

Understanding
the effects of
trauma and abuse

Abuse and trauma can affect people in different ways. This booklet will help you understand common reactions to trauma. It makes no difference whether the abuse happened recently or many years ago.

CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Physical effects of abuse and trauma	5
Emotional and psychological effects of abuse and trauma	9
Moving forward	14
Summary	16
Warning signs of domestic abuse	17
Useful numbers	18

INTRODUCTION

Trauma survivors can feel the effects of their experiences in their:

- Bodies
- Moods
- What they do
- How they deal with other people

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Everyone is different and has a different reaction to abuse and trauma.

Whatever your reaction, it is understandable. It is a natural response to your experience.

Other booklets in this series will help you learn (with lots of practice) to manage your reactions.

PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF ABUSE AND TRAUMA

Physical injuries can be caused by physical or sexual abuse.

Physical effects of abuse can be obvious. These might include:

- Cuts
- Bruises
- Broken bones
- Sprains
- Black eye
- Stiffness

However they can also be less obvious and might include:

- Infection or internal injuries following a sexual assault
- Chronic tiredness following nights of disturbed sleep
- Miscarriage and pregnancy problems from assaults
- Headaches and other tension issues (tension is often held in the back and neck, resulting in back and neck pain)
- Stomach and/or bowel problems

For some survivors, repeated injuries can cause pain over a long time without them realising this might be the cause. This may be so if the survivor was too young or too frightened to get treatment at the time.

Some of the ways which people use to cope with abuse and trauma can cause problems.

Some survivors eat too much, or too little, or eat the wrong things. This can sometimes be for comfort or to deliberately 'hide' themselves.

Some cope by drinking more alcohol than they know they should, or use drugs to block out the pain and the memories.

Some cope by cutting or burning themselves to help them deal with overwhelming emotions, to bring them back in touch with the present, or because physical pain is easier to deal with than emotional pain.

Some survivors stop caring about their bodies and themselves.

It can sometimes be hard for people who have been abused to think about looking after themselves. Some people do not feel important enough to take care of themselves, others do not want to be noticed, and may try to make themselves as invisible as possible.

After abuse it can be difficult to use health services.

Some medical care may be difficult for survivors, especially procedures such as internal examinations or smear tests. This may be because of physical injuries which cause difficulty with the procedures. Some women may feel too worried, tense or stressed to cope with this type of medical care. Others may not care enough about themselves to deal with health issues as they come up.

The stress, fear and terror experienced during and after abuse can affect the body.

There is a close link between physical and mental health. Low mood or high anxiety can result in feeling worse physically, with aches, pains and tiredness.

People who have been abused often report migraines, irritable bowel syndrome, back pain, muscle aches and other illnesses. Some of these physical symptoms can be partly caused by being severely stressed for a long time.

Learning more about the emotional effects of abuse can help to improve physical health.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Although this section describes possible links between physical health and life experiences, there will be aspects of physical health that are unrelated to previous abuse or trauma. This is because people who experience abuse and trauma are more than survivors of abuse. Everyone can be unwell at times. But abuse can make certain types of physical health problems more likely.

Always seek medical assistance if you experience physical problems. You can talk this over with a health professional who can help you get sensitive and appropriate healthcare.

HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO YOU?

Use this space for your thoughts about how your health and wellbeing may be affected by your experience of abuse.

How do you feel physically and emotionally?

Can you spot any links between your experiences and how you feel physically?

Do you feel able to talk to a person who is treating you about these possible links? For example, a GP, nurse or physiotherapist? If you do not feel able to talk to a professional, is there someone else you could speak to?

Think about how you cope with your feelings.
Do any of these have a negative effect on your body?

EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF ABUSE AND TRAUMA

If you slipped on an icy pavement, this could result in a broken ankle. In the same way, emotional or psychological ‘injuries’ following abuse are a natural and understandable response. This is the case even if the effects last for years or decades.

There are some things that might increase the risk of psychological difficulties. These include how long someone is abused; how severe the abuse is; being abused by more than one person; having little support from other people; and/or having other difficult experiences.

The psychological effects of abuse are not a failure in survivors but a sign of the abuse and trauma they have experienced. There are many possible psychological and emotional effects of abuse including:

- Day-to-day mood difficulties
- Feeling ‘disconnected’
- Difficulty controlling thoughts and memories
- Negative thoughts about yourself
- Difficulties within relationships

Some survivors experience some of them and others many of them. Some survivors experience these difficulties immediately after the abuse; some may find that, after a long time without difficulties, they suddenly start (often triggered by a stressful event, such as having a baby or losing a job or another trauma; hearing about abuse in the media or community; or seeing or hearing about the person who abused them).

Some may find that their difficulties go or become easier over time. Although there are patterns in the reactions to abuse and trauma, everyone is unique and has their own experience. It is important to remember that these are natural reactions to trauma.

HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO YOU?

Take care of yourself during and after reading the next section as it may bring up difficult thoughts and feelings. If you notice this, it may help to call a friend or do something you enjoy.

The following pages list common psychological ‘injuries’ which survivors experience.

You can put a tick beside each ‘injury’ if you feel it applies to you. This may help you to plan what you would like to work on in the future. You can explore this on your own or in future therapy.

Remember that these are natural and understandable reactions to abuse and trauma.

Day-to-day mood difficulties

It is common for people who have experienced abuse to have mood difficulties. This can include symptoms of anxiety and depression. It can get in the way of everyday life. Common symptoms are:

- Feeling overwhelmed by day-to-day stresses
- Feeling anxious or panicky
- Feeling jumpy
- Feeling low in mood
- Being tearful
- Loss of interest in activity/hobbies
- Tendency to worry
- Poor sleep
- Feeling angry
- Problems with sex

Feeling ‘disconnected’ (dissociative difficulties)

Some survivors of abuse experience dissociative difficulties. This means that a person’s emotions or attention can sometimes, feel ‘separate’ from the world around them. These difficulties can include:

- A sense of feeling ‘unreal’
- Feeling as though the world/environment seems ‘unreal’
- Feeling numb/out of touch with feelings
- Feeling ‘switched off’
- Tendency to ‘space out’ or that time can go past without noticing
- Poor concentration
- Difficulty in remembering everyday or past events

Difficulty controlling thoughts and memories

Survivors of abuse often have thoughts and memories about the abuse which cause unpleasant feelings and are difficult to control. These can include:

- Flashbacks to past events - sudden and powerful memories which can feel as though the abuse is happening again
- Tendency to think over what happened in the past
- Nightmares and waking up feeling frightened and/or agitated
- Trouble remembering details of abuse
- 'Hearing' the voice(s) of the perpetrator(s)*

Negative thoughts about the self/identity

Survivors often think negatively about themselves, or find it difficult to see positives in themselves or their lives. This can affect many aspects of their lives. Common self-esteem/identity issues are:

- Feeling helpless
- Feeling shame about the abuse
- Feeling guilt about the abuse
- Self-blame
- Disliking yourself
- Feeling 'different' from others

**This booklet uses the word 'perpetrator' to mean the person who abused you*

Difficulties within relationships

If someone is hurt by another person, this can lead to difficulties within relationships with partners, friends or family and other areas of life. Common examples are:

- Tendency to withdraw or isolate self from relationships
- Finding it difficult to trust other people
- Finding it difficult to be assertive with others
- Worry about being hurt by another or about hurting others

HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO YOU?

Use this space for your thoughts on how your experience of abuse may have affected your emotional health.

Do you experience any of the examples listed above?

Is there anything you are experiencing which is not on this list?

MOVING FORWARD

This booklet focuses on effects of abuse and trauma which survivors find difficult to cope with. Some survivors describe positive emotional and psychological changes from dealing with the trauma. This includes increased resilience (feeling strong and able to cope with or tolerate difficult things), increased understanding of other people's experiences, and ability to 'put things in perspective' (for example not putting pressure on yourself when it is not needed).

TRY IT OUT

You have read about some of the difficulties which people who have experienced abuse and trauma often face. You have also thought about how these relate to your own difficulties. This section helps you to think about the physical and emotional health difficulties you could tackle.

What difficulties could you tackle?

Physical health

For example your diet, talking to a health professional about how you are feeling

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Emotional health

For example managing anxiety, low mood or anger

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

SUMMARY

- Although there are common reactions to abuse and trauma, everyone has a different experience and reacts differently
- Abuse and trauma can have short-term and long-term effects
- Abuse and trauma can affect a person's emotional life
- Abuse and trauma can affect how people think about themselves and others
- Some survivors find it difficult to always 'stay in the present'
- Abuse and trauma can affect a person's relationships
- Abuse and trauma can affect a person's outlook
- However a person responds to abuse and trauma, it is understandable and natural

WARNING SIGNS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

Domestic abuse is abuse by a partner or ex-partner. It is often subtle and can take place over a long time. This can make it difficult to clearly see what is happening. Warning signs that a partner or ex-partner's behaviour may be abusive are:

- Criticism or verbal attacks
- Pressure tactics to make you make decisions, guilt trips, threatening to withhold things
- Abusing authority, always claiming to be 'right', telling you what to do, putting you down in public
- Disrespecting, interrupting, not listening, twisting words, putting down friends or family, or in front of friends or family
- Abusing trust, cheating on you, being overly jealous
- Breaking promises, not following through on agreements, their plans are more important than yours
- Withholding emotionally, not expressing feelings, not giving support or compliments, not respecting your rights or feelings
- Minimising, denying and blaming, making light of their behaviour, not taking your concerns seriously, saying you are to blame for abusive behaviour
- Controlling the money
- Isolating you from family and friends
- Harassing you, phoning, visiting when you do not want them to

If you recognise any of these, you may find it helpful to phone one of the useful numbers.

USEFUL NUMBERS

Domestic abuse

The Scottish Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline (24 hours) **0800 027 1234**

Broken Rainbow **0300 999 54 28**
(support for lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) people who are experiencing domestic abuse)

Rape and sexual assault

Rape Crisis Scotland Helpline **08088 01 03 02**
(national rape and sexual assault helpline for women and men, who have been raped, sexually assaulted or have experienced childhood sexual abuse)
Open daily from 6pm to midnight

Childhood sexual abuse

National Association for People Abused in Childhood **0808 801 0331**
(NAPAC – support for adult survivors of any kind of childhood abuse)

Crisis and mental health

Breathing Space **0800 83 85 87**

NHS 24 **111**

Health

NHS 24 **111**

- Please let us know if you have any questions or concerns
- You can also find out more at: www.hris.org.uk

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NHS Lanarkshire - for local services and the latest health news visit www.nhslanarkshire.scot
NHS Lanarkshire General Enquiry Line: 0300 30 30 243

NHS inform - The national health information service for Scotland. www.nhsinform.co.uk
Tel No: 0800 22 44 88

If you need this information in another language or format, please contact the NHS Lanarkshire General Enquiry Line on 0300 3030 243 or e-mail info@lanarkshire.scot.nhs.uk

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