



Government of Western Australia  
North Metropolitan Health Service

**SARC**

SEXUAL  
ASSAULT  
RESOURCE  
CENTRE

# Supporter's guide

For people supporting an  
adult survivor of sexual trauma



# Introduction

This guide is for family, friends, partners, carers and others who are supporting an adult who has experienced any form of sexual trauma, either recently, or in the past.

The guide aims to provide information to help understand the impacts of sexual trauma and how the experience can change behaviours, thoughts, emotions and wellbeing. It also contains suggestions on coping and recovery, and guidance on how to support the person you care about.

Legal and service information in this guide is applicable to Western Australia. If you live in another location, you will need to source information relevant to your area.



True support involves standing beside the person on their journey of highs and lows to recovery, while caring for yourself in the process.



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# Firstly to you – the supporter

It can be extremely confronting seeing someone you care about struggling from the effects of sexual trauma. You may be trying to figure out how best to support them, while also trying to deal with the situation yourself.

You may be feeling helpless and experiencing mixed emotions such as rage, guilt, regret, sadness, and more. The person you are supporting may have changed in ways that are difficult for you to understand. They may have also changed the way they behave towards you. It can be a very confusing time.

It is important to know that their recovery is possible. And that support from other people, such as you, is critical for them to heal from their trauma experience.

It is also critical that you look after yourself now and throughout the process of being a support person. The section 'Taking care of yourself' has some important information for you.

Supporting the person you care about during their recovery will take time and patience. It will also require you to take good care of yourself. While it may not always be obvious, your support will play an important role in their recovery.



## The most important ways for you to offer support

Believe them

Stay calm

Give them time to talk when they are ready

Don't force them to talk or tell you details

Listen to what they say with complete openness

Validate their feelings and reactions

Don't judge them, their thoughts or actions

Let them know you are there to support them

Let them know that the experience was NOT their fault

Reassure them that their reactions are normal

Assist them with everyday tasks if this is what they want

Be patient, as they are likely to have good days and bad

Support them to find information, options and help when they are ready

Show hope for their recovery

Maintain confidentiality and don't break their trust

Stick by them and encourage them

Help them to feel safe



## Immediate considerations

If the person experienced a sexual assault recently, there are some important issues to immediately consider including:

- **Getting medical assistance.** It is important to see a doctor and tell them what happened, **as soon as possible**. The doctor can help with emergency contraception (morning after pill) to prevent pregnancy, screening for sexually transmitted infections and check for physical injuries. This is best done within 72 hours of the assault. Some medical injuries may not be immediately obvious. If pressure to the neck (strangulation) was involved in the assault, there may be serious health risks. The doctor may order tests to ensure the person is okay.
- **Reporting the assault to police.** Sexual assault is a crime and there is no set timeframe in Western Australia (WA) for reporting. However, it is best to report the assault as soon as possible (within three days is best). In WA the **Sex Assault Squad** can be contacted on **(08) 9428 1600** or email [sex.assault@police.wa.gov.au](mailto:sex.assault@police.wa.gov.au). Sexual assault can also be reported to a local police station in person, or by calling **131 444**. If possible, it is best if the person doesn't shower, change clothes, or wash clothing, so that forensic evidence is not lost.
- If there are no major injuries, and the victim is unsure about what to do next, or they prefer not to involve the police, they can contact the Sexual Assault Resource Centre's (SARC) crisis line on **(08) 6458 1828** or country freecall on **1800 199 888**. This service is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- For further information following a recent sexual assault, please refer to the [SARC website](#)

**If the person is still in danger**, it is crucial that they find safety. You may need to assist them to access an emergency service.

- If someone is in immediate danger, call triple zero **(000)**.
- To report the situation to police, call **131 444**.
- For support and advice with domestic violence, contact **1800RESPECT** on **1800 737 732**.
- For emergency mental health support contact the Mental Health Emergency Response line.
  - » Perth residents: 1300 555 788
  - » Peel residents: 1800 676 822.
- For immediate risk of suicide, do not leave the person alone. Call triple zero **(000)**, or take them to a hospital emergency department. Other services include Lifeline **13 11 14** and Suicide Call Back Service **1300 659 467**.

**If they experienced a sexual assault or sexual abuse in the past**, medical issues may not be as urgent, however, they may still choose to report the assault or abuse to the police (there is no time limit in Australia) and/or to access counselling.

When supporting the person, do not force them to speak with anyone if they do not want to unless their health and safety is compromised.



You can assist by:

- letting them know how important their health and safety is.
- letting them know there are services available to assist them and these are confidential (except in special circumstances, for example, if harm to a child is involved).
- providing a list of options and contact numbers.
- offering to help them to make contact and driving them to appointments.
- reminding them that they have done nothing wrong and that you are there to support them.
- respecting their decisions, even if they differ from what you believe.



## About sexual trauma

### Types of sexual trauma

Sexual trauma involves any type of unwanted sexual contact. It can happen to anyone of any age, gender, culture, ability or social standing. It can include:

- child sexual abuse
- sexual assault or rape involving penetration (of any part of the body)
- sexual assault not involving penetration
- sexual exploitation
- exposure and voyeurism (spying on people when naked or having sex)
- forced pornographic filming or viewing
- sexual harassment
- image-based abuse.

The person you are supporting may be a victim of online image-based abuse where intimate images of them have been shared or used without their consent. Or they may have shared an intimate image with one person, who has then distributed it without their consent. Sometimes, images are stolen and used without consent on porn sites and other locations.

There are laws in Australia making these acts a crime. However, it is very difficult to permanently remove all online images once they have been made public. Image-based abuse can result in victims feeling degraded, dehumanised and ashamed. It is common for these victims to experience extremely high levels of psychological distress.

Refer to the [SARC website](#) for information on image-based abuse.



## It can happen to anyone

Sexual trauma can occur anywhere, to anyone. It can happen at home, at work, as part of a group, at a place of study, in a religious or spiritual group, on a holiday, in a sports team, at a festival or function, in prison, in a residential care facility, at a social event, on the street, or in a health service.

Sometimes perpetrators use violence, force and threats. Other times they use manipulation, 'charm' and coercion. They frequently 'groom' potential victims, carers, colleagues and others to create opportunities to abuse others. Children rely on the care and protection of adults and are more vulnerable to abuse. Whatever tactics are used by the perpetrator, sexual acts without consent are a crime.

In some instances, consent is not relevant, and the act is still a crime. These instances include sexual acts involving children, people with psychological or cognitive impairment, people whose decision-making ability has been impaired (e.g. if someone has been drugged) and other vulnerable groups.

Sometimes, it can be difficult to imagine someone you know being guilty of committing a sexual assault. Often these people have been trusted members of the family or community. This can make it more difficult for the victim to speak out.

Your belief in, and support of the victim is crucial.

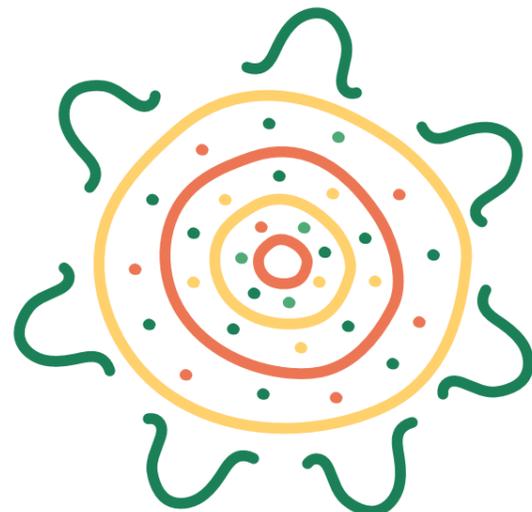
## Parents of child abuse survivors

It can be very difficult for parents finding out an adult child was sexually abused during childhood. You will have some intense and difficult feelings. You may feel extremely angry and betrayed by people you trusted, you may even feel this way towards yourself. It can be particularly difficult if the perpetrator was someone you trusted, loved or admired. Many parents find themselves in a similar position.

Take one step at a time. You are making a great start by reading this guide. It will take time for your child, you, and other affected family members to work through the situation and recover. Your child already has many strengths that have helped them survive so far. The information in this guide will help you to support them in their recovery. It also has important information for your self-care and coping.

## Common reactions after a traumatic experience

A traumatic experience can have serious impacts on a person in many different ways. It can affect their body, thoughts, feelings, behaviours and the way they relate to others. There is no right or wrong way to react. The person you are supporting may be experiencing some of the examples listed on the following page or something different. Either way, it is important for them to know that what they are experiencing are normal reactions to an abnormal, traumatising experience. And that these reactions will reduce with time and support.



### Body

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



### Thoughts and effects on the mind

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



### Feelings and emotions

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



### Behaviour and actions

- Neglecting self
- Easily startled
- Very alert
- Self-harming
- Avoiding people or places
- Getting into fights
- Nail biting
- Socially withdrawing
- Acting out of character
- Being impulsive
- Drinking / smoking
- Distracted and distant
- Panic attacks
- Changes to eating
- Lack of interest in things

The person may be experiencing some of these reactions, or they 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, the reactions of survivors 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 adrenaline 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 they 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 to trauma 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 reactions can be exhausting and confusing.

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, a suburb, an anniversary date, certain words, being in a room alone with someone, physical touch and 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 or 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 to cope often result in adding other challenges, and don't resolve the situation.

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.



## Feelings and emotions

### Why it is difficult to speak about

It takes an enormous amount of courage for someone to speak about sexual assault or sexual abuse. It can be even more difficult for them to talk about it with the people closest to them. Here are some of the reasons it may be difficult for them to talk about their trauma.

#### Feelings of

- shame and embarrassment talking about such personal details.

#### Fear of

- their safety from the perpetrator, or the safety of others
- re-living the traumatic experience while talking about it
- being judged, blamed, not believed
- experiencing more hurt due to the responses of others
- causing loved ones to feel hurt or upset
- having their sexuality questioned or judged (particularly men and members of the LGBT+ community)
- revenge from family or community members
- cultural consequences.

#### Worry about

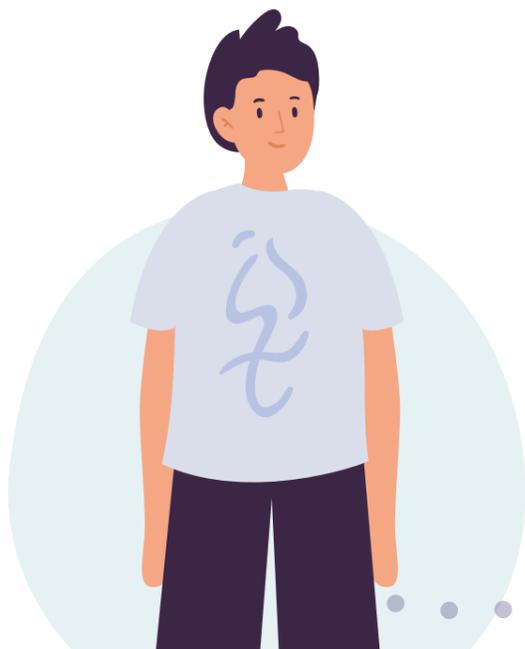
- how it will impact family members, partners, and loved ones
- how they will be viewed by others after disclosing
- confidentiality being broken
- language barriers (if their English is not fluent)
- not being taken seriously (especially if the perpetrator was an intimate partner)
- getting into trouble for other things (such as being drunk or drugged at the time)
- being rejected by the community (can be a major factor for Aboriginal people and people in culturally and linguistically diverse communities)
- the listener and if they will cope with what they hear.

#### Concerns about

- being forced to report to police
- not being supported by police and support services
- a lack of proof, or not being able to describe details accurately
- going through a grueling process that may not result in punishment of the perpetrator
- using services they believe have let them down previously.

“I’m very close to my Dad and it was hardest for me to tell him about the abuse. I didn’t want him to feel guilty or that he’d let me down. I was worried about how it would make him feel.”

- A survivor



## How to support a survivor

Many survivors of sexual trauma recover in weeks or months on their own, or with the help of friends and family. Some people struggle with the effects of the trauma for a long time. One of the most important aspects of their recovery is how others respond to them, and the amount of support they receive. This is why you, and your role as a support person, is so important. It is also important that you get support for yourself during this time.

You may not always feel strong,  
but in their eyes,  
you are their comfort  
and their strength.



## Awareness of myths about sexual trauma

Unfortunately, many false beliefs and ‘blame the victim’ attitudes exist in the community. These beliefs can make the experience harder for survivors and hinder their recovery. Even victims themselves might believe some of these myths. To be an effective support person, it is important that you don’t believe or support any of these myths.

In some instances, you may know the perpetrator, and have an initial reaction of disbelief. Especially if you have known them for a long time or shared a close relationship with them. Remember, just because you haven’t witnessed this aspect of the perpetrator, it doesn’t mean it isn’t true. Perpetrators can be anyone in the community, including charming, well-known and highly-regarded people. It is often said that many perpetrators ‘hide in plain sight’. Very few people make up a false allegation of sexual trauma against someone.

Remember, it is not your fault if you knew the perpetrator but didn’t know they were committing sexual crimes. But now is your time to make a difference – by supporting the victim.

### Some important things to understand:

- It is normal for someone not to fight back during a sexual assault because usually they are so terrified, that their body automatically goes into freeze mode.
- Sometimes victims of sexual abuse attempt to befriend or please the perpetrator. This is a survival strategy.
- It is understandable to find it difficult to tell others, and delay speaking about the sexual trauma.
- It is unreasonable to expect children to stop adults from perpetrating sexual abuse, for many good reasons.
- Sexual trauma is a crime and no matter what, is NEVER the fault of the victim.



## When to talk

Provide opportunities for the person you are supporting to talk if they want to. It is important to give the person your full attention so you can better understand what is happening for them.

Here are some tips:

- Make sure you are feeling calm and don't have other distractions.
- Choose a quiet place to talk, with minimal interruptions. The person may feel most comfortable in their own environment.
- The person may prefer to talk while being driven in a car, or walking. This can be a good option to suggest as it feels less 'intense'.
- Give them your full attention and **listen**.
- Reassure them that it is okay to say as much or as little as they feel ready to say.
- Don't force them to talk or to tell you details.
- Slow the conversation to their pace. Silences are okay. It may take them time to find the words.
- Don't display extreme reactions to what they tell you, for example sobbing with grief or kicking furniture in anger. This can be overwhelming for the survivor who is already trying to cope with their own emotions. They may feel responsible for your reactions and they may avoid being open with you again.

## Helpful things to say

It can be difficult to find the right words to say when offering support. Below are some suggestions that you might find useful. However, you can adapt these to feel comfortable for you. It is important to be your 'real' self when offering support.

People start to heal when they feel heard.



### Examples of supportive statements:

- "I'm so sorry you've been through this. I'm here for you as long as you need me."
- "We are going to get through this together. You can call on me any time you need to."
- "Thank you for telling me. I'm here for you for whatever you need."

### Examples of validating responses:

- "I can see why you feel scared at night, anyone would after what you've been through."
- "It must have been so terrifying for you."
- "I would feel angry too after what they did."

### Examples of statements to combat feelings of guilt and self-blame:

- "What happened is not your fault."
- "What he/she did is a crime. They are completely in the wrong and you didn't deserve this."
- "You've said or done nothing wrong. This should never have happened to you."

## Myth

**Myth:** Sexual assaults happen in dark, secluded places and are committed by strangers.

**Myth:** The victim must have done something by the way they acted or behaved to provoke the assault.

**Myth:** Sexual assault can't happen in a marriage. "It's a husband's / wife's / defacto's / etc. right to have sex with their partner whenever they choose."

**Myth:** They didn't scream or fight back, so they must have agreed.

**Myth:** You can usually 'pick' a sexual perpetrator.

**Myth:** Men can't be sexually assaulted.

## Fact

**Fact:** Most sexual assaults occur in a home, car, or workplace and the perpetrator is someone known to the victim.

**Fact:** Nobody EVER deserves to be sexually assaulted, no matter how they are dressed or how they behave. Raping someone is a crime.

**Fact:** A relationship does not imply consent. Forcing a person to have sex when they do not want to participate is sexual assault.

**Fact:** Many people who have been raped were not able to struggle or scream. They may have been threatened and some become paralysed with fear. There is often a fear that the attacker will become more violent if they struggle.

**Fact:** Sexual perpetrators come from every class, age, ability and culture.

**Fact:** One in 20 men aged over 15 years experience sexual violence in Australia. Usually the assault is by another man.

## Examples of statements to give hope:

- “It might be hard for a while, but you will recover from this. And I will be beside you all the way.”
- “You deserve a happy life, and you will have one.”
- “Most people who have been through terrible traumas struggle at first, but over time they heal and recover. You will too.”

## Comments and questions to avoid:

Reacting personally. For example “Well it’s not my fault, how was I supposed to know it was happening?”

Any questions asking ‘why?’. For example “Why were you out so late?” or “Why didn’t you run?” or “Why didn’t you tell someone when it was happening?”

Asking ‘why’ questions can imply that you blame the victim in some way, or you expect them to explain the reason behind what happened. No-one should be expected to explain the reasons for a perpetrator’s abuse.

Saying “I know how you feel” or “I know what you are going through”. Every person is a unique individual with their own memories, thoughts and feelings. You can never proclaim to know exactly what someone else is going through.

Any comment comparing experiences or minimising what happened. For example “At least you weren’t physically injured” or “It’s not as bad as X, they ended up in hospital” or “It didn’t affect you too much, you’ve had a great career. Some people end up on the streets”. These types of statements show no compassion and are not helpful in any way.

Putting too much focus on the perpetrator and legal issues. Focus on the survivor and what they need.

“Talking about the abuse to my partner and friends has normalised the experience, and helped me to process it. I would say talking has been a major part of my recovery.”

- A survivor



Remember to be supportive, you don’t need to offer a solution or an explanation. You need to listen, to believe, to not judge, to reassure, to support, to be patient, to be kind, and most importantly - to be there.



## How to help

### Take care of health and safety first

If the person experienced a recent sexual trauma, there are some important aspects to take care of as soon as possible (refer to 'Immediate considerations' in this guide).

If anyone is in immediate danger, get assistance as soon as possible. Call triple zero (000).

### Provide ongoing support

Because everyone is different in how they cope after a traumatic experience, it can be hard to know the best way to help. This guide will give you some ideas, but it is often best to ask the person. Here are some examples of how you might do this.

- “What is the best way I can support you right now?”
- “You’ve got your mates here. What do you need from us?”
- “So many people care about you. What can we do to support you through this?”

Sometimes, the person is not able to come up with answers to these questions, and it may be helpful to ask more direct questions for the time being. Here are some examples.

- “I’m looking forward to coming over tomorrow. Can I check if you would prefer to talk about what happened when we are together, or would you prefer not to talk about it? I’ll respect whatever you choose.”
- “You are a great friend and I know you don’t want to see anyone at the moment. I’m here when you are ready. In the meantime, I’m going to drop a meal at your front door today and I’ll text you on Wednesday before I go to the supermarket to see what you need. I’d love to help out if you need anything.”
- “I’m taking the kids to the zoo on Saturday. Can I come past and pick your kids up for the day to give you some time to yourself? I can make everyone a packed lunch and drop them home by 5. Will wait to hear from you. I think of you often.”

It can be helpful for you to know how much support the person is receiving from friends, family and services. You may be their only support person, or they may have many avenues of support. Sometimes they may want your help in telling someone else what has happened. For some family members, friends and partners, sexual trauma will be a very new and confronting topic, and they will be struggling to know how to deal with the situation. You may want to offer this guide to other support people.



LISTEN quietly and attentively  
to UNDERSTAND.

## Listen

One of the most important things you can do is to offer opportunities for the person to talk, and for you to listen calmly and openly, without judgement, to what they say. Give them your full attention as they talk. Focus on understanding what is happening for them now, not on giving advice or trying to 'fix' the situation.

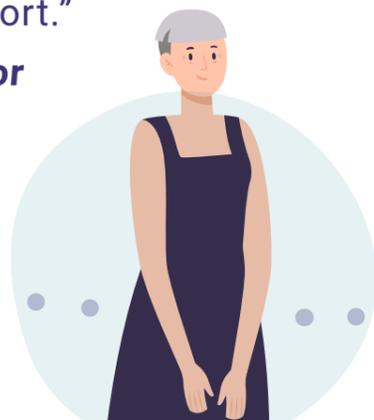
They may want to talk, but not want to bring the subject up. You could provide them with an opportunity to talk by asking something like this.

“Do you feel like talking more about what you told me last week?”

Allow them to express their feelings. This might involve sitting with them as they cry, scream, become angry, swear, or fall silent. These emotions relate to the situation, not to you. You aren't expected to solve anything. By being there for them, believing them and listening without judgement, you are providing important support for their ability to cope.

**"One of the most helpful things for me was when a friend sent through a list of internet links to relevant information and support services. It was just too overwhelming for me to search the topic on the internet. Having the information given to me on one page made it less overwhelming. Then I was able to start learning more about the topic and find some support."**

**- A survivor**



Listen over and over again, as the telling allows the survivor to heal.



## Give them control over decisions that affect them

During sexual abuse and sexual assault, power and control was taken away from the person. An important part of healing is for the survivor to gradually take back power and control over their own life. You can support this process by letting them choose what they would like to do, and when, during their pathway to healing. They may have some difficult decisions to make. You can help by talking through the options with them and letting them choose what to do.

Make sure your own emotions do not lead to you attempting to 'overprotect' the survivor. While safety is important, this reaction can result in them becoming isolated and not taking control of their life. It is important that they regain control of their life.

You may play a stronger role at first, for example helping with practical tasks, and talking through options with them. It is a good idea for them to start doing things for themselves so they regain a sense of control and affirm their capabilities. Your role is likely to change as they resume control over their life. They may choose to never discuss what happened with you. This is okay. You don't need to know the details. You need to see them coping, recovering and healing.

## Offer distractions

Sometimes distraction can be a welcome change for the person to focus on something completely different. For example, when they feel ready, you may want to plan gentle outings. Remember to let them have a say in the plans. Activities that involve body movement and connecting with nature can be particularly effective. Here are some ideas.

- walk on the beach at sunset
- gentle hike through bushland
- a trip to the zoo
- an outing to listen to live music
- coffee and cake at a nice café
- swim laps at a public pool
- plan some 'photography days' taking photos of nature
- learn some new card or board games together
- do Sudoku, cross words or puzzles
- visit a fair or show e.g. car show, craft fair, computer exhibition or home show
- light a fire to sit around and drink tea
- do something different e.g. ten pin bowling, a boat trip or a creative workshop
- have fish and chips at a park
- redesign a garden bed, choose the plants at a nursery and plant them together
- start morning walks along the river or at a beach
- take a dog to play at the park
- choose a recipe to cook together.

Always be sensitive to the fact that they may not be ready for crowds of people and that they may be triggered in certain settings, particularly if the setting resembles the circumstances in which they were assaulted. One approach is to come up with a suggestion, then check with them, and make sure they have a say. Here are some examples of how this could be done.

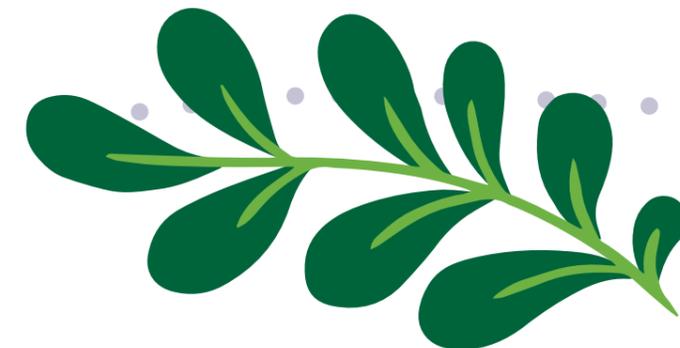
“While the weather is nice, I was thinking we could go to the beach for a couple of hours on Friday morning, or go and get a coffee at that new café. Would you like to do either of these?”

“I'm not working on Tuesday and was hoping we could do something together. What do you think?”

Over time, they will be comfortable to start seeing others. You might like to facilitate this if you feel it is appropriate. Here's an example of how you might do this.

“When we go to brunch next week, is there a friend you would like to invite along?”

“Sally has been asking how you are. After the beach next week, would you feel comfortable if we called in to see her on our way home?”



## Reassure them

During their recovery, the person will benefit from reassurance that:

- they are still the same person as they were before the trauma
- you still love / care for them
- they will recover
- their reactions are normal
- regardless of what happened, your relationship with them is the same.

Avoid reassuring them about things you cannot guarantee. For example, you cannot reassure them that the perpetrator will end up in prison (it may not happen, and they will feel let down all over again).

## Be patient

After a traumatic experience, it is common for survivors to vary in their ability to cope with daily life. Some days they may seem to function very well, and other days they may seem to struggle, even with simple, everyday tasks. Their moods and emotions may vary enormously. They may treat you differently at different times, sometimes being open and accepting of your support, and other times pushing you away and projecting their anger onto you.

It takes a great deal of patience, understanding and empathy to remain consistently calm and accepting during these times.

Your support and compassion  
may change a life.



## Monitor their coping

It is advisable to check on how the person is coping. You don't need to have any specialist skills to do this. It simply requires a caring and respectful approach. But remember, they won't want to be bombarded with questions, and may find it overwhelming or annoying if asked too often. So you will need to gauge how often to check in, and when to give them space.

You can check in by asking an open question such as the following.

💬 *"How are you feeling at the moment?"*

Sometimes, it can be helpful to set up a casual way to connect with the person so you can check in on them.

💬 *"Hey mate. I'm thinking of taking a drive along the coast tomorrow. Want to come along?"*

There are other ways of monitoring how they are feeling without constantly asking. This can be particularly useful when supporting someone who struggles to verbalise their feelings. Here are some ideas.

- Develop a 'thumbs up' signal system together e.g. thumbs up for feeling good at the moment, thumbs sideways for feeling average, thumbs down for feeling low.
- Develop a system where the person uses emoji's in online messages to reflect how they are feeling.
- Develop a 'rating system' that reflects how the person is feeling. When asked, they reply with a number from 1 – feeling terrible to 5 – feeling okay, to 10 – feeling fantastic.

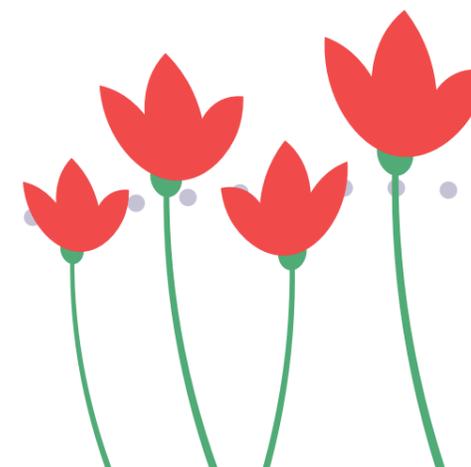
## When they are feeling low

It's okay and normal for survivors to have days where they feel low; when they are overwhelmed with feelings of sadness, anger, helplessness, regret, and other emotions; when they cry and don't want to go about their normal day.

At these times, it can be best to simply give the person permission to feel the way they do. You can support them by saying something like:

💬 *"It's okay that you feel like this. You've been through an awful experience."*

At these times, it can be best to simply give the person permission to feel the way they do. You can encourage them to be kind to themselves. Remind them to use the calming strategies that work for them, to help them to get through the day. Accepting the feelings can help to overcome them.



**"Even the words 'sexual abuse' are too much for me, they take me back to the abuse. My partner and I use the letter 'A'. She will ask me "Is there anything about the 'A' that you want to talk about?"**

**- A survivor**



## When they are feeling anxious or stressed

It is normal for the survivor to feel stressed and anxious, particularly after being triggered by reminders of the trauma. Triggers can be different for survivors, so it can be useful for each person to work out what their individual triggers are. Encourage them to monitor their body and emotions, and notice their early warning signs. These signs might be things like holding their breath, becoming tense, nausea, or dizziness. When they notice these signs, they can immediately start a calming strategy. It is often best to start with deep, slow breathing.

A handout titled 'Calming Strategies' can be found on the [SARC website](#) (some strategies are also listed towards the end of this guide).

Encourage the survivor to practice calming strategies regularly to find out what works best for them. They can then gain a sense of control by drawing on these strategies whenever they need to.

## Supporting someone who is having flashbacks

It is very common for survivors to have 'flashbacks' of their traumatic experience. Flashbacks can happen at any time, particularly if triggered by a reminder of the event. They can be terrifying for the survivor, and feel like the abuse or assault is happening all over again. Signs that the survivor may be having a flashback include a look of panic, 'freezing' and / or a sudden change in breathing.

Flashbacks are a normal reaction of the human body to a trauma experience. If the person you are supporting is having regular flashbacks, encourage them to read the Care Package on the SARC website. Remind them that the trauma experience is in their past, that they have survived, and that they have control of the present and the future. Encourage them to see an experienced counsellor to assist them to overcome these experiences.

## Supporting someone who is having trouble sleeping

You, and the person you are supporting, may both experience difficulties sleeping during this stressful time. Share ideas for improving sleep, and find what works. Plenty of sleep and rest will help with coping and recovery.

### Tips for better sleep

- Limit your caffeine intake. More than one cup of 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, coffee, mocha and tea.
- Try to get some exercise every day, but don't exercise immediately before going to bed.
- Use your bed for sleeping only. Don't read, listen to upbeat music, use the phone or watch TV while you are in bed.
- No matter how exhausted you feel, try not to sleep during 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.
- Have a warm shower or bath one to two hours before going to sleep, not immediately before.
- Get some daytime sunlight, then make your bedroom very dark for sleeping.
- Avoid going to sleep on a full stomach or if you are hungry.
- Try to establish a bedtime routine. For example dim the lights, put on relaxing music 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. Set an alarm so you don't oversleep.
- Relaxation techniques before going to bed can help. For example, breathing exercises, 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, wheat bag or hot water bottle). 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. Consider reading a book or listening to a relaxing app or podcast. Then return to your bed for sleep.

## Self-harm

Following a sexual assault, some people may find the experience overwhelmingly distressing, leading them to self-harm in an attempt to cope.

The term 'self-harm' describes when someone injures themselves purposefully. It can include acts such as:

- cutting, scratching, picking or burning the skin
- taking an overdose of medication or a substance
- pulling out hair, eyebrows or eyelashes
- repeatedly banging the head or hitting the body
- punching walls or objects.

Self-harming can be used in an attempt to:

- deal with painful feelings
- feel an immediate sense of relief
- release tension and emotional build-up
- distract from emotions and memories
- punish themselves
- feel 'in control'

## Suicide

When someone is experiencing deep emotional pain, they may view suicide as a way of ending their pain. They may have constant thoughts and feelings of wanting to die, or these might come in intense and sudden bursts. Some warning signs that someone might be considering suicide can include:

- appearing very 'down'
- talking about suicide
- posting on social media in a way that suggests they are considering ending their life
- talking about not being able to deal with the pain
- saying they feel like a burden to others
- indicating they have lost hope of recovery
- talking about death
- speaking about feeling alone or worthless
- displaying unusual behavior
- giving away personal items
- disconnecting from people & commitments.

- prove they are not 'invisible'
- relieve feelings of loneliness
- send a signal that support is needed
- express complicated emotions.

Despite what many people think, a person doesn't usually self-harm because they want to die. However, these actions can result in serious injuries and sometimes even death. Self-harming is an indication that the person is in need of help.

It may be upsetting for you and difficult to understand their reasons for self-harming. These tips may help you to provide support:

- Talk openly with the person you are supporting to let them know you are worried about them.
- Listen openly and without judgement to what is happening for them.
- Encourage them to read the [Care Package](#) on the SARC website which has some suggestions that they may find useful.
- Encourage them to speak with a professional.

You know the person best, so tune into what you feel and observe about them. If you are struggling to understand their crisis, try to imagine it like a physical wound, but instead it is an emotional or psychological injury that needs care and assistance to heal.

## Ask about suicide

If you are worried that the person you are supporting is going to harm themselves, the best way to find out is to ask. Try to be direct. Talking about suicide doesn't cause someone to become suicidal. Here is an example of how you might ask.

*"I've noticed that you seem to have lost hope recently and you seem really down. Are you having thoughts about suicide?"*

Listen calmly to what they say and let them tell you how they feel. Sometimes what they say can be confronting and it can be a frightening time for you listening to these details. It is okay to tell them that you feel worried and afraid, but try not to pull away or become distraught. Show them you are there for them with non-verbal actions (e.g. nodding or holding their hand).

### Respond supportively. You can do this in the following ways:

- Let them know thoughts of suicide can be a normal reaction to sexual trauma for some people.
- Listen with empathy and without judgement.
- Make the person feel that there is hope of things getting better.
- Assure them that they are not alone.
- Take them seriously.
- Talk honestly and openly about suicide.
- Discuss the importance of getting professional help and talk about options available.
- Do not promise to keep the information a secret.

### Things to avoid include the following:

- Trying to talk them out of suicide by reminding them of what they have going for them or how much it would hurt their friends and family. They may view their situation differently, and these messages can add to their burden by causing feelings of guilt and shame.
- Trying to 'fix' their problems.
- Dismissing what they say as 'attention seeking'.

### Here are some examples of what you can say to show your support.

*"Thank you for telling me. I know it's hard for you to talk about but I'm here to listen and to help you get through this."*

*"Lots of people feel like this after a traumatic experience. How long have you been feeling this way?"*

*"I can see how much you've been struggling and I'm here for you. We can find a way through this together so that you can start to feel happy again."*

It is important to find out if the person has made a plan for ending their life. If they have, they are more at risk, and are in need of immediate help. This is an example of how you can ask about a plan.

*"Have you thought about when and how you will kill yourself?"*

**If the person is at immediate risk (e.g. they are planning to end their life very soon and have access to the means to do it), ensure that they are not left alone. Call a service for advice or take them to a hospital emergency department. If someone is in immediate danger, call triple zero (000).**

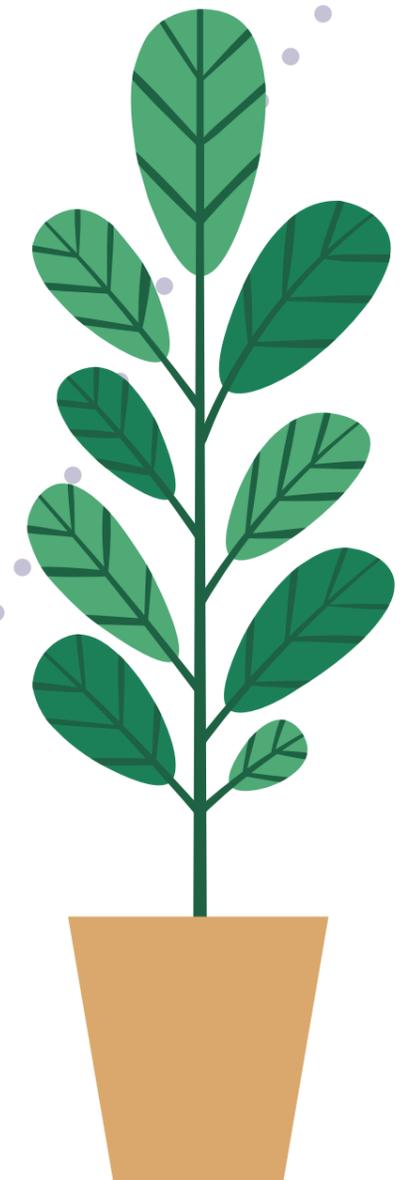
**Refer to the section in this guide for a list of Support services.**

## Post traumatic stress disorder

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 common behaviours that may indicate someone is developing PTSD.

1. Reliving the event through constant memories, nightmares and flashbacks that are very upsetting.
2. Avoiding people, places and events that may remind them of the traumatic experience, and avoiding talking about it.
3. Feeling so 'on edge' that it means they have trouble concentrating and sleeping. They always feel tense and alert. They may self-harm, or they may take more risks than usual.
4. 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 the survivor for more than one month, it is likely that they are suffering from PTSD, and it is advisable for them to speak to a GP or to make an appointment with a mental health professional for diagnosis and follow-up.



## If you are an intimate partner

### Building a healthy sexual relationship

People who have been sexually abused or sexually assaulted often experience difficulties with touch and sex as a result of the trauma. Building a healthy and enjoyable sexual relationship is possible, but it can be challenging at first.

Survivors of sexual trauma often need time to build trust and confidence with physical touch and sex. If the trauma was a recent experience, they may need a period of no sex to recover. They may also need time to become comfortable with their own body. You play a key role in building a positive sexual relationship with your partner. Open, respectful communication is at the heart of this process.

“It’s like there needs to be heightened confirmation of consent before sex – checking that I’m not only willing and ready physically, but also emotionally.”

- **A survivor**



Some tips for building a positive sexual relationship:

- Talk with your partner to find out what they are feeling and what they need from you.
- Remember to make touch playful and fun. Laugh with your partner and include small things like cuddling, kissing and holding hands.
- It may be helpful to ask which part of their body they feel comfortable for you to touch.
- Let them set boundaries and limits so they feel safe. Agree to always respect each other’s boundaries. Decide on a cautionary word or signal to pause what is happening if they feel anxious.
- Allow your partner to take as much control over sex as possible and give them permission to say ‘no’. Go at their pace.
- Find out what they like, and let them know what you like.
- Help them to associate touch and sex with good feelings, not bad.
- Start slow, be patient and be guided by them. Talk along the way. When difficulties arise, reassure them, and know that it isn’t personal towards you.

Over time, touch, sex and intimacy should become easier. If difficulties persist, or if this area of your lives seems too complex to deal with alone, there are sex therapists available who help couples to build a positive sexual relationship.

“One of the most challenging aspects for me has been developing a good sexual relationship with my partner. She is very supportive and we talk a lot, so that helps. One of the things I had to learn was to say ‘no’ to sex. As a male, it seems like you are expected to want sex all the time, but this isn’t always the case. And if I felt expected to say ‘yes’ when the time wasn’t right, it left me in a bad place.”

- **A survivor**



TRUST is the glue of life.  
It’s the most essential ingredient  
in effective communication.  
It’s the foundational principle  
that holds all relationships.

Stephen Covey



## Getting professional help

It can take time for people to feel ready to talk to a professional – and they may not ever want to. Keep the following tips in mind:

- Let them know that professional help is available if they want it.
- Reassure them that many people go to a counsellor to help them cope with life events and that it doesn't mean they are 'broken' in any way.
- Let them know that there are different options for accessing help.
- Don't make your support conditional on them seeing a professional.



The range of support options available to survivors include face-to-face counselling, online counselling, telephone counselling, face-to-face support groups, online support groups, books, podcasts, and more. Different options suit different people.

### How do you know if professional help is needed?

If the person is showing symptoms that are very distressing, or last for more than a couple of weeks, it is advisable for them to access professional help. 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
- showing signs of PTSD
- continuing to have physical symptoms of being tense, agitated and on edge
- continuing to have disturbed sleep and/or nightmares
- having relationship problems with friends, family and colleagues
- increasing use of alcohol or drugs
- having thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

Even if the survivor appears to be coping well following the experience, it can be helpful to see a counsellor to reduce the likelihood of negative impacts in the future.

### How you can assist them to access professional help

It is up to the survivor if they choose to engage in various support options that are available to them. However, you can help by letting them know what options are available and offering to assist them to get started. It is important that you give positive messages about getting external support. Here are some examples of how you might do this.

“The idea of talking to a stranger can be frightening. Remember, these counsellors have special skills and work with hundreds of people who have had these experiences. They understand lots about what you are going through and they help people get through these situations all the time.”

“It's okay to get help to cope through the tough times, lots of people do. Then when you are feeling stronger, you won't need the help any more. You'll be back in charge of your life and feeling good again. That's what you deserve.”

“What if you give it a go for two or three counselling sessions, then decide if you want to keep going or not?”

“It will be confronting at first, but worth it. If you like, I can drive you to appointments and wait in the car. Then we can go for a coffee or a walk afterwards if you feel like it. What do you think?”

Here are some practical ways you might support the person to access external support:

- provide a printed list of support services, descriptions and contact numbers
- send the person an email containing links to a range of support options and ask which ones appeal to them
- offer to sit with the person when they call to make their first appointment
- offer to drive the person to appointments.

### Counselling options

Professionals who have experience working with trauma are trained to assess trauma and to help survivors better understand their reactions and develop effective coping strategies. Professional options include trauma therapists, psychotherapists, accredited mental health social workers, and psychologists. It is a good idea for the survivor (or you, if they are not up to it), to look into counselling options. It's okay to contact counsellors to ask what qualifications and experience they have, what experience they have working with clients recovering from sexual assault/abuse, and what approaches they use.

A starting point is for the person you are supporting to speak to their GP about a referral to a professional counsellor. They may be eligible for a '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, they need to make an appointment with a GP and discuss their situation. If the GP is not supportive or lacks understanding about trauma, it is okay to find a different GP. It is a good idea to research counsellors first, write down the details of the preferred counsellor, and ask the GP to make the referral to that counsellor.

### Finding a counsellor

- The 'Australian Psychological Society' (APS) provides a list of psychologists through their website at [www.psychology.org.au](http://www.psychology.org.au)
- The 'Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) provides an online list of social workers through their website at [www.aasw.asn.au](http://www.aasw.asn.au)
- The Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA) provides a search engine of therapists throughout the country at [www.pacfa.org.au](http://www.pacfa.org.au)
- There are a range of additional support services 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 under 'Client Information Handouts' on the Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC) website [www.kemh.health.wa.gov.au/Our-services/Service-directory/SARC/Client-Information](http://www.kemh.health.wa.gov.au/Our-services/Service-directory/SARC/Client-Information)
- There are also many online support groups, podcasts and books that can assist survivors. These can be found by searching the internet, and reading online reviews.

# Support services

Telephone counsellors are available on 24 hour helplines. This might be a good place to start counselling if the survivor lives remotely, or if they find it too confronting to talk to someone face-to-face. You can provide some phone options to the survivor and let them choose if they would like to make contact. In some instances, they may like you to be with them for support when they make their first call. Many of these services can also provide support to you.

- 1800RESPECT **1800 737 732**
- Lifeline Australia **13 11 14**
- Lifeline Text service 6pm - midnight (Sydney time) **0477 131 114**
- Lifeline online chat 7pm – midnight (Sydney time). See Lifeline website <https://www.lifeline.org.au>
- Suicide call back service **1300 659 467**
- W.A. Mental Health Emergency Response Line 1300 555 788 (metro); **1800 676 822** (Peel) Rurallink, mental health support for people living in rural W.A. **1800 552 002**
- Beyond Blue **1300 22 46 36**
- The Samaritans Help Line 135 247
- Phoenix Support and Advocacy (fees apply) **08 9443 1910**
- Women's Domestic Violence Helpline **08 9223 1188; 1800 007 339**
- Men's Domestic Violence Helpline **08 9223 1199; 1800 000 599**
- MensLine Australia **1300 78 99 78**
- QLife support for people who identify as LGBT+ 1800 184 527
- PANDA support for new/expecting parents **1300 726 306**
- Open Arms support for veterans and their families **1800 011 046**
- Elder Abuse Helpline **1300 724 679**
- Translating and interpreting service (TIS) **13 14 50**

## Youth services (up to 25 years):

- Youthbeyondblue **1300 224 636**
- Urgent mental health support line **1800 048 636**
- Kids Helpline **1800 551 800**
- The Samaritans Youthline **1800 198 313**
- eheadspace **1800 650 890**
- eheadspace online options available at <https://headspace.org.au/eheadspace/>
- Beyond Blue provides information and support to help everyone in Australia achieve their best possible mental health, whatever their age and wherever they live. You can access their website at [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)
- Phone apps provide excellent support options. To view a range of apps available, refer to the Client Information Handout titled 'Support and Information Apps' on the [SARC website](#).
- A detailed '[Care Package](#)' for survivors is available on the SARC website.

## What if they don't want to see a professional?

It can take time for people to feel ready to talk to a counsellor about their trauma experience. Some people never choose to do this. Ultimately, the decision rests with the survivor.

The tips below may be of help if the person chooses not to see a professional counsellor:

- Don't get angry at their decision.
- Don't make your support conditional on them seeing a professional.
- Offer more information about what counselling involves and its benefits if they aren't familiar with it.
- Reassure them that they're not alone.
- Remind yourself that it is not your responsibility to 'fix' or heal the person
- Let them know other support options are available if they choose, such as telephone or online counselling / groups, books, podcasts, etc.
- Display hope for them and their recovery.

You may like to print a copy of the '[Care Package](#)' on the SARC website and give to the person you are supporting, or share the link with them so they can read through the information in their own time.

## What if they don't like their counsellor?

Different counsellors come with different personalities, experience and counselling approaches. It is important for survivors to find the right 'fit' with a counsellor. This is another reason to do some research on counselling options before choosing. It can take several counselling sessions to start to feel comfortable with a counsellor. Encourage the person to 'stick with it' during the initial counselling sessions which are likely to feel confronting. After several sessions, if they really don't feel comfortable with the person, or if they are not finding the counselling helpful, it is okay to try a different counsellor.



## Taking care of yourself

Being a support person for a survivor of sexual trauma can put a lot of pressure on you.

Providing ongoing support can be challenging and tiring. It is critical that you monitor your own coping strategies and look after yourself, both physically and emotionally. What is important is the way in which you express your or frustration, and not letting it dominate or take control of your life.

It is normal for you to experience a range of feelings during this time. Many supporters experience strong feelings of shock, confusion, disbelief, guilt and anger.

### Anger

It is common and very understandable for support people to feel angry at the situation, at the perpetrator, or even at themselves. Feeling angry is okay. What is important is the way in which you express your anger, and not letting anger take control of you.

It can be helpful to monitor yourself and notice when you start to feel angry. Take note of the early 'signals' (in your thoughts, body or behaviour) that you are feeling angry. Once you become aware of these signals and notice when you are becoming angry, it can reduce its hold on you. It is also a prompt to do something to counteract the feeling - such as taking time out, focusing on breathing, using grounding strategies, telling yourself positive and empowering thoughts, or doing some hard aerobic exercise.

When anger overpowers other emotions, it results in aggression or self-destructive acts, impacts relationships, or feels like it is 'taking over', it becomes a problem. It is important to get professional help when this starts to occur.

## Self care

Providing support to a sexual trauma survivor can be extremely stressful and involve changes to your life. Your usual routines might be disrupted, and there may be changes to your lifestyle and relationships with others. Depending on your relationship to the survivor, there may also be additional challenges such as financial stress. Where possible, it can ease the stress for you if there are other people who are also supporting the survivor, and if the survivor is accessing professional help.

The tips below may help you to take care of yourself while supporting the survivor:

- get regular exercise
- eat a healthy diet
- maintain your own relationships
- sleep well
- keep up your hobbies
- try to stick to your usual routines
- relax regularly and manage your stress
- take breaks
- do something you enjoy each day
- monitor your own coping
- ask for help when you need it
- talk to a counsellor if needed.



Remember, it is okay to ask others for help, and to seek your own counselling if needed (see the list of Support services). You may find it helpful to have a trusted friend or family member as your own support person, but remember to get permission from the person you are supporting first before talking to someone else. It is important not to break their confidence. If they prefer you don't talk to someone you know, professional counselling is a good option that protects everyone's confidentiality.

There is a huge amount of information online if you would benefit from learning more about sexual violence, impacts of trauma, recovery methods, or self-care. The information is easy to access, but remember, you also need to have some breaks from the topic and to do something different that you enjoy. This can be especially important if you start to feel disheartened. The recovery process can take a long time, so you need to ensure that you take care of yourself from the start, and continue to monitor your own coping abilities.

## If you have your own sexual trauma experience

For people who have their own experiences of sexual abuse or sexual assault, it can be extra challenging supporting someone else to cope with their trauma experiences. You might find that you are triggered by hearing them talk about their experiences, or if you have not resolved your own emotions, you may project your feelings and judgements onto the survivor.

Below are some suggestions for you.

- Monitor your own reactions and feelings closely. If you are experiencing any difficulties, seek counselling and support for yourself.
- Avoid comparing the other person's experience or reactions to your own. It is not helpful to make judgements about another person's behaviour, emotions or actions, based on your own.
- If you are triggered and react to the survivor in an unfair, judgemental or overly-emotional way, wait until you are calm and then apologise to them. Reassure them that they have done nothing wrong and explain that your reactions stem from your own struggles with sexual trauma (if you feel comfortable to share this).

Self-compassion is simply giving the same kindness to ourselves that we would give to others.

Christopher Germer



## Make time for yourself

Sometimes, being a support person can seem all-consuming. Taking care of yourself is crucial and it will make you more able to offer quality support over time. Try to make time every day to do something you enjoy.

It can be a good idea to make a list of things you enjoy and remind yourself to regularly take time out to do them. Here are some ideas:

- walk on the beach
- watch the sunset
- book tickets to a sport event
- plant some flowering plants
- light candles
- read a good book
- listen to music
- book tickets to the theatre
- plan a camping trip
- play an instrument
- soak in a bath
- call an old friend
- meet a friend for lunch
- drink coffee at the river
- have a movie marathon
- go for a picnic
- build something
- paint, draw or sculpt
- knit, sew or crochet
- swim in the sea
- polish the car
- go for a bike ride or jog
- see a live band
- book a massage
- plan a hike
- plant a vegetable garden
- cook your favourite meal
- meet a friend for coffee
- buy or pick fresh flowers
- do some baking
- go to the gym
- play sport
- build or fix something.

### 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.



## Manage your stress

It is important that you monitor your stress levels. Try some different strategies for calming and reducing your stress, and regularly use the ones that work best for you. Below are some strategies to try. They can be useful to both you and the person you are supporting.

### Controlled breathing

This is the one of the most effective ways to relax quickly. Deep breathing signals your body to relax.

- Sit comfortably. Place one hand on your belly and one on your chest. Take some slow, deep breaths into the belly. It's helpful, but not essential, to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. If you are doing abdominal breathing correctly, the lower hand should move as much or more than the hand on your chest.
- Continue this slow, deep breathing for a couple of minutes, imagining the breath calming your body and clearing your mind. Notice how you feel.
- Focus on controlling your breathing throughout each day, whenever you become anxious and before stressful events.

Your breathing is  
your greatest friend.  
Return to it in all your  
troubles, and you  
will find comfort and  
guidance.



### Quick muscle tensing and relaxing

- Tense your feet, lower legs, thighs, buttocks, pelvic muscles, abdomen and lower back muscles. Hold them tight for a few moments and notice the tension. Then release the tension completely and let all those muscles soften and relax. Notice the difference.
- Repeat and tense other parts of your body. Take a deep breath in. Notice how your body feels. Let your breath out, making a 'whoosh' sound and let your muscles relax.
- As you continue to breathe, focus on releasing, softening, and letting go. Let the tension continue to flow out with every out-breath.

## 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 which can be particularly relaxing when combined with deep, slow breathing to the sound of soothing music.

## Mantras or positive sayings

Having your own mantra or selection of positive sayings to use when needed can be powerful. Some examples are listed below. Make up your own, write them down and practice using them.

“I'm a good support person and right now, I'm going to take time to support myself”.

“I am strong enough to do this”.

## Mindfulness meditation

Mindfulness is purposefully focusing your attention on the present moment and accepting whatever you become aware of without judgement. You can learn mindfulness and meditation on your own by following books, apps or recordings, or by attending a class. Search online for more information.



## Mental grounding

Grounding involves focussing on the present- what you are seeing, hearing and feeling right now. Here are some ideas for grounding using the mind.

- List all the sounds you can hear around you.
- Recite a poem or song lyrics.
- Count to 10 or say the alphabet very slowly.
- Do a Sudoku, crossword or other puzzle.
- Do a maths problem in your head.
- Describe your surroundings in detail including colours and shapes.
- Picture the route you take to get from your place to work, or the shops, or a friend's house.

Remind yourself of the present by saying details about yourself and what is happening (silently if you are in public). For example

“My name is X, I was born on Y, and I'm Z years old. Right now I am in the supermarket one block from where I live. I'm going to pay for my groceries, then walk home slowly.”

## Physical grounding

Here are some ideas for grounding using the body.

- Run cool or warm water over your hands, notice how it feels.
- Trace your hands against the physical outline of your body.
- Pat a pet and really focus on the feel of its coat, ears, tail and belly.
- Carry a grounding object in your pocket (e.g. a stone) to touch. Focus on the feel of its surface.
- Slowly eat some spicy food. Then taste something icy cold. Focus on the different sensations in your mouth.
- Inhale the smell of a flower or essential oil, especially lavender or vanilla. Focus on the smell and try to describe it yourself.

We can't practice compassion with other people if we can't treat ourselves kindly.

Brené Brown



## 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 or a fruit smoothie.



## Reducing sexual trauma in our communities

It is crucial that all individuals and services take action to prevent sexual abuse and sexual assault in the community. In particular, we need to protect children and vulnerable adults who are most at risk.

You can help protect vulnerable people in the following ways.

- Be aware of signs of sexual abuse / assault.
- If you suspect a child or vulnerable adult, including someone with a disability, has experienced sexual abuse or sexual assault, or is currently at risk, report your concerns to police. Do this immediately if the danger exists now.
- If you work in an organisation, including a residential facility, and you have reason to believe a colleague is a perpetrator, report your concerns to management immediately.

Remember, perpetrators can be anyone. They often ‘groom’ and manipulate other adults to trust them so that they have access to vulnerable members of the community. When supporting survivors in communities, it is important to be sensitive to confidentiality, safety and the implications of publicly revealing the name of perpetrators in an unplanned way.

Societal attitudes can support sexual violence against groups in the community, such as women and members of the LGBT+ community. These attitudes can lead some men to think it is okay to commit sexual violence (although not all sexual assaults are committed by men, the large majority of perpetrators are males). It also changes the way services and individuals respond to incidences of sexual violence. Rape against any person is a crime. Sexual abuse and sexual assault in all forms is **NOT OKAY**.

You can help challenge destructive attitudes in the following ways.

- Speak up against inappropriate comments, including jokes about rape and sexual assault.
- Challenge myths and misconceptions and instead offer facts.
- Never blame victims of sexual trauma, or minimise their experience.
- Never excuse the behavior of perpetrators.
- Raise respectful and informed children of all genders.
- Ensure that people, especially young people, understand that the sex viewed in pornography is harmful and NOT a true reflection of respectful, consensual or enjoyable sex for everyone involved.
- Instill respectful, inclusive attitudes, behaviours and approaches in your households, sporting groups, workplaces, educational institutions and other places.
- Demand that our leaders, legal systems, services, and media use approaches that challenge destructive societal attitudes towards sexual trauma, and support victims and their recovery.

By working together and speaking up, we can demand respect and equality for all, and make our communities safer places for everyone.

## Summary

You might never have imagined that you would be supporting someone who has survived sexual trauma. It's an important role and it might seem overwhelming to you at first. By reading this guide, you are demonstrating your commitment to providing effective support to the person that you care about. Remember to take care of yourself also, and to reach out for help when you need it.

Offering support and showing kindness are two of the greatest gifts a person can give.



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

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To the family, friends and support people of survivors—thank you for standing beside the members of our community who have suffered sexual trauma. You play an essential role, not only in the recovery of the survivor, but in helping our communities to heal from trauma and become safer places for everyone.

Much gratitude to the many people who had input into this guide including survivors, counsellors and support people. Special acknowledgement and thanks to Andrew Stead, a survivor of sexual trauma, who willingly shared his valuable insights and gathered feedback from his network of supporters.

Feedback about this package is welcome at the following QR code, link or email address.

 [www.surveymonkey.com/r/SupGuide](http://www.surveymonkey.com/r/SupGuide)

 [SARCTraining@health.wa.gov.au](mailto:SARCTraining@health.wa.gov.au)



