

Living Well

A Guide for Men

living
Well



livingwell.org.au provides information and support to men who have experienced sexual abuse, to partners, family, friends and service providers.

Contents

What is sexual abuse?.....	3	Physiological reactions and sexuality	29
General information about this booklet.....	4	Social myths and unhelpful ideas.....	30
PART 1		The victim-to-offender myth.....	31
Establishing a secure base	7	Trust, intimacy and relationships.....	32
Staying connected.....	8	Flashbacks	34
Eating well.....	9	Nightmares	37
Exercise.....	10	Panic attacks and anxiety	39
Relaxation and quiet time	12	Give yourself a break	40
Mindfulness	14	Deciding to tell?	41
Sleeping.....	16	Suicidal thoughts	43
Helping others and helping yourself ..	18	Self-harm.....	44
Ideas about being a man	19	Alcohol, drugs and self judgment.....	45
PART 2		What am I feeling?.....	46
Coping with sexual abuse and living well.....	21	Parenting.....	49
Recent sexual assault.....	22	Justice	50
Expectations and making changes ..	26	Prosecuting the offender or offenders ..	50
Shame	27	Compensation.....	51
Tactics of abuse	28	Celebrating life	53
		Notes	54

What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse or sexual assault is any act of a sexual nature where one person has not consented or agreed. This includes where a child is too young to consent, or someone is not in a state of mind to understand what is happening. Any sexual act done by an adult to a child is child sexual abuse.

It can involve physical violence, but it doesn't have to. It is still sexual abuse if there was no physical violence.

Sexual abuse often involves less obvious forms of coercion, such as emotional manipulation, threats or blackmail.

Sexual abuse can involve direct physical contact, but doesn't have to. Sexual abuse can also be things like making someone watch or say something they don't want to.

Sexual assault can happen to people of any age or background.

It is when one person or group of people uses power (be it physical, emotional, financial or something else) to coerce another.

People who commit sexual offences can be of any gender or background.

“ Sexual abuse is a crime. ”

General information about this booklet

Who is this book for?

You might be reading this because of things that have happened to you personally, or to someone you care about. The idea is for this book to assist adult men who are dealing with problems related to sexual abuse, whether the abuse happened in the past or quite recently.

Men are not all the same!

Men face some common social pressures about ‘being a man’, but each man is a unique individual. Given that men are such a diverse group of people, there is no way that every single idea in this book will be helpful to every individual man. So please, take up the parts that make sense to you and leave those sections that aren’t relevant right now, you can always come back later.

You don’t have to do it alone

It’s OK to ask for and accept help from other people, and to offer and give help to other people who need it too. Men who have suffered sexual abuse sometimes struggle to do things to care for themselves. Throughout this book, we want to remind you that you deserve to take care of yourself and to live a fulfilling life.

Ways of living well

Our hope is this book will provide some practical advice about ‘living well’. What that means will be different to each person, but hopefully some of the ideas here will be of use to you.

Many of the ideas here could be helpful ideas for anyone. Other ideas are more specific suggestions about dealing with the problems that sexual abuse can bring into men’s lives.

Taking a stand against sexual abuse

This might be your first step in looking for some useful information, or you might have been working through problems related to sexual abuse for a long time.

Either way, picking up this book suggests that you want to take a stand against sexual abuse and the problems it can produce. By taking a stand against sexual abuse and reclaiming your life, you join many, many other men and women. It’s worth repeating: you don’t have to do it alone. The Living Well website provides details of places and people to contact in your area (www.livingwell.org.au). We can help you find someone in most areas of Australia.

Tips for using this book:

Think about the right time and place to read this book.

Is reading this by yourself going to be the best for you, or will it be better to talk with someone supportive (like a friend, partner, or counsellor) about the parts you find relevant?

Have a limit on what you will read at any one time (e.g. one or two sections).

Have a pen ready to mark the ‘tips’ that you find useful.

Allow some time -10 minutes or so - after reading to reflect on what you’ve read and whether it is relevant or helpful to you. Some people might find it helps to have a journal to write or sketch their responses.

Plan to do something fun, relaxing or energizing after you have put the book down. It could be something you can do alone or with a friend or partner.

- Go for a bike ride, a run or a walk
- Listen to or play some music
- Prepare a meal with someone
- Dig in the garden
- Play a computer game
- Read a novel or the newspaper
- Go swimming

Or something else that’s enjoyable to you and helps get out of the headspace of ‘thinking about abuse all the time’.

Part 1 - Living Well in day to day life

Establishing a secure base

In this section (Part 1), the focus is on general, day-to-day things you can do for your overall health and well-being. You could think of this as establishing a 'secure base' to work from. The topics covered here include:



Staying
Connected



Eating
Well



Exercise



Relaxation



Mindfulness



Sleeping



Helping
Others



Ideas about
being a man

They are probably good ideas for anyone, not just men who are dealing with the legacy of sexual abuse. We'd suggest coming back to this section if some of the later topics become overwhelming.

The idea of a secure base is about focusing on achievable goals, and putting 'first things first'. If the basics are not quite in place, like sleeping well and having strategies for dealing with day to day stress, other problems and challenges will be much harder to tackle.

It does not make the difficult stuff go away, but it does put you in a better place and frame of mind to deal with it.



Staying connected

Staying connected to people has a positive effect on your general well-being. Feelings of depression can thrive on isolation and loneliness (which is different from ‘alone time’). Knowing that other people are there and care about you can make it easier to care for yourself.

Try to make time to catch up with people and avoid being isolated. Mobile phones and the web are useful tools for staying connected when meeting people face-to-face isn’t possible.

There might be a range of people in your life that you share different levels and kinds of connections with.

- A person you might have a coffee or drink with...
- A person you might share a meal with...
- A person you might do something fun or relaxing with...
- A person you could tell that you are reading this book...

Remember that not everyone in your life has to know everything about you.

It might be worth making that extra effort to connect with supportive people who give you extra energy, and taking a break from relationships that seem draining at the moment.

While ideally there may be a few people you would trust to talk to about problems related to sexual abuse, there are probably other people in your life as well.



Eating well

Eating well is about providing your body and mind with nutrients that keep you active and alert, as well as about enjoying the food you eat. Ideally you want to be eating five serves of veggies and two serves of fruit a day. Keep your fluid intake up by drinking plenty of water.

In the last few years, a lot more people have become interested in food and cooking, and it is certainly more socially acceptable for men to enjoy cooking than it was a generation ago.

Here are some simple tips about eating well:

- Eat a healthy breakfast
- Avoid snacking between meals
- Plan healthy, quick and easy meals for busy days
- Make use of the freezer - cook 2-3 meals worth at a time
- Enjoy cooking - experiment with new foods and try new recipes
- Make the most of foods in season
- Make mealtimes special occasions for the whole family
- Invite a friend around to eat, or better yet, to help cook
- Eat slowly and savour every mouthful
- Listen to your body - stop when you feel full
- Try growing your own veggies, fruit or herbs

For more information about eating well, see the links on the Living Well website.



Exercise

Exercise and becoming active is linked to positive mental health. It has the ability to change your state of mind in both the short and long term in ways that give you more energy for dealing with life's challenges.

All adults benefit from at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity activity each day. If you can't do this every day, it still helps to try and exercise fairly regularly. This exercise does not have to be done all at once, you can break it down into sessions of at least 10 minutes.

Different types of activity suit different people. Some people prefer team sports, some people like individual sports. Some people prefer to play competitively, others like a more social environment. Some people prefer exercise rather than games or sports.

If you're not sure what would suit you, try a few things out.

You don't have to be an athlete to boost your fitness. Some people find it really helpful to exercise with a partner or friend. Exercising with someone has the benefit that you can motivate, encourage and support each other to go for that walk in the middle of winter or to the gym when you are still aching from the last session. The main thing is that you find something that is fun or gives you a sense of achievement.



Tips for exercise:

As well as structured exercise or activities, there are day to day things you can do that don't take much time, effort or organisation.

Work in an office?

- Keep your walking shoes handy and be active whenever you have the chance.
- Park your car a few blocks from work.
- Get off the bus or train at the stop beforehand and walk.
- Take the stairs instead of the lift.
- Walk up the escalator instead of standing still.
- Walk the longer way around to the photocopier, printer or fax machine.
- Enjoy a walk during your lunch break or team up with a friend to walk after work.
- Walk to your colleague's office instead of sending an e-mail.

At home:

- Walk around while you're talking on a cordless or mobile phone.
- Do some gentle stretches or sit-ups while watching TV.
- Use TV ad breaks as a chance to do some household chores like washing dishes or putting stuff away.
- Do some energetic house-cleaning, gardening or odd jobs on the weekend.
- Park the car further away when going to the supermarket.



Relaxation and quiet time

Basically, relaxation exercises are short, focused routines with a specific purpose in mind - usually to slow down your breathing or relax when you are tense.

The ability to gently slow your breathing, relax your muscles and calm your self is a useful life skill. Learning to simply take some quiet time out, that is not about 'getting something done', can help you to relax and feel fresh and energized.

Some people who have survived trauma find that imaginative relaxation - focusing on an image or thought that is calming and soothing - works as well as body centred approaches.

Men who have been subjected to traumatic experiences, including sexual assault, can find relaxation difficult. At one time, staying alert, constantly checking for danger might have been necessary in order to keep safe and reduce harm.

The first challenge can be to consciously notice when you are tense - your body and mind might have got in the habit of being on-guard to the extent that you hardly notice it.

So it can initially feel unsafe to drop your guard, and it can take practice and a bit of a risk to accept that there might be some places and times where you are actually safe from harm.

There are significant health benefits when you can learn to stop being constantly tense and on guard.



Tips for relaxation:

Learning to breathe deeply and relax your body helps with your general ability to rest, as well as being a useful tool for recharging your batteries. Below is one simple relaxation exercise that a lot of people find useful when they feel stressed or anxious. It involves deliberately tensing and relaxing your muscles. The Living Well website has more to try.

1. Find a safe quiet spot and sit in a comfortable but upright position in a chair or on the ground (try not to slouch).
2. Plant your feet or hands firmly on the ground- push them into the ground and feel that the ground is solid.
3. Gently clasp your hands together in front of your stomach, just below your belly button.
4. Begin to notice your breathing - the pace, the depth, etc.
5. When you are ready, take a slow deep breath in through your nose.
6. Breathe in, without causing pain, for about 5 seconds.
7. At the same time as you breathe in, grip your hands together, like your hands are trying to pull in opposite directions. Use the muscles in your arms as well. Stop if you are hurting yourself, and try again with a bit less pressure.
8. Slowly breathe out through your mouth, releasing the air in a smooth controlled flow (again, about 5 seconds).
9. At the same time as you breathe out, relax your hands and arms.

Repeat steps 5-9 three or four times.



Mindfulness

You might have heard the term ‘mindfulness’. This is related to relaxation but they are slightly different things.

Mindfulness is more focused on paying attention to things about yourself and your environment that would normally go unnoticed. Mindfulness allows us to step away from negative thoughts and feelings which often seem so compelling.

Practising mindfulness is useful in and of itself, not just when you are having difficulties. You can incorporate it into your everyday routines, such as practising mindful walking or mindfully drinking tea or coffee. By consciously using mindfulness in as much of your day as possible, you increase your awareness and enhance your sense of control and choice.

A ‘trap’ for men trying to use mindfulness is feeling pressure to ‘get it right’, or thinking that you ‘just don’t get it’. There will be times when you doubt your ability to practise mindfulness. Expect that you will become distracted and doubt your ability to ‘do’ mindfulness. This is part of the practice. Simply try and notice the doubtful thoughts, and return to your anchor (‘anchor’ is explained on the next page).

Another challenge: mindfulness goes against the idea that men are ‘do-ers’. Learning to notice things without trying to assess them or change might feel difficult. The idea that you should do something will almost certainly occur; try to simply notice that thought, then come back to your anchor.



A short mindfulness exercise

This introduction exercise is adapted from ThinkMindfully.com

- Begin your practice by anchoring your attention to your breath. You can think “in” on the in breath and “out” on the out breath.
- Whenever a thought, feeling or sensation arises, notice what is grabbing at your attention and label the experience.
- Try to observe each thought that arises with an accepting, curious, welcoming attitude. Don’t judge the thoughts and label them good or bad, just observe them arise as you would leaves on a stream, watching each leaf go by.
- Let all thoughts drift out of awareness on their own. You don’t have to push them away because they will naturally pass on their own, in order to make room for the next ‘leaf’ to go by.
- After noting each thought, simply draw your attention back to the breath, and once again think “in” on the in breath and “out” on the out breath.

Try doing this for 5 minutes to start with. As you get more into it, you can try stretching out the exercise over a longer time. See the Living Well website for more ideas and links about mindfulness.



Sleeping

A good night's sleep helps to recover from the previous day and get ready for the next one. Sleep helps us to think more clearly, manage difficult situations better, and feel more energetic.

The most important part of sleep is the 'deep sleep' phase, the first 5 hours after you fall asleep. It's nice to sleep for 8 hours, but it's not always needed (and some people don't like sleeping that long). However, regularly getting less than 5 hours sleep a night can be a problem.

Stress can get in the way of a good night's sleep. There can be a cycle of worry, where anxiety about not being able to sleep makes it even harder to relax. Being worried about having nightmares can also make it hard to relax and get to sleep.

Poor quality 'deep sleep' can lead to:

- Tiredness during the day
- Poor concentration
- Irritability
- Aches and pains in the muscles and bones
- An immune system that doesn't work well, leading to frequent illness
- Longer periods of depression.



Tips for sleeping:

If possible, try to establish a consistent routine. Go to bed at the same time every night.

Spend 30 minutes doing something relaxing before bed. Although watching TV or playing a computer game might be considered relaxing, some people find it doesn't really help with getting to sleep. Try reading a book, or doing a relaxation exercise instead of watching TV for that last half hour and see if that makes a difference.

Get up at the same time every morning, even if you had a bad night. Try to resist the temptation to have 'just a little bit more' sleep!

Do something to 'wake yourself up' in the morning, like a quick walk, run or bike ride.

If you have been having long-term sleeping problems, you know that it is not easy to change. It might be time to seek expert help. This could be your GP or other health practitioner, or a counsellor who deals with sleep problems.

If things are really serious, there are also sleep clinics that provide intensive treatment.

beyondblue.org.au has a useful fact sheet with tips for managing sleep difficulties.



Helping others and helping yourself

Sometimes you can lose sight of the fact that you have something to offer. Doing things for other people actually has a beneficial effect on developing our own well-being. Recent research in neuroscience shows that helping others and working cooperatively activates and strengthens certain parts of the brain, enhancing well-being.

Doing things to help others influences your perception of yourself and the world. The more people see you as a person with skills and abilities, the more you are able to see yourself that way.

In putting this into practice it is important to take care of yourself, to check that you are not doing this out of duty or continuing a habit of always putting others before yourself.

For some men, accepting help becomes easier if they can also do something in turn that helps someone else.

You could put this into action in any way that suits you. It might be volunteering with a formal organization, offering to help a friend or an elderly neighbour, or making time to listen to someone you know who is having a hard time.

In helping others, take time to notice the conscious choice you made to offer assistance and consider how this fits in with the kind of person you want to be.



Ideas about being a man

Every man has their own experiences and beliefs about what it means to be a man. Gender is a significant part of personal identity, along with a range of other things that ‘make up’ our sense of who we are: cultural background, physical ability/disability, sexual preferences, religion, family, where we live... the list goes on.

While every man is unique, men face some common social pressures about how they should behave, feel and think. These pressures can influence how men respond to different situations at different times. Men can feel under pressure to:

- Deal with problems alone
- Always be in control
- Express only a limited range of emotions
- Never admit any vulnerability

There are times when these qualities can be helpful. In a crisis or emergency, and some kinds of work, the ability to ‘keep a level head’ or ‘hold it together’ are highly valued and sought after (such as ambulance officers, in the armed services, or business executives).

However, a difficulty with these expectations ‘to be a man’ is that they can become quite restrictive. They can lead to men isolating themselves, becoming reluctant to talk about what is going on for them. These expectations can lead to men becoming overly self critical. These judgments might come from people around them, too.



Unfortunately, these pressures can have men evaluating and judging themselves in unhelpful ways. They can lead to men being down on themselves for ‘being tricked’, for ‘not fighting hard enough’, for ‘not being able to cope’, for ‘not measuring up’, when they would benefit most from understanding and encouragement.

Unrealistic expectations to ‘man up’, to ‘push through’ and ‘just get on with it’ can lead to men feeling they have to work through problems alone. It can have men believing it is a sign of weakness to ask for help with personal problems, difficult thoughts or feelings. Yet in other areas of their life, men will routinely gather all the information and support they can. If you have a problem with your car you can’t fix, you take it to a mechanic or friend who knows about cars.

A challenge we face as men is to be aware of these expectations, whilst making sure they don’t restrict our choices and willingness to access support that helps build the kind of life we want to live.

Some questions to consider:

- Are there times you are particularly aware of expectations about how you should handle situations as a man?
- Do you sometimes find yourself wondering about these expectations, and whether they really suit you or those around you?
- Have there been times when you’ve done what’s best, even if it has gone against some ideas about ‘being a man?’

Part 2 - Coping with sexual abuse and living well

In Part 2, we will be talking more specifically about some common problems faced by men dealing with child sexual abuse or adult sexual assault. The following issues are covered, and there are some practical tips on dealing with most of them.

Recent Sexual Assault
Expectations and making changes
Shame
Tactics of abuse
Physiological reactions and sexuality
Social myths and unhelpful ideas
The victim-to-offender myth
Trust, intimacy and relationships
Flashbacks
Nightmares
Panic attacks and anxiety
Deciding to tell?
Suicidal thoughts
Self-harm
Alcohol and drug use
What am I feeling?
Parenting
Justice
Prosecuting the offender or offenders
Compensation
Celebrating life

Recent sexual assault

Although it is rarely discussed, rape and sexual assault can and does happen to adult men as well as to boys. The next few pages are for men who have recently been sexually assaulted, within the last few days, weeks or months. If this doesn't apply to you feel free to skip forward.

Medical treatment

You may need medical attention. You are entitled to have a support person with you if you need to attend hospital. You can also choose whether or not you want a forensic medical examination, where the doctor will collect medical evidence that might be able to be used to prosecute the offender(s). If you are not sure, you can talk to a counsellor/advocate from a sexual assault support service (if you're not sure where to start, try www.livingwell.org.au, or look at the back of this book for useful contacts).

Legal options

You have the right to make a statement to the police, but no-one should force you to do so. A police statement usually involves giving a lot of detailed information, so it can be distressing and re-traumatising. Having a counsellor or advocate from a sexual assault support service can be a valuable support through this process, whether you decide to make a statement shortly after the assault, at a later time, or never.

Coping with trauma

Extremely traumatic events can leave you feeling as if your world has been turned upside down. You have been in a dangerous or life threatening situation that was beyond your power to control.

Sexual assault can produce physical and emotional responses or unwelcome thoughts from “out of the blue”. You may feel and experience emotions and physiological sensations that you have never felt before.

You might feel severe pain, shock, tremors of arms and legs, stomach problems, nausea or vomiting, loss of appetite, constipation, diarrhoea, nightmares and/or sleeplessness, headaches and dizziness.

You may find yourself spacing-out as a way of coping. Some people have flashbacks, when memories of the rape intrude at different times.

As strange as it may seem at first, this is your body and mind coping the best way they can; they are normal reactions to out-of-the-ordinary events (although not everyone has any or all of these responses). The experience differs for everyone.

Remembering this can help keep at bay thoughts that you're ‘going crazy’ or becoming ‘mentally ill’.

Try to restore some normality and control

While the world may previously have felt like a reasonably safe place, it might now seem dangerous and leave you feeling insecure. It can be helpful to try and get some parts of your life back to normal. This can help to get back some sense of control and choice in your life. It will probably take some time to get any sense of routine back. It can help to try small things such as taking a walk, breathing exercises or making a favourite meal - to give you some sense of normality.

As you manage to take these steps, take time out to recognize that you are taking back control of your life - it is an achievement worth noticing.

Seek support

You might feel like shutting yourself away from the world. This is a normal response. However, if you can let someone know what's going on, it can help you to feel less isolated. It can also be good to know that there is someone to make sure you are looking after yourself in practical ways, like eating.

Go easy on yourself; it might take some time to get back to a routine. This isn't because you're doing something wrong, it is because people naturally need time to recover from the overwhelming, frightening and confusing reality of sexual assault.

Tips for regaining control

Take things slowly and don't pressure yourself with unrealistic expectations. It usually takes some time to restore some sense of normality. Remember that all the feelings and physical sensations listed above are common responses to a traumatic event. They are not a sign that you are 'going crazy'; you are processing an extremely distressing violation of your personal integrity.

Some people find the following things helpful:

- Exercising
- Studying
- Reading
- Working
- Drawing or painting
- Listening to music
- Playing sport
- Writing (writing can be particularly useful for getting stuff out of your head and organising your thoughts)

Others find counselling, meditation or spiritual practice and prayer to be sources of strength.

If flashbacks or nightmares are a problem, see the upcoming pages for some ideas.

This is the end of the section dealing specifically with recent assault. However, the information in the rest of the booklet is still relevant whether the assault(s) was recent or in the past.

Expectations and making changes

For some people, picking up this book might be a sign that you are ready for big changes in your life. You might have a sense that this isn't going to be easy and might be a bit of a struggle sometimes.

At the same time, it might feel like things are a struggle already and it's time for things to change as soon as possible. There can be a real sense of 'c'mon, I'm ready, let's get on with it!'

It's important to try and stay realistic about how much can change and how quickly. You can make changes for the better in your life one step at a time.

Trying to work it all out can become overwhelming and frustrating. It can feel like everything in your life is beyond your control.

At times like this it can be helpful to try and focus on something you can control - it might be your breathing or what food you are going to eat tonight. These might seem like small decisions but they are important.

Shame

Shame can be an extremely powerful feeling. It can have men feeling that they were somehow responsible for the abuse, or should have seen it coming, or should have been able to stop it. The fact that the abuse was sexualised makes the feelings of shame more intense. Remembering the actual abuse can make men feel 'dirty' or confused.

Shame can stop men speaking up about the abuse.

There is a place for shame: it belongs with the person or people who committed the abuse. It does not belong with the person who was abused.

It is a profoundly unfair legacy of sexual abuse that the person who was abused often ends up left with feelings of shame. It can be helpful to remember that the abuse was not caused by you, that you were not responsible, and that the person who committed the abuse is the rightful 'owner' of any shameful feelings.

For some people, this sense of shame comes from thinking about how they could have avoided the abuse. There is nothing wrong with thinking about this. However, there is a difference between wishing you could have done something to stop the abuse, and being responsible. This might become clearer if you imagine how you might offer advice to a child who is going down the park to play with friends. By offering advice, that does not mean you hold them responsible for the deliberate actions of an adult who hurts them.

Tactics of abuse

A useful ‘anti-shame’ exercise is to examine the tactics used by the abuser(s).

While this can be very confronting, it can help to get clear about just where the responsibility for the abuse lies and where the shame properly belongs. This can be particularly helpful for men who were abused as boys or teenagers; it can also be helpful for men sexually assaulted as adults.

The tactics of abuse are the things the abuser(s) did, or said, or threatened to do, to commit the abuse and to try and keep it secret. They might have included ‘tricks’ to get you thinking that you were somehow to blame or at fault.

Sometimes the tactics of abuse can only be seen for what they are when you look back at them. For example, it is easy for an adult to convince a child that the child will get in trouble if anyone finds out. Of course as an adult we can see that this is a tactic and not the truth; but a child has no way of knowing that.

In looking back and reviewing what happened be careful not to use the knowledge you have now to judge your decisions and action back then. Take time to remember the context, how old you were, your physical size or maturity, what information you had about sex, what support was available?

It can be helpful to take a ‘generous’ attitude to yourself and the way that you survived.

Physiological reactions and sexuality

If at that time of the assault a man developed an erection or became aroused in some way, this can make him even more reluctant to speak about sexual abuse.

These physical responses do not mean that a man wanted to be sexually abused in any way. Some people who sexually abuse others will deliberately manipulate the boy or man to develop an erection, then use this as false evidence to say the abuse was 'wanted'.

We cannot always control how our body reacts, especially in stressful situations. A boy or man might develop an erection as an unwanted response to fear or physical stimulation. These physiological responses do not say anything about his desire or sexuality.

Physical arousal or lack of it can cause a great deal of confusion for men. Some men feel aroused when they recall the abuse and worry about what this means.

It is an unfortunate reality that an experience of sexual abuse can influence sexual intimacy. It can both make men hyper interested in sex or particular sexual acts, and also make them feel overwhelmed or uncomfortable about sexual contact with a partner, whereby they start to avoid sex and isolate themselves.

If sexual thoughts, reactions or difficulties are distressing or bothering you, it is a good idea to find a trained counsellor who understands sexual assault and sexuality to help you make sense of this.

Social myths and unhelpful ideas

Homophobia and confusion regarding sexuality can stop men speaking about sexual abuse.

If a man was sexually assaulted by a man he may be concerned that people will think he is gay and discriminate against him, or that the abuse was deserved, or that gay sexuality is abusive.

If he was abused by a woman he might worry that people will not take his complaints seriously, and that he should be okay about it.

These unhelpful ideas are based on a false belief that sexual assault somehow says something about the sexuality of the person who was assaulted.

The reality is that sexual assault does not reflect the sexual orientation of the person who is assaulted. Sexual assault is an abusive act of power. It is not caused by the sexuality, or any other characteristic, of the person assaulted. It is like saying that the victim of a robbery was robbed because they have psychological issues with money.

Like any other act of violence, sexual abuse is caused by the offender's decisions and actions.

The victim-to-offender myth

There is a common myth that men and boys who have been sexually assaulted will go on to perpetrate sexual assault. This is untrue, however the myth itself can affect men in unhelpful ways. Some men even describe feeling ‘infected’ or ‘contaminated’ because of the abuse they suffered.

Men have spoken about their fear of harming children even though they have no conscious intention or thoughts of doing anything harmful or sexually abusive. Some men may go to great lengths to avoid interacting with children and even view themselves as dangerous.

The fear that others will see him as a potential abuser is one of the major barriers to men telling anyone about their experiences of rape or sexual abuse.

In fact, there is no evidence to suggest an automatic route from experiencing abuse to going on to commit sexual offences. People who sexually abuse make a conscious choice to commit abuse, it does not just happen. If someone is concerned that they are going to harm or abuse a child, it is important that they find a counsellor to help sort this out.

The reality is that the vast majority of men and boys who experience sexual violence do not perpetrate abuse or assault. In fact most men we speak to are horrified by such a suggestion. Many become strong advocates and speak out against child abuse and other forms of violence.

Trust, intimacy and relationships

Men who have experienced sexual abuse can face the same pressures that all men face about self-reliance, dealing with things yourself, and so on. However there may also be other struggles that are connected to sexual abuse when it comes to closeness and relationships.

Trust is often used as a tactic of abuse, especially child sexual abuse. Such a profound betrayal of trust can lead to the conclusion that trusting people or getting close is dangerous. This conclusion is not 'wrong', because it is a sensible conclusion to draw from your experience.

Some men have said they struggle with some of the following things, related to this betrayal of their trust.

- Reluctance to trust someone or let anyone get close.
- Perceiving any expression of care or attention as a sign of sexual interest, or an attempt to get something from them.
- Feeling vulnerable.
- Wariness about sharing personal information.
- Feeling uncomfortable with gentle touch or touch without prior specific agreement.
- Difficulties with any sexual intimacy.

These issues can make for unsatisfying relationships for both partners. Many men feel frustrated that they just can't seem to get close to people, including their partner.

It is important to remember that it is not trust that causes sexual abuse, but the misuse of trust. In fact, children need to trust adults in order to survive. You did not cause or deserve to be abused because you trusted someone. The abuse happened because someone abused that trust.

While being careful and not trusting people can be important in some circumstances, it can get in the way of intimate, close relationships with people you really care for. If you want to feel closer to the people you care for, it might take time and feel like a slow process, but it is possible. The first thing to realize is that you can't build intimacy by yourself - it is a shared project.

Intimacy means more than sexual intimacy. It is also about sharing special and important moments with close friends. Intimacy can develop through connections you make with a friend or partner; spending time, playing together, discussing ideas, including disagreeing, shared parenting experiences, supporting family members, enhancing spirituality.

This way of relating is profoundly different to abuse. The dynamic of abuse is where one person's ideas and wishes are important and the other person's are not considered at all. Intimacy is about developing mutuality, equality and negotiation.

It can be helpful for you and your partner to talk about some of the things that bring you together, to work out what ideas you share about your relationship and what differences can be appreciated and respected, as well what areas could do with some extra work and time being put into them. You could take some quiet time to consider:

- What kind of relationship would you like?
- What brings you closer to people, what pushes you away?
- Are you aware of your friends or partner's likes or dislikes?
- What builds connections in your relationship with them?
- How close a relationship do you/they want?
- What time and energy are you willing to put in to developing intimacy in this relationship?
- How might you start to do this?

Flashbacks

Many men who have been subjected to sexual abuse experience flashbacks. Flashbacks are memories or fragments of memories from recent or past events. They can be jarring, painful and intrusive. Flashbacks can last a few brief seconds or be very drawn out and detailed.

Flashbacks can be visual, auditory (sounds), emotional, physiological, and/or sensory (smells, tastes, touch).

One of the most confusing things about flashbacks is that they can seem like you are right back in the situation. If the flashback is related to times when someone was doing something sexually abusive to you, this can be extremely distressing.

Flashbacks are often triggered by things or events in the present. Triggers can be very specific, like a certain smell or sound, or general, like some kind of personal crisis.

Although flashbacks can be very unwelcome and distressing, sometimes they can contain information and feelings that fill in gaps in your memory. Some men have said they provided the 'piece in the jigsaw' that helped them make better sense of what happened, especially if their memory is foggy or unclear.

It can be a good idea to find a counsellor to help you work out how these memories 'fit' into place.

Tips for dealing with flashbacks:

When the flashback happens...

Try to bring yourself back to the 'here and now'. Deliberately and slowly notice what you can see, hear, and touch where you are right now. Touch your chair or the fabric of your clothes, and describe the texture to yourself (rough, smooth, etc).

Focus on your breathing. Deliberately slow down your breathing in and out. Count to 5 while breathing out. Try to breathe deep into your diaphragm.

Remind yourself that you are not back where the original event happened, but here in this place, in this time. Some people find it useful to ground themselves by touching their watch, wrist band or a piece of jewellery that they have now, but did not wear back then.

Asking yourself these questions can help bring you back to here and now:

- How old am I now? Where do I live/work now?
- What options do I have now that I didn't have then?
- Who can I ask for support and encouragement?
- How do I like to spend my time?
- Where do I want to put my energy now?

After the flashback has passed...

Be kind to yourself

After experiencing a flashback you might want to rest or distract yourself for a while, have a sleep, a warm drink, relax and listen to some music, watch TV, play a computer game, do some gardening or just take some quiet time for you. Words of support and encouragement to yourself are more likely to help you deal with flashbacks than questioning and evaluating yourself.

Try and work out the triggers. Choose a time when you are feeling safe and steady, and think about your last flashback:

- What was happening when the memory appeared?
- Where were you? Who was around? What were you feeling/ thinking, smelling/hearing/seeing/sensing?
- Does this relate to an event in your past?

If you can identify the triggers, your reactions begin to make more sense and become less confusing. You might still get triggered by these things, but it will be easier to put them in their place, understand what is going on and put yourself back on track.

You might want to explore these questions with the help of a counsellor. It is not always helpful to explore this by yourself if you are feeling unsteady, so try not to put yourself under pressure to 'work it out' on your own.

Nightmares

In some ways, nightmares can be like flashbacks you have when you are asleep. They might be very clear reminders of the abuse that you experienced, and can have the same unsettling, confusing and distressing after-effects as flashbacks. However, while flashbacks are usually recognizable memories of actual events, the content of nightmares can be less concrete.

Nightmares might also be of things that represent the abuse or trauma in some way. It might not always be clear exactly what they mean. They might seem very odd or bizarre, yet leave you with a definite sense of being afraid, scared, alone or disorientated. They might also trigger feelings of shame or anger associated with the abuse.

Similarly to flashbacks, nightmares can seem to come from 'out of the blue', and leave you feeling out of control.

As well as the emotional and psychological aspects of nightmares, they can also have physiological effects (sweating, increased heart-rate, breathing troubles). If nightmares happen regularly, they can also bring about anxiety about sleeping.

The same ideas that can help deal with flashbacks are also useful for nightmares. Again, there are 2 parts of this. First is the immediate work of calming or grounding yourself just after a nightmare; and second, you may like to explore their meaning in more depth. On the next page is a specific exercise that helps some people to deal with persistent nightmares.

What you can do if nightmares persist...

If, in the morning, you can put aside the nightmare and concentrate on getting on and doing what it is important to you, then do. If, however, a nightmare persists or becomes particularly disruptive you might try the following exercise.

1. Pick an unpleasant dream/nightmare, one that is not a direct replay or a re-enactment of a distressing event and write it down.
2. Write the unpleasant dream down in as much detail as you can. Only in this telling of the dream change the ending so that it suits you. Remember it is your choice to do this and that you can stop writing or thinking about the dream and do something else any time you want.
3. Now, get to know this new preferred version of the dream, rehearse it each night for about 5-15 minutes prior to going to sleep.
4. Once you have rehearsed the dream, perform a relaxation exercise, one that you are familiar with and helps you to fall asleep peacefully. If you wake up, it can be useful to repeat this relaxation exercise, breathing deeply and slowly.
5. When you are satisfied that you have re-storied the unpleasant dream to better suit you, you can choose to work on another nightmare that is slightly more intense than the last. Make sure that this process is a gradual increase in intensity and do not work with more than 2 nightmares in one week. Also take care of yourself; you do not have to over describe the upsetting content within the dream.

Panic attacks and anxiety

A common issue for people who have experienced sexual abuse is intense anxiety and panic attacks. This can take the form of distressing physiological symptoms (difficulty breathing, or shaking, or tightness in the chest), coupled with thoughts that prompt dread or fear (being convinced that something bad will happen).

The combination of physical and psychological aspects can lead to a kind of vicious cycle which can be debilitating. People find themselves worrying that they are going to have more panic attacks, which can prompt more anxiety, and so on. People often say it feels like they are ‘going crazy’.

Some tips for dealing with panic attacks...

- Learn the signs of your panic attacks.
- When you notice the signs, say to yourself ‘I know what is happening, it’s just a panic attack’.
- Remind yourself that you have gotten through this before and you will get through this.
- Use your sense of touch- deliberately pay attention to the feel and texture of your chair or clothing.
- Get yourself a glass of water if you can (don’t ask someone else to get it for you).

You can also try some of the tips for dealing with flashbacks and nightmares. Again, when you are in a quiet, safe place, you might like to try and work out the triggers.

Give yourself a break



Deciding to tell?

At one time, keeping the abuse secret might literally have been a matter of life and death for some people. The person that carried out the abuse might have made threats to hurt or kill them or people they cared about, or some other awful threat. The decision to not tell may have been the safest thing to do.

If you have already tried to tell someone, either in the past or recently, and they did not respond in a very helpful or supportive way, it can be hard to work up the courage to tell someone else.

Who can you tell?

While it can be helpful to find someone you can tell about your experiences, it is also important to take care about how you do this. Not everyone you know will be ready to hear about your experiences or what you are dealing with. Even friends or family who you get along well with are not always going to be able to support you in the way you would like. It can be useful to ask yourself:

- What am I looking for from this person?
- What kind of response would I like?
- What tells me that this person will be able to hear what I am saying?
- What are my worries and concerns?
- How might I prepare them for what I am about to say?
- How might I take care of myself and not place too high an expectation on this person?

Unfortunately, sexual abuse is such a secretive issue that you might have to educate your ‘supporters’ about how to help along the way. Some people might want to be there for you but simply don’t know what to do. Let them know that just being there to listen or to be with you IS helping; that takes the pressure of both of you. You might like to show them this book or some of the other resources at the back of this book.

Words of encouragement from a professional man, aged 51, sexually abused from ages 9-15...

“Do not feel you are alone - there are (unfortunately) thousands of us out there who share your pain, hurt and grief. Find someone you can trust - partner, friend, counsellor, doctor - and tell them what happened. This will not be easy the first time, but it is better talk than keep it bottled up. The hardest part of the whole experience is keeping the secret - once you begin to talk about it you can begin on the road to recovery. Know that there is hope, recovery, a better life.” *(from www.livingwell.org.au)*

Remember it is your decision if, who, when and how much of your story you want to tell. If someone presses for details that you are not ready or willing to share, it’s OK to let them know this.

If you feel unsure about what someone is thinking, try asking them; sometimes their silence might be because they are uncertain what to do, not because they are making judgments.

Suicidal thoughts

Thoughts of suicide are more common than you think, especially among men who have experienced sexual abuse.

Suicidal thoughts can range from fantasies, through to detailed plans. Even if your thoughts seem like they are ‘just’ passing ideas or fantasies, it is still important to find someone to talk to. The more detailed your thoughts about suicide, the more important it is to get help.

Thoughts and actions are not the same thing. Suicidal thoughts are one way of your mind telling you ‘I am not happy with things the way they are’. The important thing is that you talk with someone who is going to help you improve the situation.

Be persistent. Keep asking until you find the help you need.

Finding help

If you think you might harm or attempt to kill yourself call for help immediately

- Reach out to someone you trust and ask for help. Tell them honestly how you feel, including your thoughts of suicide.
- Call 000 (police, ambulance, fire) or;
- Call Lifeline 13 11 14 or;
- Go, or have someone take you to your local hospital emergency department.

Self-harm

When someone is hurting themselves, it is not always an attempt to kill themselves.

Self-harm can be a way of both expressing and managing the physical and psychological pain you are experiencing. Many people say that self-harm serves a purpose, usually to do with the idea that feeling physical pain seems easier than dealing with intense emotional or psychological pain. Other people describe self-harm as a way of feeling *something*.

Self-harm can be quite controlled and deliberate with the specific purpose of causing pain and/or injury. However, other forms of self-harm are more easily hidden, such as over work, over-training, or taking extreme risks.

Self-harming behaviours can escalate over time, as both your tolerance and desire for pain increases. In some cases it can lead to permanent injury and disfigurement.

The difficulty is that self-harm often only works for a short period, when you are looking for more effective long term solutions that allow you to get on with your life.

Learning some techniques to tolerate and contain distress can be helpful alternatives to self-harm. The relaxation and mindfulness exercises in this book might work for you. Writing or drawing, talking with someone, setting and achieving small goals, and staying healthy can reduce distress.

Alcohol, drugs and self judgment

If you have made a decision to stop or cut down on alcohol or drug use, it can be a positive step. Keep in mind, however, that using alcohol or drugs is a common coping strategy for dealing with uncomfortable thoughts and feelings and that when you take the ‘numbing’ effect of alcohol and drugs away memories can return with force. It can get tough if there is nothing else to fall back on. (Hint - Make use of your secure base).

The challenge of stopping using alcohol and drugs can be added to by negative judgments about yourself or about the process of change. Common self judgments include:

- I’m too damaged to get through this
- I’m not strong enough to handle it
- I’m really losing the plot/going crazy
- It’s easier not to feel all this
- I wanted to feel better but all this is making things worse

Some men have spoken about the benefit of taking a questioning position to self judgment, checking in with themselves and asking ‘Is this judgment useful for me right now?’, and ‘Do I want to spend time with it?’

If the answer is no, then it is best to leave the judgment and to focus on doing things that are useful for you right now.

Remember that these judgments are not truths about you; they are ideas and pressures that men can face. It’s OK for you to decide that some judgments are not really useful for how you want to live your life.

What am I feeling?

When you are asked ‘how are you feeling?’, it can sometimes be difficult to know how to answer. This not because men don’t have feelings; obviously we do.

When thinking about sexual abuse, sadness, shame and confusion are common emotions. These are normal feelings to have when treated in such an unfair, criminal way. Yet it is also quite understandable to want to avoid these intense emotions.

Distraction, ‘numbing’ or avoiding emotions are strategies for dealing with intense emotional pain that are sometimes useful in stopping us from feeling overwhelmed.

One emotion that men are often quite familiar with is anger. Anger can be useful in encouraging action against injustice, however, it can also lead to aggression and become a ‘cover’ for some uncomfortable yet important emotions (see www.livingwell.org.au for tips for ‘Dealing with Anger’).

What we hear from a lot of men, however, is that eventually these difficult emotions find ways to grab your attention, often at a time of crisis. We also hear that when shutting down has become a habit, it can make it more difficult to experience pleasant feelings or any sense of joy in life.

Tips for making sense of emotions:

The idea of making space, room, or time for all of life's emotions can be helpful. It is not about some emotions being good or bad, but being able to tolerate and experience a range of emotions as part of living life to the full.

You might be ready to start taking some risks with allowing yourself to really notice what you are feeling.

This can be extremely challenging, because it can initially feel like things are getting worse. Feelings that have been buried or ignored for a long time are starting to be noticed and experienced.

As we said before, this is why it can be important to have a reasonably 'secure base' to work from when doing this work. Without a secure base, it is very difficult to experience distressing feelings without getting thrown off course.

As you get used to these feelings, you slowly begin to realise that you can actually cope with them. Over time they will become less daunting, and you might even find that you experience other, more positive feelings, in a different way too.

Over the page is a step-by-step process that can help with making sense of emotions.

An exercise to get to know your emotions:

- Try to pay attention to your physiological responses to different situations. This includes your heart rate, breathing, sweating, shaking/trembling, tension in some muscles, ‘the hairs on the back of your neck standing up’...all these are clues to what’s going on emotionally.
- Start with ‘big’ categories. Is my heart beat fast or slow? Is my breathing deep or shallow? Does my face feel hot or cool? Then try narrowing it down with more precise descriptions (cool as tap water or cold like ice?), or making a visual scale rating how fast or slow (from 1-10), how hot or cold, etc.
- Once you’ve noticed and described these physiological sensations, try naming the emotion that goes with it. Again, start big (e.g. sad), and get more detailed (grief, regret, disappointment...).
- Once you have given it a name, ask: *Is it OK for me to feel this? Why/why not?*
- Are there social judgments about men expressing this emotion? Who with/where would it be OK to express this feeling without being negatively judged?

Getting to know your feelings and emotions in this way can gradually help with making decisions about whether to try and ‘stay with’ your feelings. We are not suggesting that there is a wrong or right decision, but that you can make your own decisions.

Parenting

Becoming a parent can be a challenging time for anyone, and men who were subjected to sexual abuse as children commonly face some added pressures.

Key times that can trigger difficult thoughts and feelings can include finding out about the pregnancy, the birth of the child, and when the child approaches the age that you were when the abuse was happening. Difficulties might be related to memories of the abuse itself, about your abilities as a parent, or both. It might also be fears about your child's vulnerability to abuse.

Some men worry they will hurt or abuse their children and limit their involvement, especially with tasks that require close physical contact such as bathing and nappy changing. Sadly this can lead to men missing out on important parts of their child's development and life.

Remember that parenting is a challenging and sometimes overwhelming experience for most people. Despite the challenges, many men, including men who have experienced sexual abuse, find ways to be caring, protective, and nurturing parents and grandparents.

Take time to work out your own thoughts about the kind of parent you want to be. We are not born with parenting skills; there is information available to support you in becoming a parent. www.parentline.com.au

Justice

Sexual abuse is a crime. Unfortunately, it is still the case that the vast majority of offenders are never convicted in court, even if they are actually charged. However, there have been big steps forward in the way our legal systems deal with crimes of sexual abuse, and you have every right to pursue prosecution of the offender(s) through the legal system.


Prosecuting the offender or offenders

It is very common for people who have suffered sexual abuse to delay reporting it to the police.

Thankfully, the law in most Australian States recognizes this, and child sexual abuse that happened in the past can still be reported to police and investigated even if it was many years ago.

It's entirely your choice about whether to report sexual abuse to the police or not. The first step can be talking to a friend or counsellor who will not pressure you one way or another, but help you to think through in a realistic way the reasons for reporting or not reporting.

There are now specialist police who are trained to understand this and be alert to how well you are coping with the process. In order to do their job, the police will ask you about details of your experience. Some of these could be the very details you have been trying your best not to think about for years.



Generally, giving a statement to police about sexual abuse is an exhausting and painful process. It is common to feel quite depressed or distressed afterwards. It's important to have realistic expectations about both the process and the eventual outcome, and to have a good support team in place.

The laws about sexual assault are different from State to State. Visit livingwell.org.au to find links to relevant information for your state.

Compensation

In some cases, a court can order that compensation be paid as part of sentencing. Where the offender was found not guilty or not prosecuted, some Australian States have systems in place to provide compensation to victims of serious crimes, including sexual abuse (check out Victim Assist Queensland and the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal in Victoria). It may also be possible to pursue 'civil' action to claim compensation from the offender(s), especially if the abuse happened in an institution such as a school, church or children's home.

While the amount of compensation will rarely feel like it comes anywhere close to adequate, it can help with the cost of things like counselling, safety measures, or other expenses related to recovering from sexual abuse.

In any legal matter, it is always worth finding a lawyer to give you advice. Many lawyers will not charge up-front fees for compensation claims; they will deduct their fees from the compensation amount.

Revenge

When the abuser(s) do not face court or they get found not guilty in court, this can cause immense frustration and anger. It is completely legitimate to want the offender held to account, and to have the injustice of the abuse acknowledged by the courts (which hold a special position as a kind of 'representative' of society). When this doesn't happen ideas of revenge and retribution can start to appear.

Men can often feel pressure to take matters into their own hands and take vengeance on the offenders directly. Revenge can get confused with justice and when this happens it rarely leads to a positive outcome. It may result in further abuse and violence, increased frustration, or, at the extreme, can result in you appearing before a court, when it is the person who offended against you who should be prosecuted.

Confrontation

Some people may feel that they need to confront the offender, to have them acknowledge their actions and to hear the impacts. In our experience, this is only helpful when it has been carefully planned with professional support. The person must have already acknowledged their crime and taken some steps towards taking responsibility, such as making admissions to police and undergoing counselling.

If the person is not willing to admit their crimes or to respectfully hear the people who have experienced abuse speak, such confrontations have the potential to increase distress, anger and feelings of powerless.

'The best revenge is to live well'

It is important not to lose sight of the bigger purpose of these thoughts about justice, revenge, and so on: to live a satisfying, fulfilling life. Try to focus on your own priorities and preferences for your life.

Celebrating life

It is worth noticing that despite whatever abuse you have experienced and whatever problems this may have brought into your life, you are still here.

Not only are you still here, but you are doing things to build the life you want, not a life that is determined by your experiences of abuse.

Take time to acknowledge what you have achieved. What do you feel good about? What are you proud of?

It could be a relationship, parenting, success in work, or sports achievements. It could be something you have done to help someone else.

It could be standing up against injustices, no matter how small or large.

It could be anything that reflects the life you want to build for yourself, based on your own values, beliefs and preferences.



Notes

A series of horizontal dotted lines for taking notes, spanning the width of the page.

Useful Contacts

National Sexual Assault, Family & Domestic Violence Counselling Line	(1800 737 732) 1800 RESPECT
Lifeline	13 11 14
Mensline Australia	1300 789 978
Queensland State Wide Sexual Assault Helpline	1800 010 120
Victim Assist Qld - LinkUp	1300 546 587
Victoria Sexual Assault Crisis Line	1800 806 292
Living Well	1300 114 397

Living Well	www.livingwell.org.au
1 in 6	www.1in6.org
South East CASA (Vic)	www.secasa.org.au
Male Survivor	www.malesurvivor.org
Beyond Blue	www.beyondblue.org.au
Mensline	www.menslineaus.org.au
Go For Your Life	www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au
Better Health channel	www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Reach Out	http://au.reachout.com
Parentline	www.parentline.com.au

Some of these websites were consulted in putting together this guide book. For detailed reference sources and more useful material - see the link on www.livingwell.org.au

This book is written to provide men with some practical information and support about dealing with the effects of sexual abuse. We have tried to keep it manageable, both in terms of it's size and the level of detail.

Most of all we hope that it offers some useful ideas about taking care of yourself.

>> Cameron Boyd and Gary Foster PhD

Words of encouragement

"Its not who you are, what you do in life defines who you are. The abuse happened to you not because of you. The abuse does not define you...love yourself."

>> Man age 45, sexually abused from age 9-10

"You possess great knowledge and skills relating to survival and living, make the most of these and be kind to yourself always, you are worth it, as am I."

>> Man age 47, sexually abused from age 11-15



livingwell.org.au



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