

# INFORMATION BOOKLET



KERRY RAPE &  
SEXUAL ABUSE CENTRE

## HEALING PROCESS

### FOR VICTIMS OF RAPE & SEXUAL ASSUALT

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The National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence  
An Oifig Náisiúnta um Fhoréigean Baile, Gnéasach agus Inscrébhunaithe a Chosc



## **WHAT IS COUNSELLING?**

Counselling can be described as a process which provides help, support and an understanding listener. Counselling helps clients to gain clearer insight into themselves and their situation so that they are better able to draw on their own resources to help themselves, by creating a place of acceptance.

The main focus of the counselling provided by the Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre is non-directive - this means that the counsellor will not offer advice on what you should do. Often people come to counselling wanting someone to take control of the situation but in reality you as the client, already have the answers, you might just need to talk it through in an environment where you feel accepted and respected.

## **COUNSELLING AND CONFIDENTIALITY.**

Everything that is said between the client and the counsellor is treated in total confidence. Confidentiality will only be limited in exceptional circumstances, i.e. confidentiality will be limited if there is a concern regarding the sexual abuse of a minor (under 18 years). If confidentiality is to be limited it will be talked through with the client in advance.

## • KERRY RAPE & SEXUAL ABUSE CENTRE •

The Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre was established in 1992 to provide a free and confidential counselling and support service to victims of rape and sexual abuse. Centre staff chose to change the name to the Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre in February 2000. We feel this reflects more accurately the nature of our work in the centre.

We believe that survivors of sexual violence and abuse have the right to be treated with respect and sensitivity.

We aim to provide a place of help and healing for survivors of rape and sexual abuse by offering care and support in a confidential environment.

### **We offer;**

- One to one counselling
- Telephone counselling
- Support with medical and legal procedures
- Court accompaniment
- A 24 hr emergency service and on-call service to the Sexual Assault Treatment Unit at Kerry General Hospital
- Education and Research Programmes and Information

### **SUPPLEMENTARY SERVICES**

We also offer support to family and friends and partners.

We deliver the SAYIT programme (Safety Awareness Youth Information Training) to schools and interested groups in Kerry.

### **OUTREACH SERVICES**

Our main centre is Tralee but our outreach endeavours to meet the needs of victims and their families throughout the county by having offices available that meet our criterion for privacy and confidentiality in Killarney, Dingle and Listowel.

*You are not alone,  
many others have similar experiences.  
Although it is often difficult to talk,  
we promise to listen.*

## THE HEALING PROCESS

Survivors progress through stages of healing in different ways, which makes recovery unique for each individual. However, there are some reactions to trauma, and sexual assault in particular, that are common and normal in the circumstances. We hope this booklet can help you to better understand what you may be experiencing.

In the initial aftermath feelings may include confusion, anger, guilt, shame, embarrassment, depression, loss of control, numbness or shock. You may have difficulty concentrating. Your thoughts may race. You may find yourself reviewing and re-living what occurred, or asking unending questions such as "why me?" Sleep disturbances, nightmares, and flashbacks of the assault are also common.

You may or may not experience physical symptoms. If you do experience physical symptoms they can include soreness, muscle tension, headaches, fatigue and gynaecological problems. It may seem like your whole life has been disrupted and is focused on the assault, especially if you are interacting with the legal system during the initial stages of the investigation. Although these are normal reactions to trauma, they can be very distressing. Be gentle and patient with yourself, and do whatever you need to at this time to reclaim your life and feel safer.

After a few days or weeks, you may appear as if everything is fine. You may not want to talk about what happened and want to "just forget" that it happened. This can serve a useful purpose for a while. It can be a coping mechanism, allowing you to function in your life. Unfortunately, the reality is that we don't usually really "forget". The discomfort may appear to be gone but can re-emerge in unusual ways.

Alternatively, you may feel preoccupied with thoughts about the assault. Focusing on self-care will promote recovery.

Other problems may appear that seem to be unrelated to the assault such as alcohol/drug problems, relationship problems, or depression. Disruption of normal sleeping patterns and nightmares are common. Physical concerns can develop such as digestive problems, headaches, and/or fatigue.

You may notice that you experience unusual thoughts, feelings and/or behaviours; and that you may not be acting "like yourself". Some of these experiences may include:

- Loss of Trust
- Increased alcohol and/or drug use;
- Keeping to yourself, isolating from friends and loved ones;
- Increased fears (of leaving your home or being at home alone, or of people, or of certain places);
- Avoiding work or over-working;
- Increased irritability;
- Engaging in risky behaviours;
- Suicidal thoughts;
- Change in eating habits (not eating or over-eating);
- Changes in sleep habits (unable to sleep or sleeping too much);
- Having nightmares and/or flashbacks.
- Expecting it to happen again.

All of these reactions can be responses to trauma. It can be helpful to consciously recognise that you are reacting to an abnormal and serious event (an assault). Notice when you are not acting "like yourself" and then try to remind yourself that it may be related to what happened. Remember, you can seek out support and resources.

## **HAVE PATIENCE WITH YOURSELF**

It can take weeks, months and even years to recover and emotionally integrate what has happened. There is no right time-line. Eventually, as you move through the process of healing, the assault will change from being the central focus in your life to being something painful that occurred in the past.

There may be times when thoughts and feelings related to the assault return. These can be "triggered" by such events as seeing a TV show about sexual assault, seeing a person that reminds you of the perpetrator,

seeing the person who assaulted you, or being near the assault location. You may have thought you were "over it" only to be faced with the challenges of re-experiencing some of the effects of the trauma.

Remember to be kind and gentle with yourself. Think about how you would like your best friend to be there for you at this time and then try to become your own best friend. Seek out helping and caring resources. It may be difficult, but possible.

## **WILL I EVER GET OVER THIS? WHY CAN'T I JUST FORGET?**

Remember, recovery from sexual assault or violence is a process that is different for every individual, and there are no hard and fast time-lines or schedules for recovery.

It is common to simply want to forget the assault and push it behind you. At times you may need to do this in order to get through your daily life. However, trying to "push it all away" and "acting like nothing happened" is a lot to expect from yourself. You have been through an experience that can shatter basic beliefs that we all take for granted.

It may be helpful to know that you don't have to face it all at once. You can take a middle-road, allowing yourself to deal with the thoughts and feelings about what happened in small pieces, at a pace that you control.

A counsellor who has special training and experience working with sexual trauma can be extremely helpful. Give yourself a break, you don't have to do this alone. Talking with a supportive person(s) may help you to understand and cope with the feelings and thoughts you are having.

Be very gentle with yourself, try not to expect too much too fast. You may not feel completely like yourself as quickly as you would like, and may have periods of emotional pain, but hopefully these periods will become shorter and less frequent with the passage of time. Believe that you CAN heal.

## **FEELINGS/ISSUES COMMONLY EXPERIENCED:**

**Fear(s):** Fear that the perpetrator may return, fear for your personal safety, and fear of being alone or of being with strangers. Fears can come and go and may also vary in intensity. Typically these will lessen with time.

**Depression:** Depression is more than "sadness" or a "down" mood. Signs of depression can include sadness and despair; changes in sleep habits (either too much or not enough), changes in appetite (increase or decrease), inability to concentrate, general decrease in energy levels, lack of motivation, and social withdrawal. Sometimes suicidal feelings accompany depression. If these should occur please seek help. Depression during the weeks and months following sexual trauma can come and go. An experienced counsellor can help you to deal with depression.

**Anxiety:** Anxiety is a very common reaction to trauma. Increased heart rate (often experienced as sensations of the heart "pounding"), difficulty breathing, extreme alertness, racing thoughts, jumpiness, shakiness, and panic are all symptoms of anxiety. The symptoms of anxiety are extremely uncomfortable and even may cause you to feel as if you are "going crazy". If you are experiencing these reactions, you are not going crazy; you are experiencing an extreme stress reaction to a very stressful event.

A balanced routine of rest, activity, meals, and exercise can go a long way towards enhancing your "stress hardiness". Working with your breathing (learning how to breath deeply and slowly,) and being aware of your thoughts are also useful coping skills for anxious moments. It can be helpful to create an "Emergency Kit" to use during anxious or panic-filled times.

## **THINGS TO INCLUDE IN YOUR "EMERGENCY KIT":**

- List of phone numbers of helpful people to call when you are feeling anxious.
- List of healthy activities that soothe and calm you, e.g. music, a bath, a walk.
- Sayings, songs, poems, and prayers that feel strengthening and soothing.
- Cosy blanket & hot water bottle if you cannot rest in bed at night.

- Pictures of People you love and who love you and places that are relaxing.
- Instructions for deep breathing.

Practices such as deep relaxation, mediation and Yoga are proven methods for reducing anxiety.

## **FLASHBACKS, NIGHTMARES AND INTRUSIVE MEMORIES:**

A possible reaction to trauma is to experience intense memories or even to "re-live" what happened. This reaction is very related to how our bodies and minds physically process traumatic events.

How we store and remember traumatic information differs from storage and memory of events that are not traumatic. These reactions can be a predictable response to the intensity of the event, and are often "triggered" by an event that reminds you of the trauma.

Working intentionally and in a controlled way (small pieces at a time) with the thoughts and feelings related to the violence is one of the best ways of lessening the occurrence of these reactions. Many of the methods for coping with anxiety are also effective for dealing with flashbacks and intrusive memories. A counsellor trained in the dynamics of trauma can be especially helpful.

## **GUILT AND SELF-BLAME:**

You may struggle with thinking that if you had done something differently that this wouldn't have happened; or you may experience a loss of trust in your own judgement. Know that even if you did have a lapse in judgement, that you still did not deserve to be victimised.

Sexual violence is a very harsh penalty to pay for a moment of poor judgement. People who perpetuate sexual violence tend to be very manipulative and controlling, doing or saying whatever they think will help them to achieve their "conquest". They will try to place responsibility on their victims by insisting that the act was consensual or that the victim was in some way to blame for what happened.

## **ANGER:**

It is natural to feel anger when our ability to control what happens to us is removed. You may feel angry because of the unnecessary life disruption caused by the assault. You may feel anger not only towards the perpetrator, but also towards others and yourself for "letting it happen". You may feel angry with God that this was allowed to happen to you.

Know that you have the right to your anger but that anger can be destructive if you use it unskillfully or direct it towards yourself. Try to be clear about who is responsible for the violence (the perpetrator), and if necessary seek help to gain this clarity. The perpetrator of violence and/or abuse is always responsible for his or her actions.

Try to find constructive outlets for the anger. Physical activity, sharing feelings with supportive others, journaling or writing, can all be helpful. Find what will work for you to express and resolve your anger in a healthy way.

## **TRUST:**

You may feel that your ability to trust people and the world have been taken from you. You may also wonder if you can trust yourself and your ability to judge others or assess danger. You may find yourself reacting to others with increased caution and guardedness. The re-building of trust in yourself and in others will require time. You may need to closely evaluate your thoughts about trust and trustworthiness. It is also important to know that, while 20-20 hindsight is always more accurate, no one has perfect judgement about how others will behave in the future.

The fact that you experienced an incident in which you had your power and ability to control taken from you in a violating and humiliating way can shatter the basic belief of being in control held by most of us most of the time. Again, you may need to become very aware of your thoughts and your beliefs.

## **SAFETY:**

You may wonder if you will ever feel safe again. Heightened awareness and fears of danger are fairly common after an assault. Allow yourself to think of options for helping yourself to feel safer. Let yourself know that the ability to feel safe again can return, in its own time, by taking small steps.

## **SEXUAL INTIMACY:**

It may take a while for your normal levels of sexual desire and response to return. You may wonder or you may have fears about what your partner thinks about you or if he or she still finds you desirable.

You may avoid sex out of fear of being "triggered" and having a flashback of the attack. Or you may use sex as a means of coping. These and other reactions are common concerns among sexual violence survivors. Allow yourself to find your own pace for rediscovering the joys of physical intimacy. Clearly communicate your concerns and needs about sexual contact or touching with your partner. It will be helpful if your partner will follow your cues regarding physical intimacy for a while. A counsellor experienced in sexual trauma recovery for couples may be helpful.

## **Suggestions for Promoting Healing in the Aftermath of a Sexual Assault.**

### **LET GO OF SELF-BLAME**

Remember that sexual violence is about aggression and control, it is usually not an act of passion or intimacy. Often people wonder "why me?" and blames themselves for an assault. These feelings often arise from a common, mistaken belief that sexual violence happens to individuals who "ask for it" in some way.

The truth is that anyone can be a victim of sexual violence. The perpetrator is responsible for the assault. Even if you feel you used poor judgement, it is critical to understand that the punishment for poor judgement should never be violence. NO ONE DESERVES TO BE SEXUALLY ASSAULTED.

Accept that you may be bothered by uncomfortable thoughts and emotions. Remember, these thoughts and emotions are normal reactions to a physically and/or psychologically traumatic event. Remind yourself that post trauma effects are normal as the body, mind, and spirit recover from what has happened. Give yourself time and space to work with these thoughts and feelings. With healthy coping skills, these will lessen and fade away.

### **WORK WITH STRESS LEVELS.**

Dealing with emotions and also the legal process following an assault can be stressful and exhausting. Promote your own natural healing abilities by taking especially good care of yourself: get enough rest, eat nourishing food, and engage in healthful stress-reducing activities. Self-care is extremely important now.

### **SPEND TIME WITH LOVED ONES AND OTHERS WHO CARE ABOUT YOU.**

Be with people who love you and want to support you in healthy ways. Seek out comfortable friends, those with whom you can safely "be yourself", even if "yourself" feels awful. Stay connected with people who care about you. Resist isolating yourself.

### **AVOID THE OVERUSE OF ALCOHOL OR OTHER MIND-ALTERING SUBSTANCES TO NUMB POST-TRAUMA EFFECTS.**

It really won't make the pain go away for long, and may produce more problems than solutions. Alcohol and drugs can actually decrease the quality of your sleep. Good quality sleep (which is different than "passing out" from alcohol or drugs) promotes healing. Our bodies and mind have an amazing natural ability to heal. We promote this natural resilience by healthful self-care. Again, try to accept that you will probably be experiencing some uncomfortable thoughts and feelings for a while.

It is OK to ask for help. Talking with supportive others such as friends, family, victims' advocates and counselling professionals will promote recovery. Find people who are concerned, trustworthy, understanding, and encouraging.

It can be especially helpful to talk with others. Talking about feelings is never easy, but it can be the key to healing, no matter how long ago the violence occurred. Many survivors find that they feel better if they have the opportunity to freely and confidentially discuss any problems or emotions they are experiencing. Seek medical assistance if physical symptoms persist.

Your family and friends may struggle with similar feelings to you. They may mistakenly blame you or themselves for the assault. They may believe not talking about it will make the feelings go away.

If the person with whom you choose to talk to is not supportive, seek out someone else. If the unsupportive person is a spouse/partner, family member or close friend, education may be helpful. Sharing literature about Rape/sexual assault or inviting family members to accompany you to a counselling session may help.

It is often the case that survivors don't seek help for many years after the violence, for lots of valid reasons. Individuals who seek help many years later can experience significant relief from depression, anxiety and fears that can persist following unresolved rape/sexual assault.





## **KERRY RAPE & SEXUAL ABUSE CENTRE,**

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9am-5pm Monday - Friday

Athlone Rape Crisis Centre .....	1800 306600
Carlow & South Leinster Rape Crisis & Counselling Centre .....	1800 727727
Sexual Violence Centre Cork .....	1800 496496
Donegal Sexual Abuse & Rape Crisis Centre .....	1800 448844
Dublin Rape Crisis Centre.....	1800 778888
Galway Rape Crisis Centre .....	1850 355355
Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre .....	1800 633333
Kilkenny Rape Crisis & Counselling Centre .....	1800 478478
Limerick Rape Crisis Centre .....	1800 311511
Mayo Rape Crisis Centre .....	1800 234900
Rape Crisis & Sexual Abuse Centre (N.E.) (Dundalk) .....	1800 212122
Rape Crisis & Sexual Abuse Centre (NI) (Belfast).....	04890 329002
Rape & Sexual Abuse Support Service (Wexford) .....	1800 330033
Sligo Rape Crisis Centre .....	1800 750780
Tipperary Rape Crisis Centre .....	1800 340340
Tullamore Sexual Abuse & Rape Crisis Counselling Service ....	1800 323232
Waterford Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre.....	1800 296296