trauma responses by staying present.

Soothing Grounding

- Speak kindly to yourself with phrases like “I can get through this,” “I’m safe right now”
- Think of people who care about you, try to picture their faces to bring comfort.
- Imagine a safe place. Close your eyes and imagine a place where you feel completely safe. It could be somewhere real or imagined. Recall the sights, sounds and textures to remind your body what calm feels like.
- Use coping statements such as “I’ve handled difficult moments before, and I can handle this one too.”
- Plan a small comfort. Treat yourself kindly perhaps a warm bath or a favourite meal.
- Think of what you’re looking forward to, this could be seeing a friend, spending time outdoors, or doing something you enjoy.

Mental Grounding



Describe your surroundings:

Look around you and describe what you see e.g. “I’m on the train. I can see trees, a river, and people reading.”

Play mental games:

Think of categories and work through the alphabet e.g. types of dogs, cities, or foods.

Use age progression:

If you feel younger or regressed, gently guide yourself back to the present: “I’m 9...10... now I’m my current age”

Describe a familiar activity:

Talk yourself through something routine in detail, like how to make a cup of tea or cook a favourite meal.

Use imagery:

Picture something that helps you feel safe or in control e.g. a red stop sign in your mind.

Repeat safety statements:

Remind yourself: “I am safe now. I am in the present, not the past. The date is [today’s date], and I am here.”

Use humour:

Think of something that makes you laugh or smile e.g. a funny memory, joke, or image.

Focus your concentration:

Challenge your brain with something that requires focus, e.g. say the alphabet backwards or simple mental maths.

The 5-4-3-2-1 method:

Name 5 things you can see, 4 you can touch, 3 you can hear, 2 you can smell, 1 thing you can taste or like about yourself This helps anchor you in now, reminding your brain that you’re safe.

Physical Grounding

- Run water over your hands and notice the temperature.
- Slow your breathing and repeat “safe” as you inhale.
- Grip a chair or solid surface to feel steady.
- Touch nearby objects and focus on their texture.
- Press your heels into the floor and remind yourself, “I am here.”
- Carry a small grounding object to hold if triggered.
- Stretch your body and notice your strength.
- Clench and release your fists, feeling the tension ease.

If grounding doesn't work at first

- Grounding takes practice and works best when used regularly.
- Experiment to find what helps you the most, or create your own method.
- Starting grounding early in a distressing moment helps e.g. after a flashback or when difficult feelings start to rise.
- Share techniques with trusted people so they can best support you.
- Notice which methods help the most, using a mood scale or journal can help.
- Over time, grounding can help you feel present and safe.

Grounding Toolkit

You might want to create a small “grounding toolkit” to use during triggers or flashbacks. This can include:

- A calming scent (like essential oil or perfume)
- A soft or textured object
- A comforting photo or quote
- A list of grounding statements (like “I am safe now” or “This feeling will pass”)
- Contact details for trusted people or support services

Keeping this close can help you feel more prepared e.g. in your bag, by your bed, or in your phone notes

BODY



Your Body's Reactions

Our bodies carry the impact of trauma after rape or sexual abuse and every survivor's experience and reaction is unique. It may help to:

1. Notice your body's individual physical reactions, and those that others have experienced.
2. Identify which physical responses may be linked to what happened and remember your body reacted to protect you.
3. Reflect on if these reactions still feel helpful or if they cause discomfort.
4. Consider what steps might ease or support your physical responses

Being able to notice how your body reacts and recognising patterns is an important first step. Go slowly and if something isn't right for you, adjust and try another path.

Common bodily reactions after trauma are:

- Muscle tension or unexplained aches and pains
- Headaches or migraines
- Digestive problems, such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)
- Changes in posture or body language
- Heightened sensitivity or numbness in certain areas of the body

Caring For Your Body

Trauma can leave you feeling disconnected from your body. Gentle self-care can help rebuild trust. Go slowly and be patient with yourself. You might try short walks, regular small meals, stretching or yoga, deep breathing, and rest.

If something doesn't feel right, try something else. There's no perfect way to care for yourself, just be kind. Your body has been protecting you, and with time, you can begin to feel safer in it again.

WAYS TO LOOK AFTER/SOOTHE YOUR BODY

Notice the pain - notice where you hold pain or tension and consider what might help — gentle movement, a warm bath, medication, or medical support.

You can request a female practitioner and decline any exam or touch that feels uncomfortable and health professionals should always ask for your consent before any physical contact.

Move your body - physical activity even in small amounts can help release positive chemicals that lift your mood, improve sleep, and boost your immune system. Try any movement that feels comfortable for you.

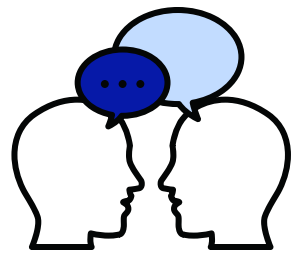
Build strength - strength-based exercise can help you reconnect with your body and increase your sense of stability and control. Start slowly and listen to your limits.

Rest and restore - sleep gives your body and mind time to heal. Try avoiding screens 30–45 minutes before bed to help your mind unwind and prepare for rest.

Find laughter and joy - watching something that makes you laugh or smile can help your body release endorphins — its natural pain relief. Even a few moments of laughter can help your muscles relax and your mood lift.

Notice your intake - alcohol, caffeine, sugar, or smoking can bring short-term comfort but over time can worsen stress or low mood. Reducing these gradually while finding other comforts can benefit both body and mind.

Choose what works for you - traditional relaxation doesn't work for everyone. If relaxing feels comfortable, try grounding or energy-releasing activities like walking, yoga, or strength exercises.



MIND

Your Mind's Reactions

It's normal for your thoughts to feel scattered or heavy. You may blame yourself or replay events in your mind.

Remember: what happened was not your fault.

Caring For Your Mind



Try these gentle approaches:

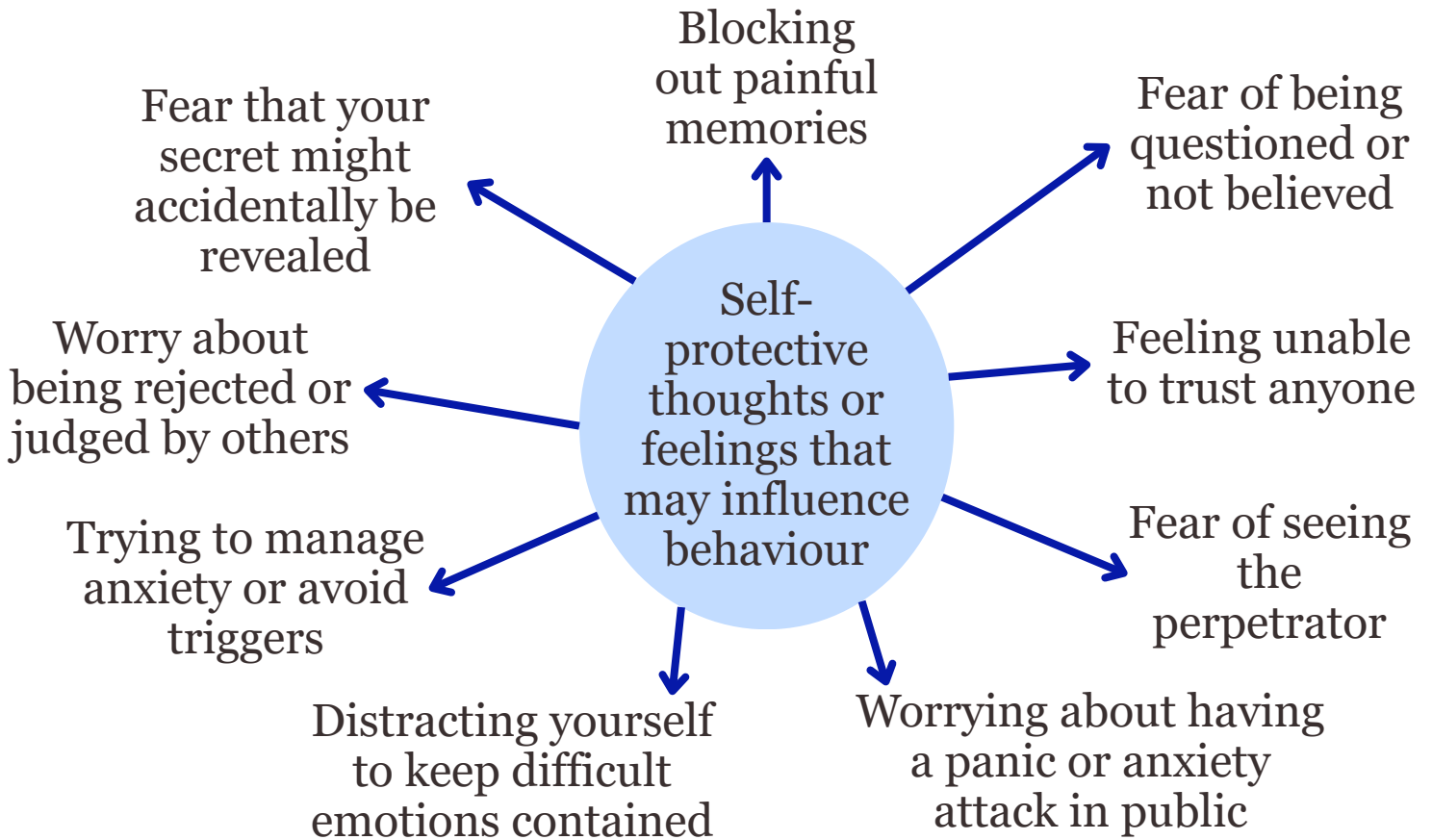
- Journaling/ writing can help release thoughts safely
- Talking to a trusted person or counsellor when you're ready
- Creating art, music, or crafting can help process emotions without words
- Setting small goals or small wins such as getting dressed, eating, or going outside show strength



BEHAVIOUR

Understanding Your Actions

Experiencing any form of rape or sexual abuse can deeply affect the way you behave and respond to situations. There are always reasons behind a person's behaviour and this is often linked to thoughts or feelings that have helped them cope or stay safe.



Some Common Behaviours After Trauma

Pushing People Away - distancing yourself can feel protective, especially if you were silenced through fear or manipulation. Reconnecting with someone safe can help you process feelings and remember it wasn't your fault.

Finding Intimacy Difficulty - struggling with intimacy is common after sexual abuse. Healing takes time, move at your own pace. Abuse was about power and control; healthy intimacy is about choice and safety. Communicate your boundaries and only do what feels right.

Drinking or Smoking More - using drugs, alcohol or cigarettes to cope is common. Noticing when and why you use them can help you explore healthier ways to manage stress over time.

Increased Sexual Activity (Hypersexuality) - some survivors may seek more sexual experiences to reclaim control or reconnect with their body. Sex is normal, but notice how it affects you emotionally and take care of your wellbeing.

Being Overly Vigilant - heightened awareness is a normal protective response after trauma. Over time, as you feel safer, this alertness can ease. Visiting a safe, calming place each day can help remind your body it's safe.

Avoiding Going Out - home may feel safest. It's okay to take time, then try small, safe steps outside — even brief fresh air or contact with trusted people can help you reconnect.

Feeling irritable or short-tempered - irritability often comes from stress, exhaustion, or lack of sleep. Notice triggers and explore what's happening, and reach out for support to help ease pressure.

Changing behaviours starts with believing it's important and trusting your ability to do it. Noticing the thoughts and feelings behind your actions helps you see which reactions once helped you cope and which may now cause more pain or hold you back.

Talking With People You Trust Can Help Challenge These Common Behaviours

Feeling the need to keep things private or to withdraw from others is a very common response after rape or abuse. Many survivors stay silent out of fear of being judged or not believed. Spending time with people you feel safe with can offer comfort and a welcome distraction.

Opening up to someone you trust may help you make sense of your reactions, thoughts and feelings more clearly. They may help you gently challenge unhelpful or self-blaming thoughts and remind you that what happened was not your fault and reassure you that you were not to blame.

BUILDING POSITIVE AND HEALING BEHAVIOURS

Recognising the behaviours linked to your recovery and the thoughts and feelings behind them is very important. However, it can also be really helpful to create new, positive, and nurturing habits. These can strengthen your sense of connection, self-worth, and wellbeing.

You could try the following:

Call, message, or visit a friend or family member.

Register as an organ donor if that feels meaningful to you.

Give someone a genuine compliment.

Share an inspirational quote or poem somewhere others can see it.

Reflect on what your friends and family mean to you — and tell them.

Join a group or activity that interests you e.g. singing, art, or wellbeing sessions

Make a playlist, piece of art, or photo collage for someone special.

Most importantly, be kind and gentle with yourself.

Do a small act of kindness for a stranger.

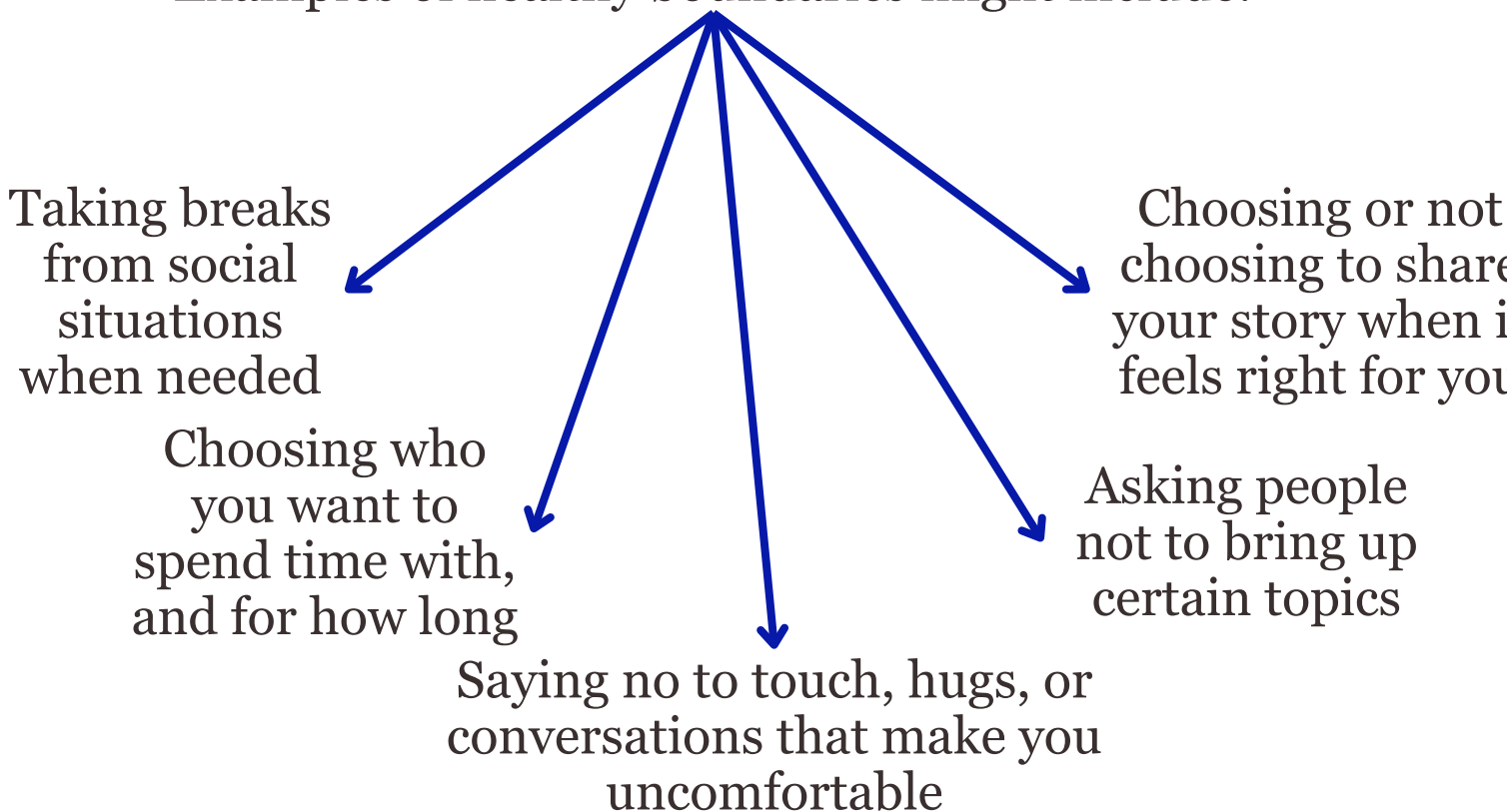
Donate to a cause or charity you care about.

UNDERSTANDING BOUNDARIES

Boundaries are limits that help you feel safe and respected emotionally, physically, and mentally. They aren't about shutting people out, they're about creating space where you can breathe and feel secure.

Your boundaries might have changed since what happened and that's okay. Healing often means adjusting what feels comfortable for you.

Examples of healthy boundaries might include:



You have the right to set, change, and protect your boundaries at any time.



IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIPS

After trauma, it's common for relationships even familiar ones to feel different. You might feel disconnected, overly cautious, or unsure about who you can trust. You may notice changes in how you respond to touch, closeness, or conversations.

All of these feelings are completely normal. Healing after trauma often involves relearning what safety and connection feel like, and rediscovering that you are in control now.

When People Don't Understand

Not everyone knows how to respond when you talk about trauma. Some may change the subject or say the wrong thing. This can feel painful or isolating, but is a reflection of their discomfort, not your worth. You can prepare by deciding:

- Who feels safe to talk to about your experiences
- What details you're comfortable sharing
- When you want to step away from a conversation

You could remind yourself: "It's okay if they don't understand, I still deserve support and kindness."

Relationships During Healing

You may notice changes in romantic, sexual, or family relationships after trauma. You may want more space, or may seek closeness as a form of comfort. Any reaction is valid and totally okay.

Healthy connection means:

- Both people respecting each other's boundaries
- Open, gentle communication
- No pressure emotionally or physically
- Feeling seen, safe, and in control



If you ever feel unsure about a relationship, your ISVA or counsellor can help you think through what feels safe and right for you.

REBUILDING TRUST

Trauma can shake your ability to trust, even those who haven't done wrong. You may feel anxious around people, or doubt their intentions.

Trust doesn't need to be given all at once.

You could try rebuilding trust by:

- Noticing who makes you feel calm and respected
- Starting with small moments of connection e.g. a text, a walk,
- Letting people know what helps you feel safe
- Reminding yourself: you're allowed to take your time

You don't need to rush connection. You are allowed to choose who earns your trust.

You Are in Charge of Your Safety

Feeling safe again takes time but you are already taking steps by seeking support and reflecting on what you need. You don't have to please others or explain your boundaries. You only need to listen to what feels safe and right for you.

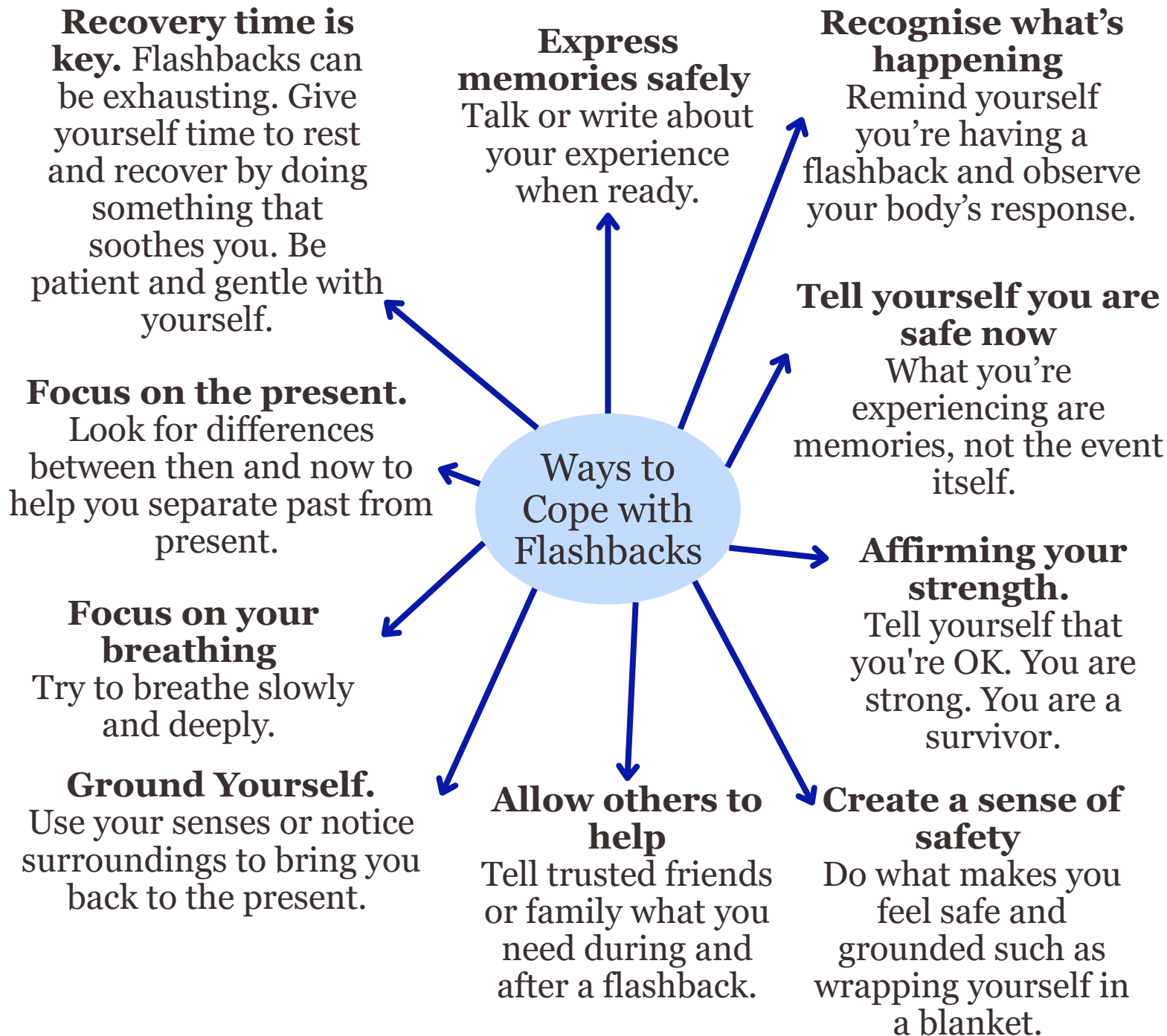
“Healing doesn't mean trusting everyone again. It means trusting yourself enough to know who deserves your trust.”

KEY REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

Flashbacks

It's common for survivors of rape or sexual abuse to experience vivid memories or images of what happened, as if the event is happening again. These are called flashbacks. They are not a sign of weakness, your mind is trying to process trauma.

Flashbacks can be sudden, intense, and distressing, but there are ways to cope:



Remind yourself: flashbacks are a normal response to trauma. They show that your mind is trying to heal. With time, support, and self-care, they can become easier to manage.

Triggers

After trauma, sights, sounds, smells, words, or feelings can bring back strong memories. These are called triggers and can make your body react as if the trauma is happening again. You may not always know what causes them and that's okay. Learning to ground yourself safely can help.



A trigger is anything that reminds your brain or body of what happened. For example:

A smell e.g. aftershave, cleaning products, or smoke

A situation that feels similar e.g. being touched unexpectedly

A place, time of year, or type of weather

A sound e.g. footsteps, a tone of voice, or certain music

Triggers can cause sudden fear, panic, shame, anger, or numbness, often before your mind understands why.

Looking After Yourself Afterwards

After a trigger, feeling exhausted, shaky, or confused is normal. Be gentle with yourself:

- Drinking water or something warm
- Rest if possible
- Try not to judge your reaction as they're your body's way of healing
- Try light movement, breathing, or a calming activity.

If Triggers Become Overwhelming

You don't have to cope alone. Support is available through talking therapies, ISVAs, or mental health professionals who understand trauma. You might also consider: grounding exercises, specialist trauma counselling (e.g., Kent Sexual Assault & Abuse Service), and relaxation sessions.

Remember: : A trigger is your body trying to protect you. You are safe now, your body just needs reminding.

Self-Harm

Self-harm is when someone intentionally injures themselves to cope with distress. It can include cutting, burning, hitting, hair-pulling, or over-scrubbing, as well as indirect forms like substance use, disordered eating, or pushing yourself to exhaustion.

Who Self-Harms?

Anyone can self-harm - there is no single “type” of person. It is a response to distress, not a reflection of weakness or character.

Why Do People Self-Harm?

People may harm themselves to:

- Express, manage, or numb painful emotions.
- Feel some sense of control when life feels chaotic or confusing.
- Punish themselves if they carry guilt, shame, or low self-esteem.
- Find relief or familiarity when emotions feel overwhelming.



Many people who self-harm describe feeling hopeless, worthless, or disconnected at the time. Hurting themselves can seem like the only way to manage feelings that feel impossible to process or express.

Common Myths About Self-Harm

Self-Harm Myth	Truth
“It’s a failed suicide attempt.”	Self-harm is usually about coping with distress not wanting to end their life.
“It’s attention-seeking behaviour.”	Most people who self-harm go to great lengths to hide it. It’s not about attention; it’s a sign of deep internal pain.
“It means someone is going mad.”	Self-harm is a response to distress, not a loss of reality.
“People who self-harm are dangerous.”	Self-harm is directed inward, not outward. They are not a danger to others.

What Can Help?

Understanding why you self-harm is key. Journaling can help you explore:

- Your feelings before and after self-harming
 - What self-harm means to you and its role in your life
 - Why you want to stop or reduce it
 - Who can support you
 - When it happens most often and what triggers it
-



Getting Support

You don't have to face this alone. There are many support services available such as SHOUT (text 85258 for text support), PAPYRUS HOPELINE (0800 068 4141 for under-35s), Samaritans (116 123), as well as a counsellor, your GP, or a specialist sexual abuse service for confidential support.

Replacing self-harm with safer coping tools takes time and practice, but every small step counts.

YOUR JOURNEY TO HEALING: SUPPORT, STRENGTH, AND SELF-CARE

Healing from sexual abuse is not something you have to face alone. It's okay to ask for help, to take things slowly, and to lean on others when you need to. Reaching out for support doesn't mean you are weak it means you are choosing to care for yourself after something that was never your fault. There are people and services who understand trauma, believe you, and want to help you rebuild your sense of safety.

What Support Can Look Like

Support can take many forms and what works for you may be different from others. You might find comfort in one or more of the following:

1. Emotional support

Talking with someone who listens without judgement — like a counsellor, ISVA (Independent Sexual abuse Adviser), trusted friend, or helpline worker.

2. Practical support

Help with housing, financial concerns, education, or work. Your ISVA can liaise with agencies or advocate on your behalf if you'd like.

3. Medical support

Care from your GP or SARC (Sexual Assault Referral Centre) for physical health, medication, pregnancy prevention, or managing sleep and anxiety.

4. Legal and criminal justice support

Understanding police investigations, your rights, and what happens next. Your ISVA can explain processes and help you make informed choices without pressure.

You can choose as much or as little support as feels right for you. It's your journey, you are in control.

Taking Steps to Reach Out

Asking for help can feel overwhelming and it is okay to go at your own pace. You don't have to share everything at once, or even talk about what happened until you're ready.



You could start by writing things down, bringing a trusted person to appointments or choosing email or text if phone calls feel too difficult. Remind yourself that you deserve support, no matter how long ago it happened.



Understanding Your Healing Journey

Healing isn't linear. Some days will feel easier, others harder and that's normal. Feeling stuck, anxious, or angry is part of the process, not failure. Healing takes time and patience, and progress isn't always visible, but every small step matters. Your reactions, no matter how intense, are valid.

1. Self-care routines

Create manageable routines that give you comfort e.g.:

- Gentle exercise
- Make a favourite meal
- Read or listen to music
- Journaling your thoughts and feelings

Daily Practices to Support Healing

4. Celebrating progress

Even small achievements count. Did you get through a difficult day? Did you reach out for help? Celebrate it! Healing is made up of many tiny victories.

2. Grounding and mindfulness

Use grounding exercises to stay present and reduce panic or flashbacks. Mindfulness can help you notice what you're feeling without judgment.

3. Building a support network

Reach out to people who make you feel safe e.g. friends, family, counsellors, or support groups. Being around people who listen and believe you is powerful.

Coping with Setbacks

Setbacks are part of the journey, not a failure. You may experience triggers, panic, or distressing memories. When this happens:

- Pause and take a few slow, deep breaths.
- Ground yourself with your senses (notice sounds, textures, smells).
- Remind yourself: I am safe now. The danger is past.
- Reach out if needed, support is always available.

Setbacks can also help you understand more about your needs and how to care for yourself.



Recognising Your Strengths

Every survivor has strengths, even if they feel hidden. These may include:

- Resilience in facing daily challenges
- Creativity, humour, or problem-solving
- Caring for others, even while caring for yourself
- Courage to ask for help

Acknowledging and using these strengths can help you feel more in control of your life.

Moving Forward with Hope

Healing isn't forgetting or pretending everything is okay. It's about gradually finding moments of safety, peace, and connection with yourself again. Every small step, every time you reach out, and every act of self-care is a sign of strength.

What happened to you does not define you. Healing is possible, and support is always available when you need it. Recovery isn't a straight path and some days may feel easier than others but every act of self-care matters. Your story is your own, and your healing belongs to you.

You have survived. You are surviving. And with support, you will continue to grow stronger and find peace, safety, and self-compassion.

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO TALK

Recognising and understanding your reactions to the trauma you've experienced is an important first step towards regaining a sense of control and beginning your healing journey.

Many people find it hard to talk about what happened, even with close family or friends. You might worry about how they'll react, or feel unsure where to start and that's normal.

Finding someone you trust who will listen without judgement can help you to process your feelings and begin to heal. Support can also come from:

- A trusted friend or family member - someone who feels safe, kind, and understanding
- Online survivors' groups or forum.
- Local support or survivors' group.
- Community activities or learning a new skill.
- Accessing counselling through your GP or a specialist support.

You can choose what feels right for you there's no single "correct" way to find support.

There is not timeline for healing...

Healing is your journey, and it unfolds in your own way. There will be challenges, but there will also be moments of discovery, growth, and self-connection. As you move forward, focus on the things that give you strength your interests, your creativity, your voice, and the people who respect and support you.

Trust yourself to take the steps that feel right, celebrate the progress you make, and allow yourself patience and kindness along the way.

Your story is yours to shape, and the future you create is full of possibilities.

Every step you take toward healing is a testament to your strength. You are reclaiming your story, your body, and your life.

ABOUT KSAAS

Kent Sexual Assault and Abuse Service (KSAAS)

Free, confidential emotional and practical support for anyone
affected by sexual abuse

General & Counselling Enquiries: 01227 451753 /
info@ksaas.org.uk

Independent Sexual Violence Advisors: 01227 826900 /
isva@ksaas.org.uk

Website: www.ksaas.org.uk

You don't have to face tough moments alone. If you feel unsafe or have thoughts of self-harm, reach out. You deserve care and safety simply because you are human and what you've experienced matters.

Immediate Help

If you're in danger or need urgent support:

- Call 999 if you need emergency help or go to your nearest A&E.
- NHS 111 (option 2) for urgent mental health support.
- Samaritans (116 123) – available 24/7 if you need someone to listen.
- Shout (text 85258) – free, confidential text service for moments of crisis.

National Support Lines

Samaritans: 116 123 (24/7, free)

Rape Crisis England & Wales: 0808 500 2222 (12–2:30pm, 7–9:30pm
daily)

Victim Support: 0808 1689 111

Shout: Text 85258 for 24/7 crisis text support

GP or NHS 111: For urgent emotional or physical care