



The Survivor's Self-help Guide



For women who have been sexually abused in childhood



The aim of this guide is to help you with the issues that may exist for you as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. You are not alone; the advice, suggestions, and information within this guide come mostly from other survivors and have been used by many people to help them cope.

Inside you will find suggestions of positive steps you can take to help you through crisis and towards recovery. It also includes practical advice for dealing with things such as addiction, panic attacks, self-harm, and sleep problems. It will show you how, with the right support things can, and often do, get better.

Not every chapter may seem relevant to you. This doesn't matter, nor does it mean that in some way you don't qualify for help. Look at whatever chapters seem most important to you. This guide is designed so that you can go through the contents and dip into parts you find most useful. We are not saying that everything you need to cope with is in this guide and we encourage you to take steps to get further support.

We strongly believe you should be in charge of your own recovery; therefore, this guide rarely gives direct advice. Instead, we try to put forward the options available to assist you in finding your way forward.

We would welcome any comments from you to improve this guide. We want to know what helps and what doesn't. In this way we can build a body of wisdom which can be passed from survivor to survivor. Please write to us or email us. Thank you.

The Survivor is the expert and she knows her needs better than anyone.

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Chapter 1

COPING WITH CRISIS

Crisis can hit at many points whilst you're dealing with and recovering from sexual abuse. It can hit when:

- You begin to realise what happened to you as a child.
- You start getting memories about what happened to you.
- You begin to talk about what happened and it begins to 'hit home' how much you've been hurt.
- You start to get memories you didn't know were there.
- Other things go wrong in your life like relationship break-ups, financial difficulties, or problems at work.
- Things remind you of the abuse, like having contact with the person who abused you, the death of the abuser, or significant anniversaries such as birthdays.
- Something violent happens, such as you are the victim of an assault. This is frightening in itself and can also be a powerful reminder of past abuse.

Crisis can be a particular feature of the early stages of remembering and dealing with the abuse. It can feel at this point that everything is in chaos. Crisis, however, is not confined to this stage. Along the way a crisis can be triggered by some of the events described above. Sometimes things can seem to get worse before they get better as the full extent of the hurt suffered becomes clearer. There is no particular time limit to a crisis. It can be short and dramatic or last for a long time

What happens in a crisis?

**It's hard to imagine it going away, and it's hard to see a way through it.
You may feel:**

- Reality is distorted.
- You and your life are totally disorganised.
- You can't cope with things as you usually can.
- Tense and panicky most of the time and prone to mood swings.
- Numb and emotionally empty.
- That you're not safe.
- You may have noticed that one or more parts of your life are not working as you would like and people around you have commented upon this.

When there's a crisis there's usually a feeling of being vulnerable. A threat may be obvious and physical such as the environment you're in not being particularly safe. Or it may be more subtle - as if your inner sense of yourself as a person is under attack. You may feel that you can't cope with the feeling of threat. Being abused as a child can trigger a number of threats for you as an adult.

Starting to get memories can leave you feeling vulnerable. If you're having a lot of distress you may start to feel out of control. Feeling like this can be very frightening. Remembering and dealing with your abuse can change the way you think about yourself as an adult and that can feel threatening.

You may feel confused sexually and question what effect the abuse has had regarding this. You may wonder if your sex drive and desires have been affected. If you're gay you may wonder whether you're gay because you were abused. All this is very unsettling and may threaten the way you see yourself sexually and as a woman.

If you're currently in a dangerous situation or have suffered a recent assault you might be thinking, "Why can't I cope with this? I should be able to." Again, this threatens your overall sense of safety.

What to do in a crisis?

Build a life raft for recovery!

Over the next few pages we'll look in detail at coping with crises. To help with this you could use the image of a life raft. This sees the process of recovery from abuse as being like a river running down to the sea. The aim is to get down the river to the sea. And as you do you start to feel more in control, happier and more fulfilled. The pain gets less. It's a difficult journey, but one that has been completed many times by many survivors of abuse.

Any rapids you encounter on the way are like a crisis. You need to travel in something safe on this journey for, whilst the water will often be smooth and the raft will simply glide with the stream, the rapids are very difficult to get over. So, you need a sturdy life raft to get you over the rough patches.

Building the life raft for recovery means:

- Staying alive.
- Getting support.
- Keeping yourself safe.
- Establishing control over distress.
- Beginning to feel your feelings.

Try to build your life raft as soon as you can, even if you're not in crisis now. It's important that when you need it you can jump in. If you're in crisis now then try to concentrate on building it. Get some help with building it from those around whom you trust.

The next few pages will give some tips on how to do it. Most of these tips come from other survivors who are on the journey too. They have overcome many rapids and their experience might be of great help.

The life raft is just an image. If it doesn't suit you then you could imagine your own safe image. It might be a house or a room or a boat or a plane - anything which will help you feel safe, protected and able to survive the hard times until better times come.

Chapter 2

GETTING SUPPORT IN A CRISIS

Why is getting support so important?

There are many reasons:

- Two features of a crisis are a sense of threat and a feeling of not coping. You need some support to help you 'over the rapids'.
- Any support you build now will stand you in good stead throughout the journey. Even when you're not in crisis, getting support is an essential part of recovery.
- Abuse tends to occur in secrecy and isolation. It's important to try to break this pattern. Getting support does this.
- It's hard to recover from what happened when you were a child without reaching out for some extra help. This is never more true than in a crisis.

So, what exactly is this support? In many ways support means people. But not just any people. These are people with very particular qualities, who:

- Listen to your feelings
- Accept and respect you
- Are reliable
- Are trustworthy
- Keep your confidences
- Believe you - that you have been abused
- Don't 'play down' what happened to you
- Never blame you for what happened
- Never side with the person who abused you.

Basically, you need a Support Team to help you on the life raft. They may be found in your immediate social circle (partner, family, friends), from professional helpers,

(therapists, counsellors, other professionals, voluntary organisations), or from other survivors. Members of your Support Team don't have to be highly qualified with lots of letters after their name. Nor do they always do 'professional' things. **For instance a supportive person might:**

- Listen
- Come round for a cup of tea
- Tell you they care about you
- Allow you to let off steam by crying or shouting.
- Make you a meal

It's worth going through the people you are involved with, and deciding whether you think they have the qualities mentioned above. If they don't then they may not be the most appropriately supportive people to have around if you're going through a crisis.

Everyone's support team will be different. It may simply be that you have the number of a telephone support line that you call when you need to, or it may be that you have a wide range of people that you see or speak to at different times.

In choosing your Support Team here are some issues to consider:

YOUR PARTNER

If you're in a serious relationship you may need to weigh up how supportive your partner is. Clearly an understanding partner could provide vital support in a crisis. Does he or she have the qualities mentioned above?

Have you told them about the abuse and what you're going through? Did they react with understanding and support? If you haven't told them yet, how do you think they would react if you did? How have they reacted when you've shared personal things in the past?

If you've told your partner already and they are supportive, you could consider the following options:

- Tell them you're in crisis and need their support.
- Ask your partner for what you need. Remember that they will have their own needs too and will probably not be available 24 hours a day. Try to arrange with them a level of support they think they'll be able to give. Hopefully, you'll be getting support elsewhere as well.

- Be clear with them about anything you're not prepared to negotiate. If sex is out of the question for you at the moment tell them that. If there are some places you can't go, or things you can't do - because it's too painful - let them know.

If you haven't told your partner yet but you think they have the qualities to make a good supporter:

- Seriously consider telling them.
- Ask them for some practical support.

If you've told your partner and they are not supportive; or if you do not think they have the qualities that would make a good supporter, you have some difficult decisions to make.

You could end the relationship. It's very hard to recover if people around you are not treating you with respect. The extra stress of a 'bad' relationship may not be what you need, particularly if you're going through a crisis.

Ending it may not be acceptable to you. You may not want the stress of a break up on top of everything else. You could try to put some space between your partner and you. This will at least reduce the number of times you are belittled or undermined, and give you time to think through what you want to do next.

You could use the space to build a framework and get support from other aspects of your support system.

There may be times when your partner is not only not supportive, but engages in the following behaviours:

- Physically hurts or assaults you.
- Does sexual things to you that you don't want.
- Verbally abuses you.

If this is the case then please try to get away from this relationship. It will be like having someone on your life raft who is trying to push you into the river. No-one deserves to be abused either as a child or an adult. But if these things are happening to you then it's not safe and you'll find it difficult to recover. Leaving relationships, even 'bad' ones, is not easy.

Here are some ideas that might help:

- Start from the position that you deserve to have healthy, supportive people around you.

- Get some space between yourself and your partner. Go away for a while. Stay with a friend.
- Use the time to talk through your problem with a member of your Support Team.
- Try to come up with a plan that will get you to safety.
- If you are in danger of being physically harmed, (assaulted or sexually abused again) get out of the situation.

If you don't live with your partner:

- Get a friend to stay.
- Go and stay with a friend.
- Consult the police, tell them what danger you're in, and ask them what they can do about it. (See our website for more information).
- Consult a solicitor about your legal rights and how to take out an injunction.

If you do live together consider all the above and in addition:

- Consult a solicitor about any legal issues regarding the property.
- If you haven't got somewhere to stay, consider seeking priority re-housing from the local authority. This may seem drastic, but it's sometimes needed in order to find a way to safety.

Remember that you can never rely on the hope that your partner will change if he/she is abusive. They may promise to change, but your safety can only be assured by actions you take yourself. You can take advice and consult with those you trust. Being safe is necessary if you're to get through the crisis and move towards recovery.

Abuse has no place on the life raft for recovery.

If you are in an abusive relationship, but it just feels impossible to get out then:

- Try not to constantly criticise yourself, or think of yourself as 'less than a woman' or to blame for what's happening.
- Stay in touch with members of your Support Team.
- Take whatever steps you feel you can towards building your life raft. Spend more time with trustworthy people. Consider making a plan to get out of the situation.
- Be kind to yourself and take good care of your emotional and physical well-being.
- Every step you can make takes you further towards getting safe, building an effective life raft and towards recovery.

FRIENDS

If you have friends you are close to and trust you may want them to join you on your life raft. Most of the options mentioned for partners are equally relevant when choosing any friends to include as part of your Support Team. **When asking them for help you could consider whether they would be prepared to:**

- Receive phone calls when you are distressed, including at night.
- Listen if you need to talk about the abuse and your feelings.
- Accompany you when you need support, to GP's appointments, shopping, etc.

Like your partner, friends will have their personal needs too, so some negotiation will have to take place about what they can offer.

You may be thinking that all this asking for help sounds very weak and that you should be able to cope.

Try to remember:

- It's a sign of courage not weakness. The journey you're embarking on is very difficult and some teamwork will help you get to where you want to go. You don't have to ask everyone for help, you could choose to request support from just one or two special friends.

FAMILY

Should you have family members you would consider asking for support, generally all the same options hold for relatives too. But there are also a number of considerations you make want to make:

- Contact with this person may involve contact or potential contact with your abuser if they are still around. Having contact with your abuser may trigger distress at any time. This could even be worse if you are in crisis. You'll have to weigh up very carefully what contact you can cope with.
- This person may have or have had a relationship with your abuser. They may still be able to support you appropriately in spite of these complications. They just need to be there for you.
- Now may not be the time for family disclosures or confrontations in order to get more support. Such confrontations need very careful planning and it does not necessarily mean that you will be in control of the end result. To try it whilst you're feeling in crisis is very risky.

Nevertheless you may have someone in your family to whom you are particularly close. This maybe someone you could consider including in your support team. **As well as needing a good supporter you may want to consider the following**

- Do they already know about the abuse? Have they been supportive over other issues in the past? Have they shown that they are *on your side*, and do not have the sort of divided loyalties which could make them 'leak' things out to the family and your abuser? In a crisis this could cause you the sort of extra stress you don't need.
- Are you able to see them separately from the family? It may not help you handle your crisis if you have to go into a stressful family environment to get support.

PROFESSIONAL HELPERS

There are a number of different types of professional helpers:

- Counsellors and Psychotherapists
- G.P.s
- Psychiatrists
- Social Workers
- Community Psychiatric Nurses

One question you may be asking is: should I get individual counselling/therapy? A good counsellor or therapist can be a great help on your journey. Some survivors have found them a life-line. Others manage okay without them. Whatever your view, remember that they are just people and should show the same or similar qualities of a supportive person mentioned above. **In addition you may want to check out the following:**

- Has the counsellor ever worked with survivors of sexual abuse?
- Have they worked with people abused as children?
- What training have they had?
- To whom are they accountable? E.g. a supervisor or professional body.

This may help you decide whether you think the counsellor is competent and has knowledge of the issues. In terms of dealing with a crisis you may want to ask:

- Do you offer emergency sessions?
- Can you be contacted at home in a crisis?

This will give you some idea about what level of support you can expect from them.

You may or may not be able to afford counselling/therapy. Privately. Two options to consider here

- Try to negotiate a reduced fee with a private therapist. They often operate a sliding scale for people on reduced income.
- Some specialist charities offer free or low cost counselling.

Always choose a counsellor or therapist carefully and be prepared to change your counsellor/therapist if the sessions are not working for you. The British Association of Counsellors & Psychotherapists (BACP) website has a list of qualified counsellors in your area who are required to abide by the BACP ethical guidelines.

If you decide that you need some individual counselling to get you through the crisis try not to see it as a sign of weakness or failure.

If you decide that you need some individual counselling to get through the crisis try not to see it as a sign of weakness or failure. People sometimes tell themselves this. It's really the opposite - **a sign of courage and strength to face up to painful issues and tackle them head on.**

Other professional helpers such as Social Workers, GPs, Community Nurses and Psychiatrists are usually tied up with the mental health system. Again, if they are to be helpful in a crisis they need to show the qualities of a supportive person. **They are sometimes able to give practical support in a crisis, such as:**

- GP's can prescribe medication. This isn't the answer to dealing with abuse but in a crisis it can provide some short term relief, giving you space to be able to start to manage the crisis. They can also help signpost you to other support.
- Social Workers often have knowledge about what resources might be available to help in the community.
- Community Psychiatric Nurses sometimes have useful skills in areas like anxiety management and relaxation.
- Psychiatrists can help you to access to a lot of valuable resources including medication.

Many survivors have found these professionals to be helpful on their life raft.

VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS

There are many voluntary organisations that might be able to offer you support. This can include telephone helplines, one to one support, practical help, counselling, support groups and many other services. They can be specialist organisations that exist to help survivors of abuse, ones that help with aspects that you may suffer with as a result of your abuse (e.g. alcohol dependency, eating disorder), or be more general in their support.

Our website www.suelambertrust.org has a list of some of the main organisations that may be able to help you along your journey. Sue Lambert Trust would also like to offer to be a member of your support team through our helpline and other services.

OTHER TYPES OF SUPPORT

Supportive people are an important part of your crisis team on your life raft. But there are other things too. Consider if any of the following are important for you:

- Do you have any activities or hobbies that help you to blow off steam? It might be watching TV, jogging, listening to music, or playing games on a computer.
- Are there any objects you find particularly comforting? Sometimes people have good luck charms, or objects associated with good times. These can be comforting to have around in a crisis.

- Do you have any spiritual or religious beliefs? These can be anything ranging from strong political beliefs to being part of an organised religion. Such beliefs can be great sources of comfort in times of crisis.
- Pets can also be a source of comfort. A loving dog or cat can give a lot of support and acceptance and may even sense that you're having a painful time.

Build your raft and put on it what you need to feel safe. This will include a few carefully chosen people who you know are supportive. You are in charge of the raft and where it is going, but they can help you over the rapids.

Chapter 3

STAYING ALIVE

You did not deserve to be abused and you do not deserve any of the suffering that has gone with it. You deserve a fulfilling, happy life.

Suicide is a taboo subject. People don't usually want to talk about it. But many women who've suffered sexual abuse as a child think about it, plan it, and even attempt it. Why?

Childhood abuse can have so many harmful effects it's no wonder many women think about killing themselves.

If any of this applies to you the following may also be true:

- You feel very depressed, and think there's no point in living.
- You may feel that you can never get anything right and that you're no use to anyone.
- The future might seem completely hopeless.
- You may feel that the only way to blot out the pain you are feeling is to end it all.
- You may not really want to die, but you want to feel oblivion, or peace, where you feel no more pain.

Feeling suicidal can occur at different stages of recovery. Sometimes it happens when you start remembering the abuse and start to try to come to terms with what happened. At this point you may experience a lot of emotional pain and chaos. Then, as you start recovering you may feel despair thinking of the long road that lies ahead. But the feelings of pain and chaos can often come back later on if you uncover new memories, or even sometimes when you achieve what seems to be a positive breakthrough.

What to do if you feel like killing yourself:

- Don't do it! Okay, this is easy to say. But the tragedy is that a small number of survivors do kill themselves. This is not only tragic in itself, but also because over time, and with support the pain gets less. You deserve to live.
- Get help and support. Talk to the people you trust about how you're feeling. Suicide, like abuse, occurs in isolation. Try to reach out to those you trust.

- Consider talking to your GP. Suicidal feelings can be related to depression. Women who've been abused often experience bouts of depression. Nowadays doctors regard depression as a treatable illness with antidepressant medication. Some survivors have found antidepressants useful in lifting their mood. They're not the answer to dealing with abuse issues, but they may get you over a rough patch.
- Decide what structure you need to stay safe. Do you need to be around someone at all times? Do you need to be able to contact someone by phone 24 hours per day? Are there trusted people around you who can do these things for you, and are they willing to do it?
- Remember that the Samaritans are available 24 hours a day, every day of the week, by phone and can even offer face to face support. They are accepting, don't judge and are experienced at listening to people who feel despairing.

If you feel you need a short spell in hospital to stay safe you'll probably have to consult your GP or another health professional. Try to take a friend or ally along with you to support you and help you get what you want.

Try to avoid using alcohol or non-prescribed drugs. If you're already feeling low, these can make you feel worse in the long run. Also be aware of the effect of mixing drink and drugs.

Try to make an agreement with someone you trust about what you'll do if you start to feel suicidal. This person could be a trusted friend or a therapist/counsellor. **Your agreement with them might include:**

- Who you will ring.
- Where you will go, for instance a safe place to spend the night.
- What measures you will take to reduce your distress, e.g. relaxation, medication, etc.

Make a list of reasons for living. It may seem difficult, but write down anything that comes to mind. Survivors often come up with many reasons for living-like:

- I won't let the abuser win.
- I want to be here for my friends, family or lover.
- If I can stick with it the pain will get less.

Try to imagine a future where the pain has reduced. Again this is hard to do if you feel down. Try to imagine what life will be like in a month's time, a year's time, three years' time, all the time with you recovering from the effects of the abuse, the pain reducing, and you getting more of what you want from life.

If you're in therapy or counselling, try to make a plan with that person about what you'll do between sessions and make a commitment to come to the next session.

If you're in the process of exploring your abuse in therapy or counselling decide whether you need to take a break and concentrate on just staying safe. Some people might feel they can push through the pain - others might need to take a break.

Finally, remember that you deserve to live.

Chapter 4

KEEPING YOURSELF SAFE

There are many aspects to keeping yourself safe. One is taking care of your body and not hurting yourself. Women who've suffered childhood sexual abuse sometimes hurt themselves by:

- Cutting themselves
- Burning themselves
- Getting involved in fights
- Abusing alcohol or drugs (if this applies to you see Chapter 5 - *Finding a Way Through Addiction*)
- Getting themselves in dangerous situations (e.g. where they're likely to be assaulted)
- Taking risks with their physical safety (e.g. driving whilst drunk)
- Getting involved with people who abuse or assault them

There are many reasons why people take it out on their own bodies or put themselves in situations where they might get hurt.

As a girl you may have been constantly scared. Fear like that can affect the way the body works, making it hard to relax and calm down. This can get carried through into adult life. Hurting yourself may become a way to get relief and calm down.

If all you've ever known is pain and hurt, then you grow up expecting it. When it's not there you may create it yourself almost like an addiction. Hurting yourself is a type of self-preservation. As a girl you had no control over the abuse - but if you can inflict pain on your own body now, there may be a sense that you can control the amount of it.

Your abuser may have tried to brainwash you into thinking that your body deserved to be hurt.

You may hurt so much inside that there seems just no way to express it. Hurting your body is a way of saying just how bad you feel.

You may feel completely numb - as though you have no feelings. As painful as it is, hurting yourself proves that you feel something, even if it's just physical pain.

You may feel overwhelmed by anger and hate and worry that if you express it you may hurt someone else. The only place for this rage to go seems to be on yourself.

If you do hurt yourself it's important to remember that it's something you've done to survive.

It's not the same as wanting to kill yourself. (If you do want to kill yourself see Chapter 3 - *Staying Alive*.) You've had to live and handle intolerable levels of fear, rage and pain. You coped as best you could given a bad situation. Try to hold onto that thought if you now feel the way you coped in the past is wrong.

What to do if you feel caught in a pattern of hurting yourself

Tell someone you trust about it. Use your support system, (see Chapter 2 - *Getting Support in a Crisis*). Like abuse, self-harm occurs in secret and seems filled with shame. Sharing feelings with trustworthy people breaks into the cycle of shame.

Do something about physical stress. (See Chapter 6 - *Reducing Physical Tension*). You may have got used to high levels of tension when you were abused as a girl. Hurting yourself, or putting yourself in situations where you might get hurt, is a way of handling this tension. It's important to learn new ways that aren't harmful to yourself.

Control the pace at which you address abuse issues. This applies whether you're in therapy, talking to friends, or reading books. ***You have the right to control when you look at issues and how fast.*** Hurting yourself may have been a way of dealing with feelings inside. As you deal with the feelings that come up you may find that you are harming yourself more. If therapy is getting too 'heavy' you could tell your counsellor you need a break, or need to focus on other issues. Give some thought as to when it feels safe for you to read books on recovery from abuse.

Think up some safe ways to express anger and rage. This helps form the habit of getting feelings from inside to outside without hurting yourself or anyone else.

Some ideas are:

- Hard exercise - running, swimming.
- Punching something that can't hurt your hand such as a punch bag, (with boxing gloves on!), or some big thick pillows.
- Smashing glass bottles at a recycling plant. If you're not physically fit, don't push yourself too hard.

- If you want to start a fitness regime and you're not physically fit check it out with your GP first.

Anger has been considered by some to be the backbone of the healing process. However, this needs to be expressed externally. Some survivors have found writing journals or poetry to be useful.

Your anger and rage may include fantasies of revenge against your abuser. This is understandable. It's important to talk about this to those who are supporting you.

You have every right to these feelings. But in order to keep safe don't act on them. You might end up getting physically hurt or suffering even more than you have already. Although you have every right to your feelings you don't have the right to hurt anyone physically. You may want to consider taking legal action against your abuser and you could contact your Support Team for more advice and support.

Avoid alcohol and non-prescriptive drugs. They impair thinking and make it more likely you'll put yourself in a situation where there's danger. If you feel addicted to these substances (see Chapter 5 - *Finding a Way Through Addiction*).

Try to take care of the basics of physical health - eating, sleeping, taking exercise. This may be difficult if you're feeling down. But it is important so that you can move away from harming yourself towards looking after yourself. (If sleep is a problem see Chapter 7 - *Coping with Sleep Difficulties*.)

Explore ways of caring and nurturing your body. You could have regular physical treats, such as:

- Hot baths with oils
- Your favourite foods
- A day at a health spa

The issue of touch is important. As a child you may not have had control over who touched your body. As an adult you *can* say who is allowed to touch you and where. This goes for both intimate and casual touch. Take some time to consider what touch you want and what touch you don't want. Then tell those around you what you expect.

If you're in a pattern of cutting, burning, or harming your body try to identify when it occurs. Do certain triggers make you do it? Does it occur at particular times of day? After you've been doing certain things? How are you feeling before it happens? If you can identify when you're likely to harm yourself you may be able to come up with a plan to avoid it, like doing some relaxation, or hitting the punch bag.

Your plan could include contacting someone from your Support Team and sharing how you're feeling with them. The idea is to find ways of expressing and coping with the way you feel inside without harming yourself.

If you continue to do it despite your best efforts, try not to criticise yourself. Self-criticism is just another way of hurting yourself! If you feel trapped in a pattern it can be very difficult to get out. Try to look after your body after you're hurt yourself. If you've burnt yourself use cold water to lessen the damage to your skin. If you've cut yourself gently clean and dress the wound. See if a member of your Support Team is prepared to help you look after your burns/wounds. They'll need to know that you're not to be criticised for what you've done; you coped as best you could with the feelings you have inside. Our experience is that usually the need to self-harm usually recedes as the abuse and trauma gets processed.

If you cut or burn yourself you may consider going to A&E. If it's a deep cut which needs stitching you may need to go. Try to take someone with you - a member of your Support Team - who'll help you get good medical care.

If you're finding it hard to control the way you're cutting, burning or harming yourself you could consider carrying a first aid kit. This might consist of plasters, bandages, butterfly stitches, antiseptic ointment, cotton-wool - things you can buy at a chemist. Survivors who feel they cannot stop cutting themselves have even carried a sterile blade so they can reduce the risk of further harm from infected cuts. This might not seem like looking after your body. But self-harm can be a difficult pattern to break, and it may be the only way some Survivors have learnt to cope with distress. Whilst you're tackling the difficult task of learning new ways you may as well minimise the damage your body suffers.

Try to remember that you don't have to punish yourself now in order to recover.

Remember the pain of the little girl inside you who was abused - she has suffered enough. You are in no way to blame for that abuse.

Chapter 5

FINDING A WAY THROUGH ADDICTION

There are many ways of dealing with the distressing after-effects of childhood sexual abuse. One way is to become addicted. Being addicted to something means being out of control in your use of it.

You can become addicted to many things:

- Alcohol
- Drugs
- Sex
- Pornography
- Masturbation
- Gambling
- Strenuous exercise
- Overwork
- Overeating
- Taking risks
- Violence

Do you feel, or have you felt, out of control with any of these things? If your answer is yes, then you may be wondering, 'what's that got to do with being sexually abused as a child?' Well, being abused is extremely painful. Such pain is hard to cope with. There may have been no one around to listen to your pain. Some people turn to addictions. If this has happened to you try not to beat yourself up about it. **It's important to understand that addictions serve many valuable short-term functions:**

- They help to blot out the pain of the abuse.
- They can temporarily reduce tension.

- They might help you feel good - briefly.
- They might help control distressing symptoms like flashbacks, or lack of sleep.

Unfortunately, with addiction there's always a price to pay:

- Your physical health might suffer.
- You might suffer financially.
- You might lose time at work, or even your job.
- Under the influence you might be more likely to get yourself into situations where you might get hurt, or hurt others.
- If you're having thoughts of harming yourself you might be more likely to do it under the influence.

All these things are potentially dangerous. In addition, it's hard to begin your recovery whilst you're in the grip of addiction. This is because recovery involves expressing and really experiencing your feelings. This can be very hard and painful. The point of addiction is to try to blot out painful feelings and whilst you're addicted it's impossible to reach them fully.

What to do if you think you're addicted

It may seem obvious, but make a decision that you want to deal with it. Talk through the decision with someone you trust.

Remember that the addiction has served a purpose. It has helped you survive.

Seriously consider professional help. Getting over any addiction is very hard. In the case of alcohol or drugs it could even involve going to somewhere to 'dry out'.

Reach out to people around you whom you can trust. This may include friends, a therapist or counsellor, professionals, or family members. When you break an addiction you can feel very distressed. It's important to be able to talk about this.

Make sure you're doing something about flashbacks, panic, sleep problems. (See chapter 7, *Coping with Sleep Difficulties*). When you break an addiction these symptoms can really hit you. If you've not found ways to handle them you might be tempted to go straight back to the addiction.

If you're in counselling or therapy weigh up very carefully whether you're able to explore your abuse whilst you're still addicted. Whilst it's necessary to talk about

what happened to you it can also be extremely painful - so painful that you're tempted to take more drink, drugs, etc. to cope with the pain. Talk this through with your counsellor/therapist and with others you trust. There are no hard and fast rules. Some survivors have found it useful to sort out their addictions before therapy or in the very early stages of it.

Always remember that you did what you did to survive. Try to appreciate your great resourcefulness in surviving. Hold onto this thought even if you feel guilty or ashamed about the way you've coped.

Chapter 6

REDUCING PHYSICAL TENSION

You may find that you feel tense a lot of the time. You may feel edgy or jumpy, things may startle you easily. When you have time to yourself you may feel shaky and find yourself unable to relax.

This isn't that surprising. As a child you may have had the experience of feeling continuously scared. You may have been always on the lookout for the abuser's next move. Your mind and body may have constantly expected danger to be just around the corner.

When this happens the body becomes tense and learns to stay tense, even as an adult. After all, you may not have been given the opportunity to learn how to relax - it may simply not have been safe to let your guard down.

It's important to try to learn to relax now because:

- Long-term, tension isn't good for your physical health.
- If we can't relax by ourselves we sometimes turn to other ways of 'relaxing' like alcohol or drugs which can cause even more problems than the tension we are trying to get rid of.

Remember that learning to reduce physical tension isn't easy and won't happen overnight. Some techniques suit some people and don't suit others. Experiment and find out what works for you.

Here are some suggestions:

- Do something physical - run - use a punch bag - swim. Anything safe that gives you physical release.
- Set time aside for rest whether this involves snoozing or just sitting back in a comfy chair.
- Laugh! Watch whatever TV makes you 'roar.' Spend time with friends who make you laugh.
- Breathing exercises. Take long slow breaths, breathing deep from your belly rather than from your chest.
- Slow down! - if you are one of those people who seem to rush about like a headless chicken.

- Try to avoid putting yourself under pressure by working to deadlines.

Do things that you know you enjoy, whether it's listening to music, painting, reading. Relaxation tapes can help sometimes. They usually involve a combination of deep breathing, muscular relaxation and imagining a pleasant scene. They can be very relaxing, but they're not for everyone. Bear in mind that if you get deeply relaxed you can also feel as though you are not in control. This can be frightening for Survivors who may want to stay in control in order to stay safe. They may also involve closing your eyes or holding your breath, two things which may trigger unpleasant memories of abuse.

There are many ways to reduce feelings of physical tension. Find which ones suit you best. You'll need to keep working at it but it's worth it. After all, your body and mind have had years of feeling tense - they deserve a rest!

Chapter 7

COPING WITH SLEEP DIFFICULTIES

Women who were abused in childhood often experience problems with sleep. These problems can take many forms, including:

- Nightmares about the abuse. Waking up in a panic.
- Not being able to get off to sleep.
- Finding that the slightest noise or disturbance wakes you.
- Finding that having sex triggers memories of the abuse.

It's easy to see why problems might arise at night. You may be feeling almost permanently tensed up and unable to rest. Night time may carry particular memories of abuse. Instead of bedtime being a relaxing ritual, as a child, it may have been the time when you were violated by someone who should have been looking after you. Simply going to bed may be a trigger for bad memories.

Here are some general hints about sleep, rest and bedtime. Before we look in more detail at the distressing areas of nightmares and waking in panic:

- Make sure the place you are going to rest is physically comfortable.
- Use whatever relaxation works for you to decrease tension prior to bedtime.

Establish some regular habits. This may be difficult. Bedtime may have been spoiled for you as a child by the abuser. Try to establish a new 'going to bed' ritual which will break the pattern of fear. This may involve; what time you go, whether you read in bed, whether you sleep alone or with a partner, whether you have the light on or off.

Experiment and see what you can come up with.

- Try to get into the habit of taking exercise during the day.
- Avoid coffee and tea in the evening - they are stimulants and keep you awake.
- Avoid literature on survivor issues just before bedtime.
- If you're with a partner see what help they're prepared to offer. Will they read to you before bedtime, or give you a massage? They have their own need for sleep too, but it's worth asking what they can do to help you.

- Avoid alcohol and non-prescribed drugs. If you're not sleeping it's tempting to 'knock yourself out' just to get through the night. But it rarely works. As well as carrying dangers of addiction, alcohol usually makes you wake up to go to the lavatory in any case.

You may be wondering whether to take sleeping pills. It's certainly worth talking to your GP as well as to any other professionals you're involved with. Problems with sleep can also be a symptom of depression and if you're depressed your doctor may prescribe you an anti-depressant to help you sleep and lift your mood. Other types of sleeping pill can be addictive and are usually only prescribed on a short-term basis.

It's worth talking to your GP seeing what advice they offer, then weighing up whether it's something you want to go ahead with. Remember that pills alone are not the answer to dealing with abuse and are not a substitute for a good Support Team. The mental health charity MIND publishes independent fact-sheets on medication which are well worth consulting when making your decision.

Coping with nightmares

Women who have been abused in childhood often experience distressing nightmares. The nightmares can include:

- Direct re-creation of the abuse.
- Children being harmed or killed.
- Scenes of death and violence.
- Being chased or otherwise assaulted.
- Being humiliated or put in a powerless position.

The emotion attached to the nightmare is often one of absolute terror. Nightmares are like flashbacks and sudden unpleasant memories in that they represent the abuse suddenly breaking through into awareness. They are very distressing and hard to get rid of. **Whilst they are difficult to cope with, some guidance might be useful:**

- Make sure you've got some 'talking' help with the issue of the abuse. Being able to talk about the way sexual abuse has affected you with a trusted counsellor, friend or on a helpline should reduce the number and intensity of nightmares over time. Being able to share it seems to reduce the need for the abuse to 'break through' in the form of a nightmare.
- Whilst they are terrifying, nightmares are also a painful part of healing. It's as though the mind is remembering what happened and is trying to make sense of it.

- Some people suggest that you can 'take charge' of your nightmare. In other words, turn the tables on whoever is attacking or abusing you during the nightmare. This may be possible in some cases but it's certainly not true for everyone. Don't give yourself a hard time if this isn't true for you.

If you wake up in a panic

Waking up panicking after a nightmare is a terrifying experience, so:

- Be kind to yourself immediately afterwards. Make yourself comfortable. Take whatever relaxation measures work for you.
- Try to remember that having the nightmare, as painful as it is, is part of remembering and healing.
- Decide whether you need to be on your own right now.
- It can be good to talk about how you are feeling. If you're with a partner who is willing to be woken then tell them what is happening and how you feel. Ask them for what support you need whether it's a cuddle or a cuppa.
- If you're on your own, is there anyone you can ring to talk it through? Consider using the Samaritans if you're feeling desperate. Try to tell a supportive person as soon as is practical afterwards. Sharing the nightmare is a way of breaking the isolation and getting support with the terror of it.
- Be gentle with yourself for the rest of the day. Be prepared for the nightmare to leave you feeling unsettled and shaky.

Nightmares are terrifying. When you experience such fear you can feel vulnerable. This does not mean you are weak. Nightmares are a part of the process of recovery albeit an unpleasant part. ***It takes courage and strength to experience them and reach out for support.***

Chapter 8

CONTROLLING PANIC AND SUDDEN DISTRESS

Starting to remember and deal with your abuse can lead to distressing feelings. These may include:

- High anxiety and panic.
- Sudden memories of the abuse forcing their way into your thoughts.
- Flashbacks, in which you seem to relive the abuse.
- Feeling that you're a girl again, and feelings emerge as they did at the age when you were abused.
- Seeing, hearing, sensing or feeling things which bring about unease.

These distressing experiences may recur throughout your recovery, but they can be a particular feature of crisis. When you experience them you can feel out of control. They appear to come out of the blue - but usually there is something which has triggered them. **A trigger can be anything that reminds you of the abuse, for instance:**

- Sex.
- Becoming a parent - reminding you of your own childhood.
- Having a child who reaches the same age as you when you were abused.
- A sight, smell, sound or touch that reminds you of the abuse. In fact anything that reminds you of the abuser.
- Seeing something on TV or in the newspapers about sexual abuse.
- Medical procedures and examinations which involve people-touching you or seeming to have control over your body.
- Any contact you still have with the abuser.
- Any relationship which involves someone seeming to have more power than you, e.g. at work or in therapy.
- Anniversaries, such as at the death of the abuser.

- If you get assaulted or abused again.

In the early stages of remembering the abuse these triggers and the resulting distress can be the main features of crises. Sexual abuse is a terrifying experience. As a girl you may have felt bewildered, powerless and completely alone. You may have tried to hide it and appear strong, independent and capable. You had to and did survive. It would have been hard to go on, feeling scared and without support. But hidden feelings don't just disappear. As you get older triggers remind you of the abuse and the pain breaks through the awareness. This explains experiences of panic, flashbacks and sudden, distressing sensations and memories.

Self-help for panic and sudden distress

Make sure you have someone you can talk to; friends, a counsellor, or a (safe) family member or helpline. Sharing your feelings helps to reduce panic and distress over time.

Try not to fight against it. You may just get more tense. Whilst it's unpleasant, panic and distress are a part of recovery and tend to get less over time.

Try to avoid situations of overwhelming anxiety, e.g. contact with your abuser, or major life changes. It's not always possible. In a crisis it's important not to put yourself through more terror than you have to. **Dealing with unpredictable memories is hard enough without adding more stress.**

- Avoid alcohol and non-prescribed drugs. Whilst they will calm you down they could lead to more problems, like addiction.
- Avoid quick decisions. It's impossible to think straight when you're in distress. Wait until you are calmer.
- Don't hurt yourself or anyone else.
- Avoid caffeine. It's a stimulant and may make you feel more 'hyped up'.
- Develop a plan with your GP about how you could use prescribed medication to help, it can be useful in the short-term.
- Try to become aware as early as you can that you're experiencing a panic attack/flashback/sudden memory/strange sensation.
- Stop whatever it is you're doing. Calm yourself. Breathe slowly and deeply.

- Keep in reality. You could say your name, your age, and the place that you're at now. Plant your feet firmly on the ground and hang onto something - like the arms of a chair. Anything to get the message that the abuse is not happening now.
- Decide what to do next. Need to begin by acknowledging what is happening to you and then:
- Leave the situation which is causing the trigger.
- Change the situation which is causing the trigger.
- Continue what you're doing slowly, breathing deeply, reassuring yourself and trying to relax.
- Accept what is happening and experience the feelings.

Afterwards try to work out what happened. What was the trigger? How did you feel? Did you learn anything new about your abuse? Share this information with a member of your Support Team as soon as you can.

Expect to feel vulnerable afterwards. You have had a very frightening experience. Get what support and comfort you need.

Remember that all of this is part of recovery. Many survivors have had these experiences, gone through them and taken control. It does not mean you're going crazy.

We can take a more detailed look at each area, adding further tips to the ideas above. If you can start to process some of these terrifying feelings you will become more able to be in control of them when they happen.

Panic Attacks

Panic is a feeling of extreme anxiety. When you're having a panic attack your body may seem to be out of control:

- Breathing becomes fast, and you seem unable to catch your breath.
- You get sweaty hands, or you sweat all over.
- Your heart feels like its racing.
- You may get a hot flush.

- You may start to think:
 - I'm not safe
 - I'm going to die.
 - I'm going to have a heart attack.
 - I'm going to collapse.
 - I'm going to make a fool of myself.
 - Something terrible is going to happen.
 - I'm going crazy.

In panic, fast breathing and adrenaline cause a number of physical sensations. It's a bit like the feeling when you go for a job interview or sit your driving test. Only your panic attacks are more likely to be caused by memories of your abuse rather than anything occurring in the present.

You may try to get away from the situation you're in. Of course if something really is happening to you which is frightening such as you find yourself in a dangerous area late at night, then it's right to feel scared and try to get away. But panic can also occur when nothing dangerous is actually happening.

Panic attacks are hard to get rid of, but their frequency can be reduced until they rarely, if ever, occur. You can learn to get through them safely.

Here are some tips:

- Breathe slowly and deeply. This is especially important in panic. Fast, shallow breathing increases a lot of the unpleasant physical sensations.
- Try to control your thoughts. They can get out of hand in panic. Think up something reassuring you can say to yourself if you feel a panic coming on.

Some ideas are:

- I'm safe.
- This will soon pass.
- This is a panic attack, there is nothing physically wrong with me.

Sometimes doing something can jolt you out of the panic. This can be anything from washing the dishes to listening to music. Experiment for yourself and see if anything works. Anything is okay as long as it doesn't involve hurting yourself or anyone else.

If you panic in a public place - providing you're not in real danger - try not to run away. Breathe, reassure yourself and ride-out the feeling. If you run from the situation it can be harder to return there later.

Sudden Memories

Sometimes memories of your abuse can pop into your head all of a sudden. There's nearly always a trigger. Often the trigger is sex or touch. You might get pictures in your head of what happened to you. People or things in the picture might seem frozen in time. Usually, you are aware it's a memory. Yes, it is frightening, but you know that it isn't something that's happening to you now. Consider the advice under *Self-help for Panic and Sudden Distress* earlier in this Chapter.

In addition:

- If you don't want to experience the memory now, you could try saying 'STOP' to yourself very firmly. That may cut into the way the trigger causes the memory. This may not work if the memories happen too quickly. Also it may not be advisable to stop the memory. Though distressing, it is part of recovery and dealing with the abuse.
- Afterwards try to write about the memory. If you don't want to write you could draw a picture representing it, or mould something from plasticine. Try to share this memory with someone from your Support Team. Memories demand to be heard. The more they are heard, the more likely they are to fade over time.
- Memories may be connected in your mind to feelings of self-shame and blame about the abuse. This is why it is so important to share them with a trusted member of your Support Team. This breaks the secrecy of the past and gets you support from someone who sees the truth that you were not to blame and that the fault for the abuse lies with the abuser.
- Sudden memories can leave you shaky and scared. Always try to balance out the experience by looking after yourself afterwards, maybe by giving yourself special treats. You've had to experience pain, you should also have some pleasure.

Flashbacks

A flashback is a sudden memory of abuse that is so strong it actually seems that it's

happening now. Something usually triggers the flashback and it's often touch or sex.

Again you can get pictures in your head. But they seem much more real. You may experience the actual sounds, smells, tastes, emotions that you did at the time of the abuse. You may feel terrified, shocked, numb, in a rage or filled with disgust depending what you felt then. You may get the same physical sensations in your body. These sensations are sometimes in your genitals or rectum. It's as if you're back being abused again.

It all seems so real it's hard to keep track of what's actually happening in the real world. You may feel completely out of control.

Flashbacks are very frightening. But you can get through them and get some control.

Some Survivors have later described them as a way of retrieving useful information about the abuse they suffered as a girl.

Consider advice under *Self-help for Panic and Sudden Distress* earlier in this Chapter and the additional advice on coping with sudden memories.

Develop a good understanding of which triggers cause you to flashback. You won't be able to avoid them all. It isn't good to block all memories because they are also a useful part of recovery.

Coping with panic, memories and sudden distress is very hard and there are no easy answers. But many survivors have experienced them, come through them and established some control. Over time, and with support they've seen this distress reduce. You have survived the abuse. Then you may have been all on your own. Now you can get support and survive the memories of abuse too. By processing the traumatic events survivors often find that flashbacks, panic attacks and nightmares become less frequent.

Beginning to feel

For survivors, feelings can seem like problems. Even pleasurable feelings like love and sex can be connected to painful thoughts. In a crisis, you may be experiencing distress such as flashbacks, sudden memories and suicidal thoughts. It's understandable if all you want to do is to stop feeling all together.

Survivors often get into this habit of not feeling much. They may describe themselves as, 'spaced out', 'numb', 'not connected', 'not all there'. **This 'spacing out' can take a number of forms.**

- Being 'in your head'. This means that you split your emotions off. It's as if they don't exist. You're able to talk about things; but the emotions that go with the

thoughts don't seem to register.

- Not being aware of your body. This can almost feel as if you don't have a body. You may ignore your physical needs and not register pain or when it's time to eat, drink, and sleep.
- Seeming in a different world. Your mind may drift off into a world of daydreams, or you may get the sensation that you're actually watching yourself from outside your body.

Does any of this ring a bell for you? Not feeling is a habit formed in childhood. It's easy to see why you may have worked out that your best way of surviving was not to have feelings.

When you were abused it was too frightening to cope with. Your mind had to do something to help you through it, so it 'spaced out.'

If your abuse involved a great deal of physical pain, or if you were physically abused in other ways as well, your brain may have gone 'numb' to protect you from the pain.

After the abuse you had to find a way to carry on. It's very hard to face up to the fact that those who should have loved and protected you, actually abused you or failed to prevent it. And you may have had to go on living with them afterwards. This is an impossible position to be in. Your mind went 'numb', 'spaced out', to protect you from feeling how bad it was.

When you look at it this way, going numb is revealed as a very useful way of surviving. You did well to use it and survive. But there comes a point when it's no longer as useful. As an adult, not **feeling** can be a handicap.

There are a number of problems with not being in touch with your feelings as an adult:

- Feelings provide a lot of information. Recovery from abuse involves taking in new information and experiencing new and old feelings. Your feelings will tell you how you're doing, what issues are around for you, what progress you're making.
- Feeling 'numb' and 'spacing out' doesn't help you when you have to make choices, decisions and plans. You can't do this when you're numb because your head is 'somewhere else'. Recovery is all about choices, decisions and plans. This guide encourages you to make lots of them, such as:

***Who should be in my support team?
How do I get myself safe?
Which relaxation methods work for me?***

Being 'numb' can stop you concentrating on sorting out your crisis and recovering.

If you're around people who aren't safe, or your surroundings aren't safe, your feelings will help you to assess the danger. Then you can do something about it.

If you feel numb you're more likely to put yourself in danger, or to stay in abusive relationships when you should get out.

If you're cut off from your emotions it's hard to get close to people and to let them in. Dealing with crises and recovery involves reaching out to supportive people. To do this you need to be able to establish close relationships.

If you can't establish supportive relationships you may become isolated. This may feel the same as when you were a girl. Recovery is very hard in isolation.

If you 'space out' to deal with painful feelings that doesn't mean the feelings disappear. They may emerge later, sometimes explosively.

Feelings of rage may reappear leading to violence. Feelings of shame may reappear leading to self-harm.

It's not okay to hurt yourself and it's not okay to hurt anyone else.

Getting in touch with your feelings

Changing habits - beginning to feel after years of not feeling - is hard work. Particularly when, as a girl, there were such good reasons for not wanting to feel. But there are good reasons now to change and here are some ideas that may help:

- As with sudden memories and flashbacks, try to identify the triggers that occur before you go numb.
- Try to become aware of going numb as you're doing it. This is a first step in getting some control.

If you decide to try to control the 'spacing out' then ways to get in touch with your feelings are:

- Focus on your body. Sometimes feelings emerge as a pain or sensation in the body.
- Breathe slowly and deeply. We tend to restrict our breathing and hold ourselves tightly when we don't want to feel. Deep breathing also helps deal with panic.

Afterwards try to identify what you've felt. If you can't put a name to it you could use

your journal, draw it or paint it, or mould a model of it in plasticine. Anything which *externalises* the feeling so that you can actually see it.

Remember you still have the option of continuing to space out or go numb if you want to. You don't have to feel everything. This might be overwhelming, particularly in a crisis. You can choose to go numb if it doesn't feel safe to have your feelings, or if you just haven't got the energy. **You might make this choice if:**

- You're trying to cope with an addiction. Having your feelings might be overwhelming and drive you back to the addictive behaviour.
- You're in a pattern of hurting yourself, spacing out might be an alternative to hurting yourself. However, be careful with this. If your pattern of self-harm involves hurting yourself as a way of jolting you out of numbness, then you'll need to find a way of coping other than spacing-out or going numb.
- You think that having your feelings could lead to rage which could result in violence.

Always try to tell a member of your support team about the feelings you've had.

The important thing is to get some control and start to *engage with your feelings*. Getting control helps you to take charge of the crisis. Beginning to feel takes you through the crisis and into recovery. You're steering your life raft over the rapids and into the calmer water beyond. **Be patient and kind to yourself**, learn to trust so that you will get back the life you deserve.

Good luck on your journey.

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