

# WELLBEING

## AND STUDENT SUPPORT



## Self-Care following Sexual Assault or Domestic Abuse

Created by the Sexual & Domestic Abuse Adviser (SDAA)

The University of Warwick is committed to supporting students who have been subjected to Sexual Assault or Domestic Abuse. This booklet was developed by the Sexual and Domestic Abuse Adviser to provide some basic guidance and support.

The booklet will cover:

- Introduction
- Impact of Trauma
- The process of recovery
- Who should I talk to & seeking professional help

For a detailed list of all external agencies that support victims/survivors of sexual violence and domestic abuse, please refer to Support for survivors of sexual and domestic abuse  
[warwick.ac.uk/services/wss/topics/supportforsurvivors-svda](http://warwick.ac.uk/services/wss/topics/supportforsurvivors-svda)

# Introduction

Most of the time, our lives feel safe and secure, and we cope well with life. Sadly, and without any warning, we can experience unexpected trauma following a sexual assault or incident of domestic abuse, and suddenly our lives are unrecognisable. Everything seems overwhelming and you struggle to know what to do or who to turn to. This is a typical reaction, and it is important not to put any pressure on yourself. When dealing with trauma, it can be difficult to think of solutions or make decisions, therefore it is hoped that this booklet will provide some guidance on what to do and where to seek support.



# Impact of Trauma

Following sexual assault or domestic abuse, individuals can be affected in many different ways, and it can take time to process what happened. Initially you might feel little or no distress and question whether the incident actually occurred, this is known as acute stress reaction and relates to your brain's autonomic response to trauma. Others may experience a heightened sense of helplessness and lack of safety immediately after the assault which can lead to prolonged emotional and psychological distress. We all react differently to trauma and there is no 'typical' response. Here are some common symptoms expressed by victims/survivors. We hope that this information will help you to understand and manage your symptoms as part of the process of psychological adjustment and recovery.

Emotional & Psychological	Physical
Shock, denial, or disbelief.	Jumpy, trembling or easily startled.
Confusion, difficulty concentrating.	Sleep disturbances, insomnia or nightmares.
Anxiety and fear at not coping.	Intrusive memories or flashbacks.
Guilt, shame, self-blame.	Dissociation.
Withdrawing and disconnecting from others.	Fatigue, aches & pains.
Feeling sad, depressed, or hopeless.	Frightened by sudden movements or noise.
Feeling numb.	Racing heartbeat, palpitations or dizziness.
Cognitive avoidance around the incident.	Gastrointestinal symptoms such as nausea, vomiting & diarrhoea.
Loss of self-esteem & confidence.	Disturbance of menstrual cycle and changes in sexual appetite.
	Active avoidance.

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Cognitive and behavioural avoidance is very common following assault, and a certain degree of avoidance is a useful coping strategy as you process the incident. However, prolonged avoidance is unhealthy and specialist support may be required to gradually support you to deal with the incident.

These symptoms can last for a few days to several months or longer. Recovery is very individualised but gradually these symptoms often/usually fade as you process what happened and develop coping strategies to deal with the trauma. From time to time, you may be triggered by recurring memories or emotions but with effective coping strategies in place, you will be able to deal with these without too much distress.

# Process of Recovery

Just as there are many reactions to trauma, the recovery journey is personal to everyone and there is no one solution. It is a difficult time with varying degrees of symptoms. You don't need to feel frightened or embarrassed about the occurrences of these symptoms or worry they are an abnormal response or sign of weakness. Expression of feelings will not lead to loss of control and may in fact help you come to terms with the assault.

It can also impact on relationships particularly family and friends as you question who to tell and try to pre-empt their reactions. It is important to think about what you need and who can offer the right type of support for you. Not everyone will appreciate what you have been through and sometimes, you are expected to deal with it in a certain way.

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## Recovery is a personal Journey

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Again, it is important to emphasise that there are no right or wrong ways to react. Your symptoms can change, they can alter in frequency or intensity and although wanting to avoid painful emotions is an understandable reaction, it is an essential part of recovery to work on accepting your feelings. Individuals cope differently based on their personality types, past exposure to adversity/trauma, current life stressors, coping styles and resilience. You may experience a change in attitude towards others and the world.

These are all common factors and with time and support, you can learn to deal with these.

To avoid connecting or repress our emotions takes a lot of energy, therefore emotionally connecting is the pathway to healing and recovery. Disconnecting is a form of self-protection.

Here are other natural forms of self-protection which can be helpful in the short term:

**Numbness** - your feelings may seem blocked off, distant or dream-like. This is a way of allowing the distress of the assault to be felt slowly and gradually. This may be perceived that you are 'unfeeling' or 'being strong' but this is not the case, your brain is slowly trying to come to terms with the trauma.

**Going over the event** - reflecting on the assault can allow you to try and make sense of what happened but this will need to be done with support.

**Distractions** can be helpful but should not be used long term as it will hinder your processing and healing from the assault.

A high-angle photograph of a sandy beach. The ocean waves are breaking on the right side, with white foam washing onto the sand. A series of footprints is visible, starting from the top left and moving towards the bottom right, following the curve of the beach. The sand is a light tan color, and the water is a clear blue. The overall scene is peaceful and serene.

"You've got to feel it,  
to heal it"

# Useful Strategies & Support

## STRATEGIES

- ▶ Take time out for yourself.
- ▶ Find people to talk to as it will help you process the assault.
- ▶ Express your needs honestly and ask for help as some friends may be reluctant to push their support as they don't know what to say or what you want.
- ▶ Accept support from others.
- ▶ Try to establish a routine as soon as possible.
- ▶ Don't be over ambitious. Pace yourself and take it easy.
- ▶ Avoid bottling up your emotions and isolating yourself.
- ▶ Don't expect the memories to go away quickly; recovery is a process.
- ▶ Joining a support group or accessing specialist support who understand what you have been through is particularly important as it can allow you to release pent up feeling

## PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

One of the biggest reasons that victims/survivors are reluctant to seek professional help is the fear that they will be pressurised to contact the police. This is not that case, and we want to reassure you that you don't have to report the assault to the police if you don't want to. You need time to reflect on what has happened to you. However, it is important to consider getting medical help as soon as possible for any injuries. Try not to wash or change your clothes following assaults. Injuries sustained following domestic abuse should be treated by GP or local medical staff. It is essential to get medical support following sexual assault due to risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or potential pregnancy.



**Sexual assault referral centres (SARCs)** offer medical, practical and emotional support to anyone who has been raped, sexually assaulted or abused. SARCs have specially trained doctors, nurses and support workers to care for you and a forensic medical examination can be undertaken, as well as referrals to mental health support and sexual violence support services. The evidence obtained from this examination can be stored for up to 2 years, so you can decide to report the assault to the police at a later stage.

Our local SARC is:

### **Blue Sky Centre**

George Eliot Hospital, College Street,  
Nuneaton, Warwickshire, CV10 7DJ

**Phone:** 0800 970 0370

**X (Twitter):** [twitter.com/blueskycentrecw](https://twitter.com/blueskycentrecw)

**Email:** [info@blueskycentre.org.uk](mailto:info@blueskycentre.org.uk)

**Web:** [blueskycentre.org.uk](https://blueskycentre.org.uk)

# Self Help & Resources

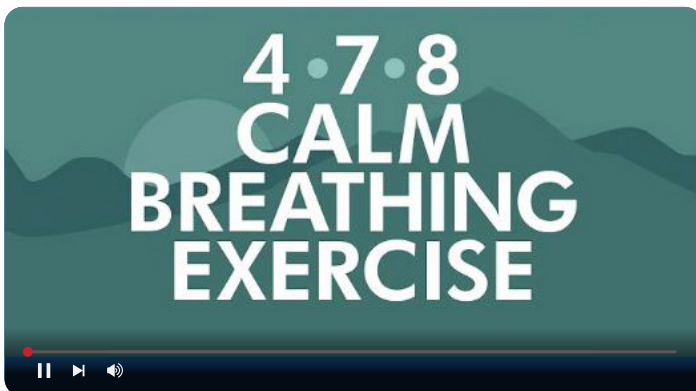
## **Breathing**

Breathwork can help individuals to heal from trauma by providing a safe space to process emotions and trauma from the body. This is achieved by helping the individual:

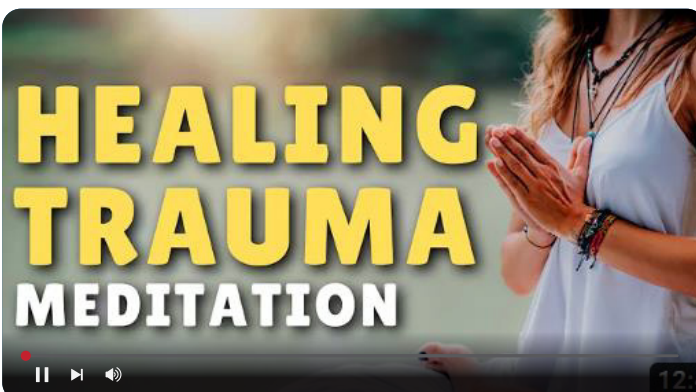
- ▶ Regulate their nervous system.
- ▶ Process & release the trauma experience.
- ▶ Support when experiencing panic attacks.
- ▶ Promote general mental and physical wellness.

## **Meditation**

Use of meditation can help trauma survivors remain in the present and create a sense of security & safety. It can be a useful counterbalance to the effects of trauma but be mindful it may trigger flashbacks or trauma emotions so approach this practice carefully and thoughtfully to reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes.



Watch the  
CALM BREATHING  
EXERCISE video  
[here](#)



Watch the  
HEALING TRAUMA  
MEDITATION video  
[here](#)

# Self Help & Resources

The role of the **Independent Sexual Violence Adviser (ISVA)** is to support people who have experienced sexual violence. It does not matter if the incident/s happened yesterday or years ago. The support can be practical, such as liaising with other professionals like your GP or finding other services that can help, such as counselling or other talking therapies.

- ▶ **Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAs)** are trained professionals skilled at offering support to victims/survivors of domestic abuse at high-risk of serious harm and helping them develop trusting relationships.
- ▶ **Specialist Trauma Counselling** – ensure to ask them about their experience and qualifications so that they are appropriately skilled to work with psychological trauma relating to SV or DA.

For a detailed list of all external agencies that support victims/survivors of sexual violence and domestic abuse, click [here](#) or refer to Support for survivors of sexual and domestic abuse.