Caring for yourself after sexual violence

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VictimFocus
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Caring For Yourself After Sexual Violence

This course is written and presented by Dr Jessica Taylor and is available free to anyone who has been subjected to sexual violence in childhood or adulthood.

Dr Jessica Taylor (FRSA, PhD) is the founder and owner of VictimFocus, the VictimFocus Blog and The VictimFocus Academy.

Jessica has a PhD in Psychology in which she specialised in the psychology of victim blaming and self-blame of women who have been subjected to sexual violence and abuse.

Jessica is an engaging, passionate speaker, lecturer, researcher and writer in the field of sexual violence and mental health. With a career history in the management of victim and witness services in the criminal justice system, training and managing rape counselling services, setting up the first male mental health centre in the UK and training thousands of police, social workers, health staff, elected members, psychologists and local authority staff in child sexual abuse and safeguarding.

She currently works to change the field of sexual violence by challenging victim blaming, victim stereotyping and the pathologisation of abuse victims.

Jessica is a prolific author. Her blog reaches 1.2 million readers per year and she has been commissioned or invited to write several evidence reviews, articles, research, reports, book chapters and books since 2016.

Jessica experienced sexual and physical violence between the ages of 11 and 18 years old by a number of lone offenders. At 16 she became pregnant but was attacked by the offender and miscarried. Three months later, she became pregnant again and had a baby at 17 years old.

The violence and rapes increased significantly during the pregnancy and after. Five months after giving birth, she escaped the abuser with the baby.

At 18 years old she reported everything to the police and took civil action to gain an injunction. Jessica then arranged to leave the area and moved away.

The course is available on Jessica's website here:

www.victimfocus.com/victimfocus-factsheets

In this resource you will find modules of information and videos to watch as you work through the materials at your own pace.

Briefly, this course will take you through the following topics to support you in exploring how you care for yourself and process your own memories and feelings about being abused, raped, trafficked, exploited or assaulted:

1. **Reactions and responses to being subjected to sexual violence (during and after the abuse)**
2. **Understanding the grooming process that an abuser or offender may have targeted you with**
3. **Exploring forgiveness and anger towards abusers and people who let you down**
4. **Understanding your own trauma responses and their purpose**
5. **Exploring lifelong processing of the trauma, feelings and memories**
6. **Experiencing victim blaming and self-blame**
7. **Having sex and being intimate after sexual violence**
8. **How to define and understand ourselves after sexual violence**

You may want to keep a journal or notebook handy whilst you are reading and watching the videos. There are optional written/mental tasks for you to complete if you would like to explore your own feelings and thoughts further.

Before we get started, there are a few things to consider:

Be patient with yourself and kind to yourself. Try not to binge watch the videos and try not to throw yourself into too much of this at a time. You might want to cover a module per week, for example. This will give you time to process the information and your feelings and thoughts without overwhelming you.

If you find the material triggering or distressing, please talk to someone you trust. If you have no one you can talk to, please email the creator of this resource, Jessica@victimfocus.org.uk. Most of all, if you find that this course is too heavy or is making you feel unsafe, please stop reading and stop watching the videos.

Choosing to learn about sexual trauma and your own responses and thoughts is a big step. Take your time with this and seek help when you need to. There is about 10-20 hours of materials here for you to work through, reflect on and take part in tasks. You might want to grab a notepad, journal or even start a word document to reflect on your answers and thoughts throughout this course.

Module 1: Reactions and responses to being subjected to sexual violence (during and after the abuse)

Introduction to this module

This module will explore the ways in which we respond to sexual violence when it is happening and after it has happened. They include our physical and emotional responses.

Warm up task

General task: List all of the ways you think someone might respond to being sexually assaulted. Include their behaviours, emotions and thoughts.

Personal task: Consider the ways you responded to being sexually assaulted. What were you thinking and feeling? How did you behave or react?

What do we mean by reactions and responses to sexual violence?

When someone is being sexually assaulted, abused, raped or harmed in some way - everyone has different ways of reacting, coping or responding to that trauma in the moment it happens. Everyone also has a different way of responding immediately and in the days, weeks and months afterwards. There really isn't a right or wrong way of responding to being subjected to sexual violence.

Abuse and violence occurs in lots of different contexts and is perpetrated by lots of different people. These factors influence how we respond and how we feel about the abuse or violence. For example, we would probably respond differently if we were being abused by someone we loved and looked up to than how we would respond to being abused by someone we hated but we knew they were capable of hurting or killing us. In those two cases, we will still have some response to the sexual violence, but it might differ based on what would keep us the safest at the time.

Everyone responds to sexual trauma in different ways, which means some people worry about how they responded or reacted in the moment or in the hours and days after the abuse. It is common for people to question their responses and to wonder why they might have responded in a particular way. The most common question people ask is 'Why didn't I stop them?' or 'Why didn't I fight them off?'

Unfortunately, there is a lot of pressure on people subjected to sexual violence to be a 'model victim' who fights off the perpetrator and runs straight to a police station to report the crime. Most of us will never do this - but it doesn't stop us from feeling guilty or ashamed about our many different trauma responses. Research has shown that we tend to measure our trauma responses against myths in society that we are supposed to fight back or shout for help. When we compare our experiences to the myths of the 'real rape' or the 'real victim', we often find ourselves not matching the rhetoric we are told to believe. For some people, this induces feelings of guilt, shame and blame.

How do people respond or react to sexual violence when it is happening to them?

Everyone is different.

However, practitioners and academics tend to talk about five adrenal responses that we have when we are threatened with serious danger. Our brains tend to perceive sexual violence as serious danger. However, some of us will not have a trauma response during rapes and abuse if we have been effectively groomed to believe that the abuser loves us or that we love the abuser. This means that for some of us, we could be raped or abused for long periods of time and not necessarily show any trauma responses until we are much older and have started to process what that person did to us.

For that reason, use the five F's with caution. Not everyone will experience them. Not everyone will have one set trauma response, either. In fact, most of us will be able to recall times when we have responded to different traumas in different ways. It is a myth that we have one particular trauma response which is 'hard-wired' into our brains. We are much more complex than that.

The Five F's of Trauma

1. Fight - This trauma response is where we try to argue, fight, shout, push, kick, punch, swear, bite or any other response to being sexually abused or raped. It is a very rare form of trauma response in interpersonal violence. However, it is still seen by many as the 'first' trauma response - and so we are expected by society to have fought our attackers. Unfortunately, many of us have also been socialised to believe this myth too, which means we can often feel guilty or confused when we cannot explain or understand why we did not fight back.

2. Flight - This trauma response is where we try to avoid, escape, or get away from the abuser or the abuse. We may try to do this in many different ways and does not mean we have to 'run' to have a flight response. Some people have flight responses they cannot act on, such as thoughts and feelings that tell you to 'get out' or 'leave', when you become aware you are in danger. Similar to 'fight', this response to trauma is rare. Most people do not escape a sexual assault or rape.

3. Freeze - This trauma response is the most common. 70% of us will 'freeze' during a rape or sexual assault. A freeze response is one in which we feel as though we cannot move, cannot talk, cannot fight the person off or do anything to protect ourselves. People who freeze often do so to limit further harm from the perpetrator. However, this trauma response often induces feelings of guilt because people feel as though they should have fought back.

4. Friend - This trauma response is where we try to talk or appease the abuser. Lots of us use this approach, especially those of us in long term abusive situations with parents, carers, partners, or ex-partners. It is common for people who have a friend response to trauma to try to bargain with the abuser, to calm them down, to agree to one sex act but to ask not to be hurt, or to agree to something to protect someone else (including kids or family members).

5. Flop - This trauma response is argued to be a reaction to such high levels of cortisol (stress hormone) in the blood that our body shuts down non-essential muscles and body parts to keep us alive. This causes us to sort of 'flop', which some people describe as feeling like going limp, fainting, passing out or feeling like 'a rag doll'.

Whilst this list of trauma responses is helpful - remember that everyone is an individual and we were all abused or harmed in different situations. This means our responses will all have been diverse and purposeful at the time. It also means that you will not have one set trauma response that you always did or always do. Your brain will respond differently based on what is likely to be the safest response at the time. For those of you with multiple perpetrators who harmed you, you might notice that you were more likely to try to talk one of them down, but there might have been one that was so violent and dangerous that you were more likely to freeze until it was over. This is completely normal and very common.

How do people respond or react immediately after sexual violence has happened to them?

Everyone is different.

Some responses to being abused or raped can include anger, fear, shame, sadness, shock, numbness, horror, feeling sick, feeling dirty, self-blame, guilt and confusion. However, if you were abused or raped by someone you believed you were in a relationship with or loved you, you might not have felt any of these emotions or responses.

For some of us, these emotions and responses only happen years later once we realise for the first time that we were abused or raped. Therefore, it is common for people subjected to sexual violence to experience no immediate trauma responses. An example of this is when children are being abused by their parents, in which the child has been groomed to think that what is happening to them is normal, special or exciting. In lots of cases, these children will not display trauma responses for many years - or until they come to realise what is really happening to them. For some people, this can be in adolescence when they become more aware of sex and intimacy - or it can be much later on. This often explains why people wait until adulthood to disclose or report childhood abuse, especially if they did not know they were being abused at the time of the offences.

Why do we feel guilt or shame about our responses to sexual violence?

Many people worry about how they responded after they were raped or abused. It is common for people to question why they did or did not respond in particular ways - and then have feelings of guilt or shame if they feel they did not respond in the way they thought they should.

Common questions about responses to sexual violence include:

- Why didn't I cry?
- Why do I feel like this was my fault?
- Why do I feel nothing at all?
- Why didn't I report it straight away?
- Why did I talk to the offender/remain friends with them after the sexual violence?
- Why do I still love the abuser after what they did?
- Why did I feel pleasure or arousal during the abuse or rape?
- Why am I so confused about whether this was abuse/rape or not?
- Why did I let this happen to me?

Questions like this arise for most of us. This happens because we have been socialised to believe a strong stereotype of victim behaviours when someone is raped or abused. For example, how many films have you seen in which the character is raped or abused and they stand or sit in a shower or bath for hours, scrubbing themselves clean and crying? This is a very common portrayal of how victims respond to sexual violence, despite this not being accurate for most of us. This scene is common to films, soaps and dramas - meaning that millions of people have been led to believe that this is a common and normal behaviour after sexual violence.

Second, we have all been socialised to believe that 'real victims' of crime report the crime to the police immediately and provide forensic or other types of evidence. This is actually rare, with only 13% of the British public reporting their rape or abuse each year. The remaining 87% do not report to the police (BCSEW, 2017).

The guilt and shame comes from comparing our responses to sexual violence to the mythical 'perfect victim' stereotype we have all become familiar with. When we recognise that our responses differ from the narrative we are led to believe, we start to think there is something wrong with us or the way we have responded.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with our responses to sexual violence (unless we condone it and begin to perpetrate it towards others, which is exceptionally rare). However, feelings that arise after sexual violence are individual not only to us, but are also influenced by who the offender is, how old we are, what happened, what context or environment it happened within, whether anyone knew about the abuse, whether we understood what was happening to us, whether we were emotionally groomed and felt like we were in a relationship with the perpetrator or whether we were very scared and were groomed using threats, coercion and violence.

So to answer some of the questions above:

- Self-blame is covered in the modules and video further down this course, but feeling like it was your fault after you are raped or abused is very common. We often search for ways to explain what happened, and because of the way we are socialised, we can quickly conclude that it was something we did wrong.
- Rape and abuse commonly occurs within a relationship with a partner, ex-partner, parents, carers or family members. Therefore, for lots of people, they would have remained in relationships, friendships or communication with their abusers during and long after they abused or raped them. This is not something you have done wrong. Remaining in contact with the abuser, remaining in a relationship or even having sex with them again (even consensually) does not erase what they did and does not make their abuse or rape any less serious. It is very common for those who were abused by someone they loved to continue to love them, miss them and want them even during and after they have seriously harmed them. Even though you may have acknowledged what they did to you, it is completely normal to still love them or miss them. Lots of us stay with abusers in the hope that they will change or treat us better, too.
- Feeling pleasure during the abuse is common, however, it confuses and worries lots of people. Sexual contact causes physical and psychological arousal and this sometimes happens even when you don't consent or don't want the sexual contact. When it comes to child sexual abuse by adults, it does not matter whether the child thought that the abuse felt 'nice' or gave them pleasure - it is 100% the adult's fault for choosing to target and abuse the child. Many adults who were abused in childhood worry about how they responded to the sexual violence when they were children. However, it is vital to remember that the adult knew exactly what they were doing, whereas you were just a child who trusted that adult.

- It is common for people of all ages to question whether what happened to them was 'really' rape or abuse. Unfortunately, this happens because of the myths and stereotypes in society about rape and abuse. We are convinced from an early age that rape is when a strange man attacks a woman in a dark alley at night, using a weapon. This stereotype has existed for centuries, but only started to be challenged in the 1960s. It is safe to say that we haven't made much progress since then, and lots of people still believe that those types of rape are the 'real rapes'. What this means for the rest of us, is that when we are abused or raped, we question whether our experiences really constitute a 'rape' and whether anyone will believe us.

Watch the video below entitled 'Responses and reactions to sexual violence'

https://youtu.be/BFWIOI9BWGg

Reflection task

For this module, you can choose to write or think about any of the following three reflection tasks:

1. Draw a table with three columns. The first column title is 'Responses', the second column title is 'What the world thinks' and the third column title is 'What this response really means'. In the first vertical column, list some common responses to sexual violence. In the second column, consider what society thinks about that response to sexual violence using stereotypes, myths and values. In the third column, look at the response again and consider what the real meaning or purpose of that response is for the victim.

2. Write or think about your own responses to sexual violence and what they mean to you. What purpose do they serve?

3. Think or write about the way the criminal justice system perceives responses to sexual violence and how this changes the outcomes of trials and investigations.

Module 2: Understanding the grooming process that an abuser or offender may have targeted you with

Introduction to this module

This module will explore the ways in which we respond to sexual violence when it is happening and after it has happened. They include our physical and emotional responses.

Warm up task

General task: How would you describe grooming to someone who had never heard of it before?

Personal task: What grooming process do you feel you were subjected to?

What do we mean when we use the term 'grooming'?

Generally, when people talk about grooming, they usually mean the process that an abuser uses to manipulate and control their victim. Grooming is a very diverse process, however. It does not follow stages and there is no 'blueprint' for how abusers groom someone.

For example, some people may have been groomed using romantic tactics like gift-giving, compliments, spending time together, being told they are special, being told they love them, encouraging them to keep secrets and being promised relationships in the future. However, some people may have been groomed using violence coercion, threats, lies, manipulation, gaslighting, mind games and turning everyone against the victim until all that is left is the abuser. Grooming is often a combination of these tactics and can shift and change throughout the abuse.

Sometimes abusers will begin with romantic gestures and mimic a relationship before moving to threats, violence and mind games. Other abusers may prefer completely different tactics, such as exploitation or extortion. They might notice that a person is homeless and struggling for money and offer them somewhere to stay but only if they give them sex.

Grooming can take days, weeks, months or years. Every abuser will have a different way of grooming and manipulating their victims. Most are capable of switching their tactics and control methods, too.

Is grooming a specific behaviour that only offenders and abusers use?

Grooming is not a specific behaviour or skill that only offenders and abusers have. This has been one of the biggest myths that has affected our understanding of grooming. Because we have often seen grooming as specific to sex offenders, we have not noticed that grooming occurs in lots of different contexts and is used by lots of different people.

Grooming is a social behaviour used by everyone. Everyone grooms everyone else. We groom children, we groom our friends and prospective partners. We groom our employees and colleagues. In turn, we are groomed too. We are even groomed by society, fashion, marketing, the government, authorities and media. This is because grooming is simply a behaviour that seeks to influence and manipulate others into doing something, thinking something or feeling something. Sometimes it can be used positively and sometimes it can be used negatively. The video below explains this in much more detail.

For example, consider the grooming process of teaching children how to behave and succeed in school. When we first get to school, we have never experienced such a large group of children our own age, all crammed into one room with one adult in charge. We may have never been away from our parents before. We will have never worn a uniform to match everyone else before. When we arrive, we know nothing of the social etiquette of school. We do not know that we must sit cross legged on the floor. We do not know that we are supposed to be quiet. We do not know that we should line up in pairs to get into the classroom. We do not know that we are supposed to sing in unison in assembly. We do not know that we are supposed to put our hand up before we speak to an adult.

These behaviours are alien to us, and we do not understand them. However, we are groomed to behave and think this way as soon as we enter the school. We are punished if we do not do the things that are asked of us and we are rewarded when we do the things that are asked of us. We might be split up from our friends if we do not do what the adult is asking. We might be told off or made to stand by a wall. We might be ignored or told to be quiet if we speak out of turn. Over a period of time, we are groomed using both punishment and positive reinforcement, until we behave exactly the way they want us to.

When we think about grooming like this, we begin to realise that we have been groomed to perform behaviours most of our lives. In fact, much of the world's systems and institutions rely on grooming. Indeed, all marketing and advertisement relies on grooming us to believe that we need or want the items or services they are selling.

Why didn't I spot the signs of grooming when it was happening to me?

When you look at grooming as the huge, global use of social tactics like in the section above, it should become clearer as to why we don't notice when we are being groomed for abuse. If many of us have been groomed our whole lives by our parents, teachers, colleagues, friends and family - then why would we spot the signs of grooming when someone was doing it to harm us?

Most grooming processes feel the same up until we figure out that the person has bad intentions. It is common for us not to know we are being groomed. Children and adults find it hard to identify a grooming process. We may have been through them many times, but they feel so familiar that we do not easily figure out what is happening to us.

For example, have you ever had a friend who you thought was brilliant and considered them a really close friend until they suddenly started to belittle you, argue with you, lie to you and bully you? Maybe they started to wear you down over time or make you feel bad about yourself? Or maybe when you needed them most they were nowhere to be seen when you had supported them through stuff in their own lives? Often with people like this, we ask ourselves, 'How did I not see it coming?' or 'How did I let them manipulate me like this?'

This is exactly the same as being groomed. We can be misled, manipulated and harmed by people without our knowledge. This is even more pronounced in relationships where we really love or care about the abuser - as we may find it even harder to spot the signs of grooming.

This awareness has led to many people believing that teaching children and adults to 'spot the signs of grooming' will protect them from abuse and rape. However, the error here is believing that people who understand grooming are better at spotting the signs and protecting themselves, which is false. Even when people have masses of knowledge about grooming and abuse, they cannot protect themselves any better from a powerful offender than anyone else. This is why people such as social workers, police officers, psychologists and therapists are still victims of abuse and rape, even though they consider themselves to be more knowledgeable than the people they help. In fact, professionals such as these are just as likely to be groomed as people who have little knowledge of grooming - meaning that education or knowledge is not a protection from abusers and offenders.

The grooming process felt good and I enjoyed some of it, what does that mean?

In short, it just means that the abuser was very skilled at making you feel as if you enjoy the things they were doing. Some abusers are capable of this, and might deliberately give you compliments, gifts, spend time with you, treat you nicely and flatter you in order to get what they want. You might have been to nice places, done exciting things and enjoyed events or time together. This is common and is nothing to be ashamed about. The most important thing to remember is that they were deliberately creating these experiences as part of the grooming process - so there is no shame or blame for you. They hold 100% of the blame for this.

I knew I was being groomed but I couldn't escape or find a way to stop it. Is this my fault?

This is not your fault. Lots of people get to the point where they start to see that they are being groomed, lied to and manipulated. Some even start to realise they are being raped and abused. However, that realisation doesn't always mean that they can leave safely or quickly. For children being abused by parents and carers, there is often no safe way out. For adults being abused by partners or spouses, there are often practical issues that keep them trapped in abuse such as finances, property, children, family pressures, debt, illness or dependency.

Sometimes, when people try to escape an abuser, the abuser escalates their behaviours and the abuse or rapes will get worse. For this reason, lots of people feel that they cannot leave or escape because they are scared of what will happen next. These are real, rational fears.

Being trapped with an abuser is never your fault. They are 100% to blame for making you feel trapped. In some cases, abusers will deliberately make you feel this way and the aim of their grooming is to keep you from leaving.

Watch the video below entitled 'Understanding the grooming process'

https://youtu.be/6hQhHXs8LiU

Reflection task

For this module, you can choose to write or think about any of the following three reflection tasks:

1. Write or think about the way society grooms us to behave, think and feel. You might want to consider authorities, marketing, media, fashion or education.

2. Take some time to reflect on the grooming processes you have been subjected to by different people in your life. What tactics did they use?

3. Write or think about the grooming tactics that were used against you. How did you understand them at the time and how do you understand them now?

Module 3: Exploring forgiveness and anger towards abusers and people who let you down

Introduction to this module

This module explores the concept of forgiveness and the way people subjected to sexual violence will sometimes be expected or encouraged to forgive abusers and people who let them down.

Warm up task

General task: General task: Before reading this section or watching the video, do you think that people subjected to abuse and violence should forgive their abusers?

Personal task: What are your personal beliefs about forgiveness and what role has it played in your own life?

Is our anger towards abusers and rapists healthy or unhealthy?

Whilst commonly framed as unhealthy, anger is a healthy, justified and important emotion. There is no reason why we should be told or asked to dampen our anger or manage our anger towards abusers or rapists.

After what they put us through, it is unfair to ask any of us to deal with our anger or stop feeling angry.

As an emotion, anger tends to be conflated or mixed up with aggression. However, they are different things. Anger is an emotion you feel, aggression is an action you take towards yourself or others. Anger plays an important role for humans. It protects us, it motivates us, it causes us to confront danger or harm, causes activism and it causes change. Anger is often a feeling we experience when we are subjected to oppression, discrimination, injustice and abuse.

However, we have a strange relationship towards anger after abuse. As a society and as professionals, we tend to want people to manage or reduce their anger without actually processing it. We tend to say that people have anger management issues or even tell children that their anger is unhealthy or unacceptable. It is common for people subjected to abuse to be told that if they are angry, they will not be given a service or help. None of these approaches to anger are useful, because they frame the anger as a wild, negative, destructive emotion that people relate to violence. It would be much healthier to support people to express, talk about and work through their anger and what it means to them.

The reason anger seems to be related to forgiveness is that many of us will be encouraged to forgive a rapist or abuser in order to placate our anger. We may be encouraged by our families, partners, religious leaders, counsellors or support network to stop being angry about the abuse, to find forgiveness and to move on.

Would forgiving the abuser or rapist make us feel better?

Processing the abuse and traumas is your own personal journey, so if you find that forgiveness is an important part of you and your understanding of the world then you might find forgiveness to play a role in that processing. However, if you are being pressured to forgive an abuser, or someone is telling you that it will make you feel better - those are some red flags.

Forgiving the person who abused you, or forgiving those around you who didn't protect you, covered up the abuse, blamed or disbelieved you may help some people, but may not help others. The most important question to ask ourselves is what purpose the forgiveness serves. For example, are you thinking of forgiving the abuser because you have reached a place in your own trauma processing where you feel that forgiving them would help you to move forwards? Or are you thinking about forgiving the abuser because people have told you that you need to deal with your anger or sadness?

Why do people expect us to forgive abusers and rapists?

Forgiveness is a spiritual concept, and features in all major world religions and beliefs. It is also cultural and embedded into some social norms. Forgiveness holds a reputation for being honourable, moral and righteous. It is often seen as a mature and sophisticated action in which we choose to forgive the person who has harmed us to clear our own feelings and to help the other person to process what they did wrong. Arguably, this makes sense if the harm that the person did was fairly minor or manageable and is a lot easier to achieve if the harm was accidental or at least, not malicious.

When it comes to forgiving abusers and rapists, often the opposite is true. The harm was malicious, deliberate and very serious. It is rarely a one-off incident and the abuser or rapist rarely apologises and changes. Therefore, there is very little fertile ground for forgiveness to develop and grow.

Forgiveness tends to be expected of people subjected to abuse for several reasons:

1. People assume it will help us to forgive and make us feel better because they have been socialised to believe that the act of forgiveness makes everything better again.
2. Forgiveness is expected by some religions, in which the person should forgive others if they wish to be forgiven for the wrongs they have done in their own lives. In this way, forgiveness is framed as necessary unless you do not want others to forgive you.
3. Some people expect or encourage us to forgive abusers because it makes everyone else feel comfortable to believe that we have dealt with our feelings and moved on, so no one needs to talk about it anymore.
4. Forgiveness is framed as a good quality of a person by some communities and cultures. Being able to forgive is seen as much better than being someone who holds anger, resentment and 'grudges'. Therefore, forgiveness can be an external display of good character rather than what is best for us.

Can we truly process the abuse and trauma without forgiving them for what they did?

Forgiveness is not essential to processing our traumas. It is not a stage we need to aim for or go through before we can move on or feel better. Some people will never forgive the abuser and that is absolutely okay. Some people will remain angry about the abuse for a long time, and that is also okay.

Your well-being, trauma processing and your life journey is not dependent upon whether you forgive the abuser.

Forgiveness is your free choice. You may not ever want to consider forgiveness and that is fine. You may want to explore it and decide that you cannot ever forgive the abuser or the person who let you down and that is also fine. You may decide you want to forgive them for your own personal reasons, and that is fine too. Just make sure that your forgiveness is your own choice and is not being dictated, coerced or guilt-tripped by someone.

Watch the video below entitled, 'Forgiveness and anger'
https://youtu.be/Kt9Zlqvz3-Q

Reflection task

For this module, you can choose any of the following reflection tasks:

1. Write or think about the way society grooms us to behave, think and feel. You might want to consider authorities, marketing, media, fashion or education.
2. Take some time to reflect on the grooming processes you have been subjected to by different people in your life. What tactics did they use?
3. Write or think about the grooming tactics that were used against you. How did you understand them at the time and how do you understand them now

Module 4: Understanding your own trauma responses and their purpose

Introduction to this module

This module will explore the trauma-informed approach to understanding ourselves during and after sexual violence. Rather than seeing ourselves as mentally ill or as abnormal, we can use trauma models and social models to look at our behaviours, thoughts and feelings.

Warm up task

General task: Before reading this module or watching the video, write or think about the following question: Do you think all survivors and victims of abuse have mental health issues or do you think that they are traumatised? Can they be both?

Personal task: Consider your own responses to sexual trauma. What do you think has changed about your behaviour, thoughts and feelings since you were abused or raped?

What does a 'trauma-informed approach' really mean?

A trauma-informed approach to understanding human distress is a way we can explore the trauma responses without medicalising the person.

WInstead of seeing the trauma responses as mental illnesses, disorders and abnormal behaviours, a trauma informed approach sees the trauma responses as normal, rational and purposeful. Therefore, the trauma-informed approach to understanding ourselves opposes the medical model of mental health. Instead, the trauma-informed approach draws on the social model of mental health, which argues that we should look at the context, environment and situations to explore trauma. The trauma-informed approach is anti-blaming and anti-stigma.

It is not 'what is wrong with you?'

It is 'what happened to you? what did someone do to you?'

An example is below:

Medical model description of a person

Processing the abuse and traumas is your own personal journey, so if you find that forgiveness is an important part of you and your understanding of the world then you might find forgiveness to play a role in that processing. However, if you are being pressured to forgive an abuser, or someone is telling you that it will make you feel better - those are some red flags.

Forgiving the person who abused you, or forgiving those around you who didn't protect you, covered up the abuse, blamed or disbelieved you may help some people, but may not help others. The most important question to ask ourselves is what purpose the forgiveness serves. For example, are you thinking of forgiving the abuser because you have reached a place in your own trauma processing where you feel that forgiving them would help you to move forwards? Or are you thinking about forgiving the abuser because people have told you that you need to deal with your anger or sadness?

Trauma-informed description of a person

Barbara was subjected to child sexual abuse. She is still very fearful and is struggling with trauma responses at the moment. She is not ready to talk to us about what happened yet, so instead we have supported her with other things she wanted to talk about. She is scared of new people and is not ready to trust any of us yet, this will take time and needs to be approached at her own pace, when she is ready.

You may be able to see clearly that the medical model diagnoses Barbara with psychiatric disorders, complains about her lack of engagement and self-help. Whereas the trauma-informed model does not seek to medicalise Barbara and instead sees her behaviours as normal and rational.

What is the purpose of a trauma response?

All of our responses to trauma mean something important. They are not just symptoms of distress, they are responses we developed to help us to survive or process the trauma whilst it was happening and after it happened. Trauma responses mean something individual to each person. Two people might have flashbacks but might have them for different reasons and might experience them differently.

The purpose of all of our trauma responses is to warn us of danger and to make sure it does not happen to us again. For example, if after the sexual violence you found that you were left with a host of 'triggers', rather than seeing them as problematic or disordered, think of them as useful. Your brain is being triggered by those smells or sights or sounds or sensations to protect you from further harm. This was absolutely vital for us when we were prey in the wild. We needed to remember which events, animals, natural elements or experiences could kill or harm us. We remembered the feeling, sight, sound, smell of taste of impending danger so we could escape or protect ourselves.

Trauma triggers are doing the same thing. They are reminding us of factors that may protect us in future. For example, you may be left with triggers to people with a particular aftershave on, or cars of a particular colour and make, or the smell of cigarettes, or the taste of wine. These are important ways that our brain is trying to keep us safe.

What is the purpose of a coping mechanism?

Similar to trauma responses, all coping mechanisms have an important purpose. Coping mechanisms can be anything at all. Some of us might drink, take drugs, overeat, restrict food intake, self-harm, work too much, punish ourselves, overachieve, become perfectionists or even change something about ourselves to cope.

Some research (Morrow and Smith, 1995; Eaton and Paterson-Young, 2018) suggests that all of our coping mechanisms really come down to two purposes:

1. **To keep ourselves from being overwhelmed with feelings and memories we cannot cope with**
2. **To reduce our feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness and lack of control**

This research is very important, because rather than perceiving our coping mechanisms to be mental illnesses or disorders, the research asks 'What is the purpose of this coping mechanism? What is it doing for this person?'

If a child who is trapped in abuse suddenly stops eating, we need to explore whether it is a coping mechanism or whether it is a way for the child to take back control of something in their life. Similarly, if an adult starts to drink to cope with the memories of the abuse, we have to explore whether the drinking and disinhibition or relaxation is reducing the feeling of being overwhelmed.

Perceiving and processing our thoughts, feelings and behaviours as either trauma responses or coping mechanisms for the trauma is a key part of adopting a trauma-informed approach to understanding ourselves. Coping mechanisms mean something. They perform a protective role for us, either physically or psychologically. Coping mechanisms are not because we are crazy, disordered or abnormal - they always serve an important purpose.

Often, coping mechanisms develop during the abuse or sexual traumas and can continue for many months or years after you escape abuse. For example, if you were abused for a long time by an unpredictable, aggressive person, one of your coping mechanisms may have been to become compliant, quiet and submissive. This may have worked many times to protect you from further violence or abuse, and then may become one of your coping mechanisms going forward. You may notice that you revert to this behaviour when people are being argumentative, confrontational or are becoming aggressive or loud around you.

Therefore, exploring where our coping mechanisms come from and when we first started using them can give us important insight into our thoughts, feelings and behaviours now.

Are trauma responses a form of mental health issue?

The trauma-informed approach would argue that trauma responses are not a mental health issue. Instead, we choose to see trauma responses and coping mechanisms as healthy, normal, rational, expected and justified.

For example:

It is **HEALTHY** to be fearful and scared of abuse and memories of the abuse.
It is **NORMAL** to be traumatised by sexual violence.
It is **RATIONAL** to fear it happening to you again and to change your behaviours to protect yourself.
It is **EXPECTED** that you will have trauma responses after sexual and domestic violence.
Your responses to trauma.

Your coping mechanisms are JUSTIFIED because what you have lived through was traumatic.

With this approach, trauma-informed theorists and practitioners do not perceive victims of abuse to be mentally ill, disordered or abnormal. They campaign against the medicalisation and pathologisation of adults and children who have been abused. Instead, they argue for trauma therapies, long term support and humanistic, holistic ways of supporting people without classifying them with mental illnesses they do not have.

This is still a very controversial way of working. The world is dominated by medical models of mental health in which professionals and the public are regularly told that mental health issues are due to brain chemistry, neuropsychology and imbalances. People are encouraged to go to medical professionals and seek medication for their traumas, with many people placed on waiting lists for support for months or years.

However, there are now many more psychologists, therapists, social workers and counsellors who are beginning to understand the trauma-informed approach and now campaign to stop the oppression and medicalisation of traumatised people. VictimFocus (my organisation) is committed to a trauma-informed way of working which focuses on the human, and not on the labels.

How do I figure out what my trauma responses and coping mechanisms mean?

There are a few key questions you can ask yourself or write down. These questions will help you to explore what you trauma responses and coping mechanisms mean. Give yourself some time and be patient with yourself as you explore these questions and try not to complete them all in one go.

Trauma responses

1. What did I think, feel and do when the abuse was happening to me?
2. What made me do/think/feel those things?
3. Were my trauma responses useful for protecting myself or others? If not, what else could they have meant?
4. After the abuse or assault, what were my physical and emotional responses?
5. What made me do/think/feel those things?
6. How long did my trauma responses last?
7. How did those trauma responses make me feel at the time? Looking back on them now, what do you think they meant

Coping mechanisms

1. When the abuse was happening to me, what did I do to cope with the stress/worry/fear/guilt/shame/blame?
2. Did I have lots of different coping mechanisms or did I have one or two main mechanisms?
3. Which of my coping mechanisms made me feel better? Did any make me feel worse?
4. When did I first start using this coping mechanism? Was it during the abuse or was it before? Was it when I was a child?
5. How did my coping mechanism help me at the time?
6. How does my coping mechanism still help me now?
7. What is this coping mechanism protecting me from? Thoughts? Fears? Feelings?
8. When do I use this coping mechanism the most? Is there anything or anyone that triggers it?
9. Are there any circumstances where I don't feel I need this coping mechanism? Is there someone or somewhere that makes me feel totally safe?
10. How effective do I think my coping mechanisms are? Are they still working for me?

Using these questions in your own time, whether in your diary or in your head - may help you to explore the meaning and purpose of your trauma responses and coping mechanisms. They may help you to think differently about coping mechanisms such as panic attacks, triggers, thoughts and feelings. I talk about this in my video below.

Watch the video below entitled, 'Understanding your own trauma responses'

https://youtu.be/yRhicbMjDMQ

Reflection task

For this module, you can choose any of the three reflection tasks listed below:

1. Draw a spider diagram of all of the emotional, physical and behavioural responses you had to the sexual trauma. On the next page, draw another spider diagram of all of your past and current coping mechanisms for the sexual trauma. Consider if any of them are linked or have any commonalities.

2. Think about the trauma-informed approach versus the medical model approach to understanding victims and survivors of abuse. What is the difference between seeing victims and survivors of abuse as 'mentally ill' and seeing them as people who are traumatised by what was done to them.

3. Write a reflection on this module. What have you learned about yourself and your own trauma responses and coping mechanisms?

Module 5: Exploring lifelong processing of the trauma, feelings and memories

Introduction to this module

This module will explore the concept of 'lifelong trauma processing'. Rather than thinking of ourselves as traumatised for life, this module and video talks about the prospect of processing and reprocessing the sexual trauma at key life events as we age.

Warm up task

General task: Before you read this module or watch the video, consider the question: What kinds of life events might cause us to process and rethink what happened to us?

Personal task: Do you recognise any times in your life where you have reprocessed and thought about the sexual trauma again? What was happening at the time? How did you feel?

What do we mean when we say that trauma processing is 'lifelong'?

Trauma processing is not something we can achieve in 6 sessions, 12 weeks or a 24-week programme. No matter what someone sells to us as the 'fix', we will process these memories and experiences for the rest of our lives. This is not because they are traumatic, but because we do this with all of our memories and experiences. We don't just process them and forget about them forever. All of our memories, experiences and feelings make up who we are today. They change our perspectives and our world view. They change our values and our priorities.

For example, think back to when you had an argument with a close friend or family member. Think about how you perceived it at the time. Then think about how you perceived it weeks later. Did you feel the same, or did you process it differently? Now think about how you perceive that argument in the present day. Do you still remember it in the same way? Do you feel any different? Do you feel better or worse about it?

Everything we experience is processed and reprocessed many times in our lives. It is the same for our trauma memories. This does not mean we will feel traumatised for our whole lives, but our experiences and memories may well come back up for us several times as we age and go through different life stages and events.

Why would life events trigger me to think about the sexual trauma again?

Life events of all different kinds can trigger us to think about the sexual trauma. This is completely normal and rational. Before I talk about why this might happen, I have supplied a list of life events that commonly trigger us to reprocess or think about sexual traumas and abuse we were subjected to:

- **When we have sexual experiences with others**
- **When we start new relationships**
- **When we become pregnant or have children**
- **When we need medical treatment, operations or medical examinations**
- **When our children begin to get to the ages we were at when we were abused**
- **When we meet people who trigger us or remind us of the abuser(s)**
- **When we go to family gatherings and occasions where the abuser or their family will also attend**
- **When we have to trust others to take care of us or our children**
- **When the abuser becomes ill or dies**
- **When our parents or carers become ill or die**
- **If we find out that the abuser had other victims**
- **If the abuser goes on to have children or grandchildren themselves**
- **If the abuser is arrested or tried for other crimes**

This is not an exhaustive list, but it is very common for events such as these to trigger us to think about sexual trauma. It may be that the feelings of the life event make us feel the same way we felt during the abuse. However, it could also be that the life event forces us to think about the sexual trauma differently.

For example, it is common and normal to reprocess childhood trauma when you have your own children. It is also normal to become upset around the time your children reach the ages you were when you were abused. This is likely because you start to see how small, innocent and powerless you were as a child, for the first time. Many people subjected to sexual violence will experience this realisation. This may cause us to feel very protective of our children and we may become hypervigilant. However, it may also bring up feelings of anger and injustice for our child-selves. These feelings are completely normal, but you might want to talk to someone you trust or seek some support around these times if they become distressing.

Is it unhealthy to keep thinking about the trauma after many years or decades?

People subjected to sexual violence can often be given messages that they should stop thinking about the sexual trauma after a set amount of time. Maybe people have told us that a year is enough, ten years is enough or thirty years is enough. The reality is, everyone is individual and it is likely that we will keep processing our traumas throughout our lives. We will think about them sometimes, and other times we will not. We may spend some time reprocessing traumas if we have been recently triggered by something or someone.

There is no set time limit on trauma. There is no shame or guilt in thinking about or needing to talk about what happened no matter when it happened or how long ago it was. People who ring rape and sexual violence helplines are typically anywhere between 10 years old and 90 years old. Many volunteers and staff members working on those helplines have talked to people decades after the abuse took place. This is completely normal.

Watch the video below, entitled 'Lifelong trauma processing'

https://youtu.be/LMAAwr5A6nI

Reflection task

For this module, you can choose any of the three reflection tasks listed below:

1. Consider how far along your own life journey you are. Are there any life events that have triggered you? Are there any events or experiences in the future that you think might trigger you to reprocess or think about the sexual trauma?

2. Write or think about the following question: How do you feel about the prospect of 'lifelong trauma processing' but not being 'traumatised' for life?

3. Write or think about the life event that made you reprocess or think about your own experiences of sexual trauma.

Module 6: Experiencing victim blaming and self-blame

Introduction to this module

This module will explore the reasons for victim blaming and self-blame of people subjected to sexual violence. This module ends with some common questions and a video to watch.

Warm up task

General task: Consider the reasons why victim blaming is so common. What makes so many people blame victims of sexual violence? Write or think about three reasons they may do this.

Personal task: Write or think about your own experiences of victim blaming or self-blame. Did you always blame yourself for sexual violence, or did this only happen once someone else blamed you?

What is victim blaming?

Simply put, victim blaming is the transference of blame for an act of sexual violence away from the perpetrator of the violence and back towards the victim of the violence. In sexual violence, victim blaming includes the blaming of the victim's character, behaviour, appearance, decisions or situation for being subjected to sexual violence, rather than the attribution of blame towards the offender who committed the act.

Victim blaming is generally split into behavioural, characterological and situational blame; however, they often overlap.

Behavioural victim blaming blames the behaviour of the victim as the reason for the sexual violence perpetrated against them, whereas characterological blaming blames their character or personality for the sexual violence perpetrated against them.

Situational blaming places the blame on the situation the adult or child was in, rather than blaming the perpetrator for choosing to commit violence.

Therefore, all victim blaming minimises or erases the actions and choices of the offender from their own offence.

Messages of victim blaming have been found in the mass media, law, education, religion and cultural norms (please see Eaton (2019), for comprehensive review).

Why do people blame victims of sexual violence and abuse?

Theories of victim blaming are varied and all try to suggest what motivates us to blame the victim. Generally, theories of victim blaming include the following:

Belief in a Just World

We victim blame because we have a strongly embedded bias that causes us to want to believe that the world is a just and fair place in which only bad things happen to bad people who deserve it. When a bad thing happens to someone, we attack their character or their behaviour to reframe them as a 'bad person' who made 'bad choices' so we can feel better about ourselves. We convince ourselves that we are good people who do not deserve bad things to happen to us, and we would not make the same 'bad choices'.

Attribution bias

We victim blame because we fail to attribute causation to negative events properly due to a cognitive bias. The attribution bias argues that we tend to blame internal issues for what happens to others and external issues for what happens to us. However, if this was true, this would mean we never self-blame.

Defensive attribution hypothesis

We victim blame when we perceive the victim to be very different from us (age, ethnicity, country, sexuality, culture). This theory argues that the more similar we are to the victim, the more empathy we have for them and the less we will blame them.

Rape myth acceptance

We victim blame because we believe myths and stereotypes about rape and sexual assaults. These myths mean we are more likely to believe women lie about rape or that there is a set of criteria that make up a 'real rape'. When the rape or abuse falls outside of these myths, we are more likely to blame victims of abuse and rape.

Sexism and misogyny

We victim blame because of a prejudice against women and girls. We blame the woman or girl for things that are inherently female or feminine. E.g. She was wearing a skirt, she was wearing too much make-up, she was too flirty, she led him on, she is promiscuous.

Perceived control and counterfactual thinking

We victim blame and self-blame because it makes us feel more in control of our safety and the world. We reason backwards to consider if our actions or decisions caused the rape or abuse. E.g. 'If I never went to my sisters, none of this would have happened!'

Does society encourage victim blaming?

The short answer to this question, is yes. Research (my own research and that of many others) has shown that there are many parts of society that encourage or maintain victim blaming in sexual violence and domestic violence.

Below is a list of institutions, factors and influencers that encourage or maintain victim blaming based on over 40 years of research:

- **Criminal justice systems (from policing to lawmakers)**
- **Newspapers and online news sources**
- **Pornography**
- **Advertising**
- **Soaps and dramas**
- **Reality TV shows**
- **Education systems including schools and universities**
- **Social care services**
- **Health services including mental health services**
- **Sexism and misogyny**
- **Racism**
- **Homophobia**
- **Religions and faiths**
- **Cultural norms**
- **Families, friends and support networks**

Victim blaming exists, is encouraged or maintained by every factor on this list. This makes victim blaming very common. Studies from the 1960s found that around 50% of the public believed that women brought rape upon themselves or lied about being raped to get revenge on men. In 2005, Amnesty International found that a third of the public believed rape myths and victim blaming about people subjected to sexual violence. In 2011, McMahon and Farmer found that 50% of American university students believed that women 'ask' to be raped by the way they act or dress. In 2017 in the UK, the Fawcett Society found that 34% of women and 36% of men believed that women are partially or totally to blame for being raped.

In my own research between 2017-2019, I found that victim blaming was very common in men and women in the UK. Depending on the type of sexual violence, my studies showed that anywhere between 5%-68% of the British public blamed women for being subjected to sexual assaults, abuse, exploitation, rape and harassment.

When victim blaming is supported by so many different factors and institutions in society, these results are not surprising. However, this does mean that many people subjected to sexual violence will also be subjected to victim blaming.

What is self-blame?

'Self-blame' is defined as a cognitive process of attribution that tends to be defined based on two categories: behavioural self-blame and characterological self-blame.

'Behavioural self-blame' is the attribution of undeserved blame to self, based on behaviour or action. This type of self-blame leads to people considering how different behaviours or actions could have protected them or stopped the event from happening.

'Characterological self-blame' is the attribution of undeserved blame to self, based on internal character or personality. This type of self-blame leads to people believing that there is something internally or personally wrong with them that caused the event to happen.

Self-blame is also not unique to sexual violence, but studies have found that when people experience victim blaming or negative reactions when they disclose sexual violence, they are more likely to blame themselves. Further, existing research suggests that people subjected to sexual violence use the messages they receive from society and support networks to measure whether they think someone will blame them for sexual violence and to assess whether the rape, sexual assault or abuse was their fault.

Why do people blame themselves for sexual violence committed against them?

With so many messages about victim blaming in society that we all receive from such a young age, it is no wonder that so many of us blame ourselves for sexual violence. Research shows that even children measure themselves against rape myths and victim blaming to decide whether they should report or disclose the abuse or rape. Recent research from 2019 showed that even young children believed rape myths and believed victim blaming messages.

However, there are lots of reasons why we might blame ourselves for sexual violence committed against us. I have provided some common examples for why people blame themselves for sexual violence below:

- **To gain control again over the sexual violence and over our own feelings of safety. If we can blame ourselves, we can convince ourselves that we are in control and we can protect ourselves from the violence in the future.**
- **To punish ourselves for 'allowing it to happen' to us**
- **To ''explain' why it keeps happening to us**
- **Abusers repeatedly told us that it was our fault or we had brought it upon ourselves**
- **We felt love, lust or pleasure towards or with the abusers**

- **We feel we should have fought back more or done something differently to protect ourselves or protect others**
- **We were blamed by people who we believed and trusted (parents, carers, partners, authorities)**
- **We feel like we did something to deserve being raped or abused**

People have many reasons for why they blame themselves. However, for others, they do not know why they blame themselves. Women I have interviewed told me that they logically knew they were not really to blame, but they still felt to blame. This is something I have written a lot about, because it suggests that self-blame does not sit at a logically, knowledge level - but at an emotional, deeper level.

How do I stop blaming myself for what was done to me?

This might be something we ask ourselves for many years. However, one of the best gifts we can give ourselves after sexual trauma is to stop blaming ourselves for what someone else chose to do to us. If you are ready to process your own self-blame, you may wish to seek some counselling or support from a trusted friend to talk it through. If you would like to do this alone to begin with, you can use some of the tips below.

1. **Start by exploring all of the ways you blame yourself** - write them down, draw them or think about them. Notice if there are any patterns. Notice if there are some things you blame yourself for more than others.
2. **Next, explore all of the things during and after the sexual violence that you do not blame yourself for.** What do you blame the perpetrator for? What do you blame parents and carers for? Are there any parts of the sexual violence that you feel were not your fault, at all?
3. **Think about each of the ways you blame yourself** - when did this start? How did you start blaming yourself?
4. **If your self-blame came from the victim blaming of others** - consider why they chose to blame you and why they might hold beliefs like that.
5. **If your self-blame was not caused by the victim blaming of others** - consider why you might have started to blame yourself.
6. **Consider what purpose your self-blame serves.** How does blaming yourself help you? How does it harm you?
7. **Once you have worked through all of this, the final step is to start moving the blame back to where it belongs. Solely, 100%, with the perpetrator(s).**

Thinking about and working through your own thoughts of self-blame can take time and can be hard. Be kind to yourself and if you need support or someone to talk to, please do reach out to someone you trust who can help you to talk about self-blame.

Watch the video below, entitled, 'Victim blaming and self-blame'.
https://youtu.be/RAOAe9gX7ck

Reflection task

For this module, you can choose any of the three reflection tasks below:

1. Write or think about the way this module has changed the way you think about victim blaming or self-blame
2. Write or think about the following question: What do you think would happen if society decided to blame perpetrators of sexual violence for what they do?
3. Write a letter to an earlier/younger version of yourself. In your letter, tell them all the reasons that they are not to blame for the abuse or assaults.

Module 7: Having sex and being intimate after sexual violence

Introduction to this module

This module explores our feelings about having sex and being intimate after we have been subjected to sexual violence and abuse.

Warm up task

General task: How do you think being sexually abused or assaulted might impact someone's sex life?

Personal task: Write or think about your feelings towards sex and sexual contact. Do you enjoy it? Are there any parts of sex or intimacy you do not enjoy?

Why should we talk about having sex after we have been through abuse and sexual traumas?

When we have been subjected to sexual traumas and we disclose or seek help, lots of our conversations become about the rapes, abuse and assaults. Professionals talk to us about the sexual violence. Police talk to us about sexual violence. We think about the sexual violence. We can easily become engulfed by harmful and traumatic memories, conversations and images of sex. However, lots of us will go on to have healthy and happy sex lives. For this reason, it is important to have space to think and talk about having sex after sexual violence.

Secondly, it is completely normal and very common for our sex lives to be harmed by sexual violence and abuse we have been subjected to. Everyone is different in the way they cope with sex after sexual violence, but what is known is that most of us have never spoken to anyone about our sex lives after we were raped or abused. For this reason again, it is important to have information about having sex or being intimate after we have been abused by someone.

Can some people have good sex after they were raped or abused?

Absolutely. My research with 756 men and women subjected to sexual violence found that just over half of the sample said that they were able to have enjoyable, pleasurable sex with partners since they were raped and abused. However, this did mean that around half of those people were struggling to have good, enjoyable sex, too.

The key issue here seemed to be partners. People who were able to have good sex after rape and abuse had found partners who were respectful, who listened to them and who honoured their boundaries. This meant often asking them if they were okay, whether they consented and whether they were enjoying the sex. People who had partners who listened and cared about their experiences of sexual violence were having better sex too, especially where the person was able to tell their partner their triggers or boundaries.

Do other people get triggered or have flashbacks when they are having sex or being intimate?

Yes, this is very common. My research found that out of 756 people, 76% of them were having flashbacks or were being triggered during sex or sexual contact with partners. Over three quarters of people were experiencing these triggers and flashbacks.

This is normal, but most people reported them as being very distressing. Some triggers are easier than others to figure out. Some people knew what their triggers were during sex or sexual contact and avoided them at all costs (the smell of cigarettes, for example). However, others took years to learn their triggers or were still having flashbacks and triggers that they didn't understand or couldn't control.

How are people coping with having sex or being intimate?

Everyone was very different. Having sex meant different things to different people, and so their ways of coping differed too. Below are some of the most common responses to the research and how people explained they were coping with sex or being intimate:

- **'I don't have sex at all. I avoid it. I haven't been in a relationship since.'**
- **'I get into relationships but I don't have sexual relationships.'**
- **'I get really drunk or high before I have sex.'**
- **'I just grit my teeth and get on with it.'**
- **'I cut myself after sex.'**
- **'I only allow my partner to do certain things.'**
- **'I told my partner what my triggers were and what I didn't want them to do and they listened to me. Now I am having the best sex in my life.'**
- **'When I need to stop, my partner just stops and gives me a massive hug.'**
- **'I don't know how to cope with it, I don't know what to do.'**

As you can see from this list of real responses to the research, everyone was very different. However, there were some answers that were cause for concern. The answers about getting really drunk, high, cutting themselves or gritting their teeth and getting on with it meant that none of those people were truly consenting to sex. We only consent to sex when we have full information, capacity and freedom to make a choice - and most importantly - when we really want to have sex.

For lots of these people, they were having sex because they felt obliged to do so, or felt they should. They were not enjoying it and were using lots of tactics to cope with sex they didn't really want to have. This is traumatic, too.

There were people who wrote that they were abstaining from sex or had made decisions not to get into any more personal relationships. This is completely normal and very common. There is no rule which states that we must be in relationships with people, or have sex with people. Many people live long, happy lives whilst choosing not to have sex or intimate relationships. If sex is traumatic for us, or being in a relationship makes us feel worse, we do not have to put ourselves through either sex or relationships if we do not want them.

I think the abuse or rape changed my sexual preferences or sexuality - is this normal?

Lots of people in the research study wrote about the way the sexual violence had changed their sexualities, identities or sexual preferences. There is currently not a lot of research about this other than this one large study. However, it was a common answer in this large study. Men and women wrote about how they felt the abuse changed who they were attracted to, what types of sex they enjoy and how the abuse changed their own understanding of their identity.

From a trauma-informed perspective, it is rational and normal for the sexual abuse we have endured to change the way we feel about sex, our sexuality and the type of sex we enjoy or prefer. For example, there were people in the study who avoided sex with people who were the same sex as their abuser. There were also people in the study who wondered if the abuse influenced their attraction to a particular sex. Further, there were people in the data who were questioning their sexuality but were too scared to meet people of the same sex in case it triggered them. Whilst everyone was very different, sexuality and sexual preferences came up a lot in the data, with over 89% of the sample talking about this in their answers.

I have noticed that I prefer violent, rough and degrading sex that is like the abuse or rape. Is this common?

This is common. However, how you feel about this is important. Lots of people in the research study wrote about this issue and most of them were confused about what it meant. Some people wrote about the way they had become accustomed to violent, degrading or rough sex since being abused or trafficked.

However, they did not say they enjoyed it, just that they were used to it, or had normalised it.

A lot of people talked about the way they had been abused, used and exploited for so long during abuse, exploitation or trafficking that they were used to being harmed and hurt during sex. They questioned whether they enjoyed it or whether they had learned to cope with it over the years.

However, some people wrote in the study that they enjoyed sex acts that replicated their abuse or things that abusers had done to them in the past. This is a complex phenomenon and there is little research about why this might happen or why some of us might feel like this.

Should I tell my partner that I have been raped or abused?

This is absolutely your choice. If you are with a partner who has been respectful, open and non-judgemental about other personal matters and you feel you would like to talk to them about this, it is your choice to do so. Many people in the study found that when they had a loving and respectful partner, telling them that they had been raped or abused really helped their sex lives. However, some people in the study told partners and their partners did not support or respect them, which led to sex and relationships that were abusive and harmful.

However your partner reacts, it is not your fault and it is not your responsibility. If they do love you and respect you, they will listen, learn and respect your boundaries, wants and needs. If you do tell them about the sexual violence and they are not supportive, they do not believe you, they blame you or they ignore your boundaries - this is a red flag for an abuser and if you can, you need to do all you can to protect yourself and seek support to leave them.

Bear in mind that lots of partners don't really know what to say or how to support their partners when they disclose rape or abuse. If you have told a partner who loves you and respects you but they do not know what to say or how to support you, it might be worth seeking support together. This is different from a partner who is uncaring or does not respect your boundaries.

Watch the video below entitled, 'Having sex and being intimate after abuse'

https://youtu.be/ppzF8AsCwI8

Reflection task

For this module, you can choose any of the three reflection tasks below:

1. Think or write about your own sex life: How has sexual trauma influenced your sex life, sexual preferences or feelings about sex?

2. Imagine your partner has told you that they were abused in childhood, how would you respond to make sure they felt safe and happy whilst being intimate with you?

3. Write or think about the intimate contact you enjoy and the intimate contact you do not enjoy. Are there any things you would like to stop doing? Are there any things you would like to try more of?

Module 8: How to define and understand ourselves after sexual violence

Introduction to this module

This final module will finish with a discussion about how we define and talk about ourselves after sexual violence. Are we victims? Survivors? Both? None?

Warm up task

General task: Before reading any of the materials or watching the video, what do you think about the term 'victim' and the term 'survivor'?

Personal task: How do you prefer to be described? As a victim? A survivor? Or maybe something else?

Which is the right term, 'victim' or 'survivor'?

There is considerable debate around the way that women and men are described following sexual assault (see Williams & Serna (2017), for a discussion).

Some have argued that the 'victim' label is disempowering and focuses on the negative experience and consequences; that it sounds static and does not aid recovery or well-being for the person. Many have proposed that changing the language to 'rape survivor' empowers the person, is more future-focused and elicits less blame responses than 'victim'.

However, some theorists and writers take a less dichotomous view. Instead of supporting 'victim' or 'survivor', some researchers found that women felt that their realities were more complicated than the two labels. Some people felt they were a 'victim', some people felt they were a 'survivor', some people felt they were both at the same time and some hated both labels.

Why is how we define ourselves after sexual violence important?

After sexual violence, and after many months and years thinking of ourselves as a 'victim' or a 'survivor', we have to be careful that we do not define ourselves just by the sexual violence we were subjected to by others. We are many other things to many other people. We have many other qualities and roles in life. We are therefore not just a victim or a survivor of someone else's violence.

Whilst being subjected to sexual violence does change us, and does have an impact on us - it does not stop us from being who we are. We are whole people with interests, skills, views, thoughts, feelings, knowledge, responsibilities, education, roles, lives, rights, qualities, values - and futures. When professionals define us as victims or survivors, they are only seeing us through the lens of what happened to us, rather than all of the other incredible things we are and what we are capable of.

If I feel comfortable calling myself a 'victim' or 'survivor', is that still okay?

Absolutely! This is your choice and it is important that you feel comfortable with however you choose to define yourself.

What is strengths-based practice?

Strengths-based practice or strengths-based approaches work by seeing us for our strengths, talents and qualities instead of seeing us as victims, or seeing our problems and troubles. A strength-based approach does not define us by the abuse we were subjected to, but sees us as a whole person who has great skill, strength, talents, knowledge, wisdom and a bright future ahead of us all.

What does this have to do with strengths-based practice?

Defining ourselves, or being defined by the sexual violence we were subjected to is not strengths-based practice. It is deficit-based practice. This is because we are being framed and talked about as if our only quality is being a victim or survivor of abuse and violence. A strengths-based approach would see us as individual people who, yes, were subjected to sexual violence, but that doesn't make us who we are. The abuser did not make us. The abuse does not define us. I talk about this more in the video below.

VictimFocus encourages all professionals to move to strength-based approaches so they do not define or talk about people subjected to sexual violence as 'victims' or 'survivors' but as whole people with other great features, strengths and ideas.

We are not what someone else did to us.

Watch the video below, entitled 'Defining ourselves after sexual violence and abuse'

https://youtu.be/SVuQm0wYNi8

Reflection task

For this module, you can choose any of the three reflection tasks below:

1. Write or think about your own personal opinions of the terms 'survivor' and 'victim'. Have you ever used them to define yourself? How do you feel about them?

2. Consider this question: When we call ourselves a 'survivor' or 'victim', are we defining ourselves by what someone else did to us?

3. Write or think about the positive reasons why someone may choose to call themselves a 'victim' or a 'survivor'.

Final Thoughts

Hey!

Well done to you for working through this free course. The aim of the course was to learn about caring for ourselves after sexual violence. One of the best ways to do this is to learn as much as we can about ourselves, our own responses and our own feelings. This course was designed to help you to do this, whilst also learning about research, theory and evidence.

I hope you found the course interesting and enlightening. Well done to you if you managed to do some of the thinking or writing tasks and the reflective tasks. I wanted to build something that was flexible so that you could choose how deep you went with your own reflections depending on how you were feeling. You are always welcome to bookmark this page and come back to it whenever you need it.

If you know someone who might benefit from this course, please do share this page with people.

Thank you so much for taking some time out to learn more about yourself after sexual violence.

Take care and remember that you are capable of incredible things x

Useful Contacts

- Rape Crisis: 0808 802 9999 12 noon - 2.30pm and 7 - 9.30pm every day of the year
- Women's Aid: 0808 2000 247 24/7 phone line
- NSPCC Helpline: 0808 800 5000 24/7 every day, all year
- Victim Support Supportline: 0808 168 9111
- The Survivors Trust Helpline: 0808 801 0818
- Men's Advice Line: 0808 801 0327
- ManKind: 01823 334244
- GALOP: 0800 999 5428
- Mind Helpline: 0300 304 7000 (4:30-10:30pm each day)

For more free resources go to www.victimfocus.com/victim-focus-factsheets

To visit the website click the button below

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