



# HEALING AFTER SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE

**Everybody's experience of sexual violence is different. It may have an impact on your thoughts, feelings, actions and personal relationships, as well as how you view and interact with the world.**

Your reactions might be immediate or they might take a while to happen. They might also suddenly emerge at unexpected (and inconvenient) times. Every person is different and there is no right or wrong way to react or not react to the experience of sexual violence.

Some of the physical reactions you may experience are listed below, as well as some of the common thoughts, feelings and behaviours that might occur.

Learning to manage these physical reactions and finding safe ways to make yourself feel better are part of the healing process. Healing takes time, sometimes many years. Some days will be very hard but don't give up!

## WHERE DO I START?

### Safety First

Being and feeling safe is important for recovery from sexual assault.

To find out if you are feeling safe, ask yourself:

- Am I safe from further contact with the person who hurt me?
- Do I feel safe at home?
- Is there anything I need to change in order to feel and be safe?

If you are currently at risk of violence of any kind, get help to find safety by staying with a trusted friend or family's members house, finding a domestic violence refuge shelter and so on.

If you are not safe or are not feeling safe, it is important to work out what you need to do to be safe.

## TALK TO SOMEONE YOU TRUST

Speaking with someone who is safe, supportive and helpful is one of the best ways to begin healing from the hurt of sexual violence. This might be a trusted friend or relative, a community or religious leader, a medical professional, counsellor or someone else. You can view our tip sheet on finding safe and supportive people by visiting [wearesurvivors.online](http://wearesurvivors.online).

## HEAL YOUR BODY

Experiencing sexual violence might mean you feel different in your body or have injuries that keep hurting. Visiting a doctor or hospital can help you to get the treatment that you need. If you don't want to or can't visit a doctor or hospital, and it is not an emergency there are other places you can go to get help. You can visit your local community health centre or find your local Women's health centre [HERE](#). Calling Health Direct on **1800 022 222** will connect you directly to a medical professional that you can speak with. If you are from the LGBTIQ+ community you may be able to get support from [ACON's Community Care service](#).

## HEAL YOUR MIND

Sexual violence can impact your mental health. There are lots of free support services in Australia that can help you if you are feeling suicidal, depressed, anxious or have other mental health worries. Speak to your doctor about your mental health. If you can't or don't want to speak with a doctor you can call Lifeline on **13 11 14** at any time of the day or night to speak with a trained support worker. You can also visit the [Lifeline website](#) to text or chat online with someone if you don't want to talk on the phone.

## OTHER WAYS TO HEAL

Some of the ways that other survivors have found helpful in healing from sexual violence are:

- Painting and other forms of art
- Music
- Singing
- Dance
- Drama
- Sport such as self-defence, martial arts
- Writing and / or reading poetry
- Writing a diary
- Visiting a church, mosque, temple or other place of religion
- Reading about other people's experiences
- Joining a group of other survivors of sexual violence
- Talking to a trusted friend or relative
- Talking to a counsellor
- Caring for an animal
- Cooking
- Reporting the abuse to the police
- Seeking justice
- Helping others who have been abused

## WHAT IS COUNSELLING AND CAN IT HELP?

Some people find it hard to talk about their experiences with people they don't know but for many survivors of sexual violence, speaking with a professional counsellor in addition to friends and family can help with healing.

Counsellors with expertise in sexual violence are trained to recognise and assist with the many impacts of sexual violence. They can help with healing.

## WORRIES ABOUT COUNSELLING

If the sexual assault you experienced is impacting your daily life in a bad way, then a counsellor can help you. If you haven't been to a counsellor or psychologist before you might worry about it or be afraid of it because you don't know what to expect. You might think that going to a counsellor means you are weak.

You may never have spoken to anyone about your feelings or experiences before, so counselling might make you afraid. You might also not want to talk about what happened to you, or you might worry that your conversation with a counsellor might not be kept private.

If you are from a refugee and asylum-seeking background you may also be afraid that getting counselling might cause a problem for your application for residency in Australia.

## IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT COUNSELLING

The purpose of counselling is to help you, and the counsellor's job is to listen to your worries and emotions.

Many services in Australia, can give you counselling for free (no cost).

Counselling can be an important part of your healing.

You don't have to discuss anything you don't want to in counselling. You can provide as little or as much detail as you feel comfortable with.

A counsellor must keep whatever you say, private and confidential (unless there is a risk to your safety or the safety of others).

Attending counselling will not affect your application for permanent residency or your visa status.

## WORKING WITH A COUNSELLOR

- Get help as soon as possible after the sexual violence occurs.
- Tell your counsellor of anything in particular that you feel would be helpful to you.
- Give yourself some time to adjust to counselling; it can take some time to get used to.
- Try to communicate with your counsellor as much as you can.
- Even if counselling gets more difficult, never give up on yourself.
- Believe in your ability to heal.

There are many people who have healed from their experiences of sexual violence. It takes time, but you can do it too!

## FINDING A COUNSELLOR?

You may already know where to find a counsellor, or you may have a family member or friend who can tell you how to find a counsellor. If you don't know where to start, you can speak to your doctor or contact these organisations below. They can provide you with some free phone counselling and can help you find a local counsellor to work with in your community:

→ **1800RESPECT:** National sexual assault, domestic and family violence counselling service. Call 1800 737 732.

→ **NSW Sexual Violence Helpline.** Call 1800 424 017.

If you don't speak English, you can use:

→ **Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National):** Provides immediate interpreting services. Call **131 450**.

There are also organisations who have experience in helping survivors of sexual violence who are new to Australia, or who can help refugees, asylum seekers or people holding temporary visas.

→ The **Asylum Seekers Centre.** Call (02) 9078 1900.

→ The **NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors – STARTTS.** Call (02) 9646 6700.

→ **Settlement Services International – SSI.** Call (02) 8799 6700.