



Sexual Assault Referral Centre for  
Hampshire and the Isle of Wight



# Information for survivors of rape and sexual assault

Northern Road  
Cosham  
Portsmouth  
PO6 3EP  
0300 123 6616

[www.solent.nhs.uk/treetops](http://www.solent.nhs.uk/treetops)

This booklet gives information about rape and sexual assault and explains what we can provide for your physical and emotional welfare. It is aimed at both men and women so there may be some information in it that is not relevant to you.

## **What is rape or sexual assault?**

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

## **Who is raped or sexually assaulted?**

Any person of any age, class or background.

The assailant is often a known person such as a relative or partner, but they may also be a stranger or someone who very little is known about.

The attack may happen indoors or outdoors. The assailant may break into the victim's home, may be invited in, or may force the victim to enter their home. There may be more than one assailant.

**Any person of  
any age, class  
or background.**

## If you have been raped or sexually assaulted

It is important to remind yourself that you are not to blame. Nothing that you have done can make a person rape or sexually assault you. You are not responsible for someone else's actions.

There is no right or wrong way to respond in situations of sexual attack. Common feelings after rape or sexual assault include self-blame, guilt, fear, anxiety, shame and anger. These are natural emotional responses and usually reduce gradually over time. More information is available on page 7.

When your safety has been violated, it is important that you begin to feel safe again and able to make your own decisions. For example, it is your right to take the process at Treetops at your own pace, stopping at any time you feel you need to. If at any time you don't understand what is happening, please ask.

## Services at the Treetops Centre

The Centre is able to:

- Perform a specialist examination by a forensic doctor or nurse
- Provide crisis support at your initial visit
- Provide telephone advice
- Provide independent advocacy and support with practical matters
- Introduce other support services, for example Rape Crisis and Victim Support.



## The forensic examination

A forensic examiner (Forensic Medical Examiner, FME) conducts this examination and their job is to look for evidence that supports your report of sexual assault and may help to identify the assailant. They will collect swab samples that can be forwarded to the police for processing, if in the future you decide to make a formal report. They will examine you for cuts and bruises and take samples from any areas of your body that the assailant has assaulted.

If you are attending the Centre with the police, these samples then belong to them. Any information or results obtained from the samples is police evidence and does not come back to the Treetops Centre. The clothes that you were wearing at the time of the assault may also be sent to the forensic laboratory for examination and (if the case goes to court) will be kept as evidence until after the trial. The police may also ask you if they can photograph any injuries that you have sustained. As a self referral (i.e. the police are not involved) you will be given other options about what can happen to your samples. You will be able to discuss this with the crisis worker.

The forensic examination is different to a normal doctor's examination. The forensic examiner collects evidence by taking swabs and documenting any injuries – they do not check for any sexually transmitted infections (STIs) at the time of the examination. They will be able to give you advice and answer any questions you have regarding STIs. Any information given at the forensic examination can be presented if your case goes to court.

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

## The Crisis Worker

They give guidance, support and information while you are at the Centre. An interpreter can also be arranged if necessary.

A crisis worker will also be able to call you back after your visit, and in most cases arrange for further support, either over the telephone or in a one-to-one situation with practical support and independent advocacy.

## The Young Persons' Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA)

The Young Persons' ISVA works with people aged 13 years and older, across Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. The Young Persons' ISVA can offer emotional and practical support, advocacy, assistance with health appointments and attend meetings with clients after the initial visit to the Centre.

## Self referrals

Centre staff can arrange an appointment to have an informal discussion (anonymously if you wish) with a Specially Trained Officer (STO), without any obligation to make a formal allegation.

If you would prefer not to speak to the police, staff can arrange a meeting at the Centre with a crisis worker or the Young Persons' ISVA who are experienced in supporting and advising people who have been raped or sexually assaulted.



## The Specially Trained Officer (STO)

As a police referral, you will be supported and guided through all the stages of the process by a specially trained police officer, known as an STO. They will take the initial details of the assault and then a full statement from you (which will be important evidence in a possible court case), accompany you to the Centre, and help you through the justice process following your visit to the Centre.

They will keep you informed about the progress of the investigation, e.g. if the assailant is caught, charged and/or given bail.

## How you might feel

Each person responds differently to a sexual attack. Your response will be right for you. Sexual assault is traumatic and recovery can take time. Support and understanding are important for recovery and it can help to talk about your feelings and concerns. Friends and relatives may be able to help, however many people also find it helpful to talk to a counsellor. If you think that this may be helpful, you can contact the Rape Crisis Centre near to where you live, or telephone the Treetops Centre and ask a crisis worker to telephone for you.

**Each person  
responds differently  
to a sexual attack.**

## Advice for families, partners and friends

Following a sexual assault, many people feel distressed and may find that it is difficult to cope. Supporting a partner, friend or family member who has been sexually assaulted can be distressing – it can be very hard to know what to say and do to help.

Leaflets are available, please contact the Treetops Centre for more information.

## Legal and court proceedings

Many people are worried about reporting rape or sexual assault to the police and having to go to court. If you have any questions or concerns about the police procedure or going to court, you can discuss them with the Treetops Centre team, the Witness Service or your STO (if you have already reported to the police).

## Criminal injuries compensation

If you have been raped or sexually assaulted you may be eligible for criminal injuries compensation. Usually the crime must have been reported to the police, but it may be worth asking if you are eligible even if the police were not involved. Information can be obtained from your local Victim Support or by searching online for the government led Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority.



## Emotional reactions to sexual assault

Following a sexual assault you may experience a wide range of emotions that can be distressing, surprising and difficult to cope with. Each person reacts differently: you may also feel tearful, withdrawn, depressed or just numb. You may also feel very anxious and panicky, or have nightmares and flashbacks of the assault. For many people these emotions pass within a few weeks. If they persist you may need professional help to overcome these traumatic responses. Being able to recognise these reactions is helpful, especially when you realise that they are normal and you are not going crazy or mad. The following emotions are common.

### Anxiety

We all experience anxiety at certain times, for instance you may recall feeling anxious when going for a job interview. When you are anxious your heart can beat faster, you breathe more quickly, and your skin becomes clammy and sweaty. You may feel dizzy or shaky and have 'butterflies' in your stomach. If you are really anxious, and in a state of near panic, you may feel as though you are having a heart attack and hyperventilate or over-breathe. If you do experience these symptoms they will usually pass within 20 minutes.

After an assault many people feel anxious and afraid that something might happen again, and see the world as a dangerous place with no one they can trust. You may find you are always watching out and constantly on edge, waiting for something else to happen. You may be jumpy, especially if someone is too close or touches you unexpectedly. Anything that reminds you of the assault can trigger anxiety and this can be smells, colours, sounds, as well as more specific reminders.

## What can I do about anxiety?

First try to notice what is making you feel anxious. Is it what you are thinking, doing or a reminder of the assault? Our body usually reacts to what we are thinking so if you can distract yourself, or think more helpful thoughts, this can help stop the panic rising. You could try counting objects, listening to music, or thinking of a favourite place. Relaxation and deep breathing exercises may also help. If the anxiety is becoming overwhelming seek help before it becomes a problem.

## Nightmares and sleeping problems

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

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

**You may find yourself waking up suddenly feeling very afraid and anxious.**

## What can I do if I can't sleep?

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

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

## Flashbacks

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

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

## Guilt

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

## Anger

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

Try not to block up your anger as this may result in it spilling out when you don't want it to. Try and talk about how you are feeling and remember it's a normal reaction.

**Remember you are  
not to blame for being  
sexually assaulted.**

## Irritability

After your assault you may well feel under significant physical and emotional stress of which you are not fully aware. As a result you may find yourself become irritable very easily and reacting to things that normally wouldn't have bothered you.

With both anger and irritability it is important to try and look after yourself. Use the support of others and try to relax. Moderate exercise can also help to release some of the tension.

## Depression

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

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

## Sexual relationships

Many people find it difficult to feel sexual or have sexual relationships after the assault, partly due to a lack of trust that can arise, but also because sex itself can be a reminder of the assault. You may also have negative feelings towards yourself and your body, such as feeling 'dirty'. Some people react differently and you may find yourself having more sex with different partners, or having sex you otherwise would not have wanted because you no longer care about yourself or your body.

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

## Things you may be doing

Avoiding situations, especially those that remind you of the assault, is a common way of managing trauma and related pain. These situations can seem unconnected and initially confusing. For instance, if you're wondering why you can't go out in the evenings it may be because the assault happened at night. You may find yourself avoiding being with other people, or conversely wanting to be with someone all the time. These are all subconscious attempts to keep yourself safe. They can be helpful in the short term, but may become more problematic when you try and get on with everyday activities that you enjoy.



Worrying or bottling things up can make you feel anxious or depressed leading to further distress. You may find yourself repeatedly asking questions such as 'Why me?'. Bottling up your feelings can lead to you feeling more irritable and more likely to explode with anger or become upset. Try and talk about how you are feeling and remember it is normal to be on a roller coaster of emotions after the assault.

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

## What can help me?

Overall, take care of yourself. Give yourself time to absorb the shock of the experience. Try and get adequate rest and sleep, eat regularly, and take moderate exercise. Talk to friends or family if it helps although you may decide not to tell them, or only tell certain people. However, not telling anyone and putting on a brave face, or pretending that everything is alright, can be exhausting. It is often useful to tell others what may help you as they may not know how to react, or want to protect you from further distress by not asking you.

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

**Give yourself  
time to absorb  
the shock of  
the experience.**



## Information for family and friends

Anyone can find themselves supporting a relative, a friend or partner who has been raped or sexually assaulted. Rape and sexual assault are terrifying experiences and everybody reacts differently. Some common reactions are described in the previous section. Please read this information to help you understand how the person you care about may be feeling.

### What can I do?

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

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

**Rape and sexual assault  
are terrifying experiences  
and everybody reacts  
differently.**

## Talking about the assault

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

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

## Understanding emotions

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

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

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

## Reporting the sexual assault

The decision to report the assault to the police is up to your partner, relative or friend. If you are tempted to involve the police yourself only do this if they have given you permission. The decision of whether to report the crime to the police is a very difficult one. Many people decide that they do not want to face the consequences of going through a possible court case. They may be ashamed of revealing what actually happened and prefer to cope with the effects of the crime without police help. They may also feel unable to face their assailant and find the idea of going to court traumatic. If your loved one is unsure, it may be useful for them to talk to an STO.

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

**Talking to someone in confidence could help your partner, relative or friend.**

## Consider your own reactions

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

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

## Finding help for your partner, relative or friend

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

## For you

You may feel particularly distressed and unable to cope with the situation yourself. The Treetops Centre can tell you where you might have access to alternative support. Please discuss your situation with the staff at Treetops.

## Rape and Sexual Abuse Crisis Services

These are available in Portsmouth, Southampton, Winchester and Basingstoke and between them cover the whole of Hampshire. Please see the individual leaflet for your area for telephone numbers and hours of opening.

### **Basingstoke**

Helpline: 01256 423890  
Office: 01256 423810

### **Portsmouth**

Office: 023 9266 9513  
Women's Crisis Line:  
023 9266 9511  
Men's Crisis Line: 023 9266 9516

### **Southampton**

Office: 023 8063 6312  
Helpline: 023 8063 6313  
Minicom: (for deaf clients)  
023 8063 6314

### **Winchester**

Helpline: 01962 868688 / 864433  
Office: 01962 807037

## Contacting the Treetops Centre

The Centre is at Northern Road, Cosham, Portsmouth, PO6 3EP.

Telephone: 0300 123 6616

In an emergency situation where you do not feel safe dial 999.

To contact the STO telephone 101 and ask for your STO.

## Support Organisations

### **Victim Support**

Victim Support Line:  
08 08 16 89 111 (National Helpline)

Samaritans: 116 123

Domestic Violence: 08082 000247  
(24 hour National Domestic Violence Free phone Helpline)





**Please tell us how you feel  
about the services we provide.**

If you have a compliment, concern or complaint please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison (PALS) and Complaints Services on **0800 013 2319** or ***snhs.solentfeedback@nhs.net***

Alternatively, visit: **[www.solent.nhs.uk/contact-us](http://www.solent.nhs.uk/contact-us)**

 *sign up today*

To become a member of Solent NHS Trust, please visit  
**[www.solent.nhs.uk/membership](http://www.solent.nhs.uk/membership)**



For a translation of this document,  
an interpreter or a version in

large  
print

or



or



please contact  **023 8082 5300**

**[www.solent.nhs.uk](http://www.solent.nhs.uk)**