



## **HOW TO COPE WHEN YOU HAVE BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED**

**An Information Leaflet for Young People**

## **IF YOU HAVE BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED**

If you have been sexually abused remember, IT WAS NEVER YOUR FAULT.

You are not alone! In Northern Ireland, almost half of all cases of sexual abuse reported to the police are under eighteen years of age.

Children, teenagers like you, and adults find it hard to tell anyone about the abuse. But remember, as hard as it is to talk about it, it is an important step towards recovery. This information leaflet has been written to help you understand what you might be feeling and thinking and also where to seek help. It is up to you to decide what is right for you.

### **THE EFFECTS**

As a victim of sexual abuse, you may be feeling or thinking one or more of the following:

- You may feel embarrassment because you think you did not do enough to stop the abuse happening.
- You may feel guilty because some of things that happened to you, you enjoyed.
- You may feel afraid or insecure in case the abuser comes back.
- You may feel anxious of what might happen if people find out.
- You may feel dirty.
- You may be worried about being pregnant.
- You may feel angry and wanting to blame others for letting it happen.
- You may think you are to blame, particularly if you had taken alcohol or drugs at the time the abuse occurred.
- You may be worried that you have contracted a sexually transmitted infection.
- You may be confused about what happened and why it was wrong.
- You may think of running away.
- You may think of hurting yourself. If you feel like this at any time, tell someone who can listen and help you. There are phone lines

listed at the back of this leaflet may be able to help you cope with those feelings in other ways.

As a victim of sexual abuse you may or may not be physically experiencing one or more of the following:

- Pain around your bottom (vagina or anus), including pain when going to the toilet.
- Redness, rash, swelling or tears around your bottom or vagina.
- Stomach pains, headaches, leg pains, throat infections, asthma, as a result of being anxious.
- Problems sleeping.
- Loss of appetite.

## **WHAT IS SEXUAL ABUSE**

Sexual abuse can take many forms. It includes forcing, inviting or encouraging others to take part in sexual activities. These activities may involve physical contact such as touching of private parts by, for example, a hand or mouth. It may also include penetrating or entering the vagina or the bottom, however slight by a penis, finger or other object.

Sexual abuse may also involve no physical contact at all. A young person may have been made to look at or take part in the making of sexually abusive material or photographs or being made to watch sexual activities. These are all forms of sexual abuse.

## **WHAT THE LAW SAYS**

Although sexual activity in itself is not an offence in Northern Ireland over the age of seventeen (sixteen if you are married), sexually active young people up to the age of eighteen may still be in need of protection, for example from abuse and exploitation. Many young people under the age of eighteen, however, do have a healthy interest in sex and sexual relationships. It is important therefore that you, as a young person, are able to understand and consent to the sexual activity you become involved in.

Sexual activity between young people who are about the same age may be upsetting to your parent(s) or carer(s) and while it may be illegal it is not usually considered to be abuse unless there is some form of force or intimidation. However, a sexual relationship between a fifteen-year-old girl and a twenty-six year old man may be an entirely different matter.

**REMEMBER:** When it comes to sexual abuse force is rarely necessary because, in most cases the abuser is someone you know and trust! A young person's willingness and silence is often won through treats, tricks, bribes or threats.

## **WHAT IS CONSENT?**

Consent is given where you have the knowledge and understanding to give your approval. Words or actions used by you show that you are freely in agreement to sexual activity taking place. Consent CANNOT be given where, because of age, illness, severe learning or physical disability, being asleep, unconscious or under the influence of drink or drugs, a freely given agreement could not occur.

Consent is also not given in situations where you are unable to show your disagreement to sexual activity. This could include circumstances involving the use of weapons or where someone hurts or threatens to hurt you or someone close to you.

Consent is also not given when someone you love or trust, for example a parent or teacher, encourages, manipulates, intimidates or puts pressure on you to take part in sexual activity.

## **WHO ELSE DOES SEXUAL ABUSE AFFECT?**

Sexual abuse can occur, not only against you, but also, for example, against other family members, a boyfriend/girlfriend, other friends and strangers. It can take place in any setting, including home, school or other public places. It can happen at any time in life from infancy to old age and involves girls and boys, men and women both as victims and abusers. Many different types of groups can experience specific problems in relation to sexual abuse. These include other young people with disabilities; those with mental health problems; those who are same sex attracted and bisexual; those from different cultures and religious backgrounds than you; homeless people; and young people living away from home.

## **WHAT DOES A 'SEX ABUSER' MEAN?**

A sex abuser, often known as sex offender, is a person who displays all those kinds of sexually harmful behaviour already mentioned. The abuser may act alone, in pairs, or in groups. He/she may be someone who has been convicted in a court of law of a sexual offence. If this is the case he/she must tell police their name and where they live. However, a sex offender may also be someone who has abused, but who has never been convicted. Furthermore, a sex offender may be someone whose behaviour and identity is only known to you. Sometimes an abuser's name or identity is not known, for example in the case of a sexual assault by a stranger, or the sexual abuse of a child or young person over the Internet.

## **HOW CAN LIFE BE MADE BETTER FOR YOU?**

You have been sexually abused. **REMEMBER:** No matter what, it was not your fault. You did not cause it or deserve for it to have happened.

Your abuser is at fault. He or she has done a sexual thing or things to you, a young person. These things are against the law.

The problem lies with your abuser's behaviour. Your abuser might not be all bad. Indeed you may still like or love him or her. However, it was their behaviour that was bad or wrong. They too need help.

Many grown-ups who were sexually abused at your age were never allowed, or ever had the opportunity, to talk about what had happened to them when they were young. Many have gone on to suffer short term and/or long term distress or difficulties. It is therefore important you have the opportunity to talk about what you are feeling and thinking now.

A trained and experienced counsellor can help you talk about and help you understand what has happened. Trained counsellors or therapists have worked with many other young people who have experienced what you have experienced. They will help you work through the many confusing feelings brought on by sexual abuse.

Your family members may sometimes feel that they need support too. They can also experience shock, anger and confusion, particularly when the abuser is a relative or trusted family friend. Help is also available for them.

## **WHO CAN YOU TALK TO?**

You may be afraid to talk about what has happened for fear of being blamed, disbelieved or rejected. You may want to deny or forget about what has happened or make it sound far less than what it was. You may want to protect others including, sometimes, the abuser.

REMEMBER: it's the abuser to blame, not you.

Even though you have a close relationship with your parent(s) or carer(s) you may not want to tell them about the abuse. This is because of all of the reasons mentioned above and more, for example, you may have been warned or threatened not to tell. Don't forget, although concerned, your parent(s) or carer(s) will love you like before. He/she will get the right help and give you protection from further abuse. This is also the opportunity for you and your parent or carer to talk about how to protect you. However, if you have difficulty telling a parent or carer, or if the abuser is someone close and you feel you may have a bad time from other relatives, there are other people or organisations to speak with. Contact details are included at the end of this leaflet.

Although you are entitled to personal privacy, there are occasions when adults or organisations must share some of the information you have told them with others. This is only done if it's in your best interests. Either way, when adults or organisations make decisions about you they must listen carefully to what you want and feel. You too have a right to say what you think about anything that affects you regardless of your age, race, gender, religion, language, disability, opinion or family background.

### **WHAT ABOUT MEDICAL ATTENTION?**

Not only is it important for you to talk about what you are feeling and thinking, it is also important for you to meet with a specially trained Doctor. Often there are no medical symptoms that require attention, but sometimes, as previously listed, there are. This Doctor will also be able to give you advice about the possibility of pregnancy and contracting a sexually transmitted infection.

By meeting a specially trained Doctor, who has experience working with other young people who have been abused, this can reassure you that your body is okay and that you will be fine again. Your parent or carer, Social Worker, Family Doctor or any of the organisations listed overleaf will help arrange this meeting for you.

## **DO I HAVE TO TELL POLICE WHAT HAPPENED?**

Sexually abusing or sexually assaulting another person is against the Law. However, it is up to you to decide whether or not you wish to tell a police officer about it. The reason the police want to know what happened to you is so that they can find the person responsible and try to prevent the same thing happening to you again or to someone else. If you are not sure about reporting the matter to the police you can contact your local PSNI Child Abuse Investigation Unit or PSNI Rape Crime Unit and they can give you more information about the reporting process. Contact details are provided at the end of this leaflet.

## **WHAT DO THE POLICE NEED TO KNOW?**

Police need to find out exactly what happened to you, including where and how the abuse happened and as much as you can remember about the person responsible. This will mean you will be asked a lot of questions some of which you may find difficult or unpleasant to answer. However, by telling the truth you are not doing anything wrong. The Police Officer who will be asking the questions will be a specially trained officer whose role it is to investigate this type of crime. Mostly, the police officer will not be in uniform. If you are under seventeen years of age a specially trained Social Worker may also be present. This is to ensure that your welfare, during and following any police investigation, is looked after.

The questions that are asked of you and the answers that you provide are normally recorded on video in private and in an informal setting. This can only be done with your permission. If you need additional support during this period, this will be provided. Other Police Officers and Social Workers will not know anything about your 'complaint'. Only those few who need to know will be informed.

## **MEDICAL EXAMINATION**

In most cases of sexual abuse you will be asked by police to agree to be medically examined by a Doctor. This examination will take place here at The Rowan. The Doctor concerned will have been trained to examine young people who have been sexually abused. You will also be asked beforehand to give your permission to the examination.

The purpose of the medical examination is to firstly make sure that you receive any medical attention that you require, if you have not already done so (as previously mentioned). Secondly, the medical examination is also about obtaining any evidence that may help find the person responsible. Any evidence obtained may be used in any future criminal proceedings in court. This is important as some types of evidence may be present

immediately after you were sexually abused although will disappear as time passes.

**REMEMBER:** Even if you choose not to tell police about what happened you can still receive the medical treatment you require. The evidence, if any, retained can be used in the future should you later decide to make a 'complaint'.

## **WHAT HAPPENS TO THE PERSON WHO ABUSED ME?**

It is not always possible to give you a complete run down on what occurs after a complaint to the police is made, as each case is different. Either way, if the abuser is known to you or later identified, the person(s) may be arrested by the police and interviewed. Sometimes the police charge the person(s) to go straight to court and sometimes police release the person(s) until they have finished their investigation. Either way, the police will continue to conduct the rest of their investigation as discreetly as possible.

If, after meeting police you choose not to make a complaint, on occasions the Police Officer and Social Worker may still have to take some action. This is only done if you, or other children and young people, need protection from the abuser. For example, if the abuser is living in your house he or she may be asked to live elsewhere until they are safe to return home.

## **WILL I HAVE TO GO TO COURT?**

If you have made a complaint to a Police Officer, once he or she has completed their investigation, a report outlining the circumstances will be sent to the Public Prosecution Services. This may, on occasions, result in a criminal trial where you might be called to court as a witness. The Police Officer in charge of your case will keep you informed.

Lots of young people go to court as witnesses so do not feel you will be alone. It is not always easy to do something new for the first time, but many young people feel better about going to court if they know what to expect before they get there. A handbook for young witnesses will be provided and arrangements will be made to have you supported through this process. This will include showing you the courtroom where the criminal trial will eventually take place.

At a criminal trial there will be a Judge, quite often a Jury, a Solicitor and/or a Barrister(s) prosecuting the case and a Solicitor and/or Barrister(s) representing the person who abused you. This person will also be in court. You may be asked questions about what you told police and, if your complaint was recorded by video, this may also be played. However, when you are asked questions you will most likely not be in the courtroom itself but rather a small room close by that has a video link to the court. This will prevent you from seeing your abuser. If this is to happen it will be explained to you. There

will also be a private room for you and any of your friends or relatives to wait in while the criminal trial is ongoing.

Outside of the court there are laws that prevent the likes of newspapers, radio and television from printing your name or telling people who you are.

By being a witness, you will be doing an important job but you are not responsible for what the court decides. Whether or not the person who abused you is convicted services are still available so that you can discuss your feelings and emotional reactions in confidence.

If the person is convicted he or she may go to prison. The Judge will decide on this. Whether convicted or not, or whether they go to prison or not, they will be assessed by people in authority as to what future risk they may pose to you or others. If a risk is identified, steps will be taken to prevent him or her from re-offending.

If you have been the victim of any kind of sexual violence you may be eligible to make a claim from The Compensation Agency. Contact a Victim Support Volunteer, details of which are at the end of this leaflet, for further information.

#### **AND FINALLY .....**

Regardless of whether or not you make a complaint to the police it is most important that you have the opportunity to understand where your thoughts and feelings are coming from and how to deal with the painful experiences that have affected you.

The organisations listed overleaf will listen to you and not judge. They will also give you the space and time to express your feelings in a healthy way.

**REMEMBER:** Never believe someone who tells you it's your fault. It is never your fault.



## POLICE SERVICE OF NORTHERN IRELAND

Should you need to report a sexual crime please contact the police on 0845 600 8000 or in an emergency dial '999'.

If you are not sure about reporting the matter to the police you can contact your local Child Abuse Investigation Unit (CAIU) and they can give you more information about the reporting process.

Antrim CAIU 24 Castle Street ANTRIM BT41 4JE  Telephone (028) 9448 2633	Grosvenor Road CAIU 105-107 Grosvenor Road BELFAST BT12 4GL  Telephone (028) 9070 0604
Willowfield CAIU 277 Woodstock Road BELFAST BT6 8PR  Telephone (028) 9025 9832	Coleraine CAIU 17 Lodge Road COLERAINE BT52 1LY  Telephone (028) 7028 0904
Dundonald CAIU 825-827 Upper Newtownards Road DUNDONALD BT16 1RF  Telephone (028) 9056 1759	Maydown CAIU 4 Maydown Road LONDONDERRY BT47 6SJ  Telephone (028) 7186 1355
Newry CAIU (Ardmore) 3 Belfast Road NEWRY BT34 1EF  Telephone (028) 3083 2011	Enniskillen CAIU 48 Queen Street ENNISKILLEN BT74 7JR  Telephone (028) 6632 1562

## Where to Get Help

If sexual violence has affected you or someone you know, either directly or indirectly, there are a number of other sources of help and support. You could contact the PSNI (0845 600 8000) or Social Services (see Health and Social Care Trusts overleaf) or you could talk to your GP. The following organisations can also help.

<p>Brook Advisory Centre (for under 19s) 29a North Street BELFAST</p> <p>Telephone (028) 9032 8866 <a href="http://www.brook.org.uk">www.brook.org.uk</a></p>	<p>Cara-Friend (Gay and Lesbian Helpline)</p> <p>Telephone (028) 9032 2023</p>
<p>Child Exploitation &amp; Online Centre (CEOP) 33 Vauxhall Bridge Road LONDON</p> <p>Telephone 0870 000 3344 <a href="http://www.ceop.gov.uk">www.ceop.gov.uk</a></p>	<p>Children's Law Centre Advice about law and policy affecting children and young people in Northern Ireland</p> <p>Telephone (028) 9024 5704</p>
<p>Childline Queen House 14 Queen Street BELFAST</p> <p>Telephone 0870 336 2945 Free 24 hour Helpline: 0800 1111 <a href="http://www.childline.org.uk">www.childline.org.uk</a></p>	<p>Guardian Ad Litem Agency Centre House 79 Chichester Street BELFAST</p> <p>Telephone (028) 9031 6550</p>
<p>Kidscape</p> <p>Telephone 020 7730 3300 (10 am – 4 pm)</p> <p><a href="http://www.kidscape.org.uk">www.kidscape.org.uk</a></p>	<p>NI Commissioner for Children &amp; Young People Millennium House 17-25 Great Victoria Street BELFAST</p> <p>Telephone (028) 9031 1616 <a href="http://www.niccy.org">www.niccy.org</a></p>
<p>NSPCC National Child Protection Helpline</p> <p>Free 24 hour Helpline: 0800 800 5000</p> <p>NSPCC Text phone: 0800 056 0566 <a href="http://www.help@nspcc.org.uk">www.help@nspcc.org.uk</a></p>	<p>NSPCC Northern Ireland Regional office</p> <p>Telephone (028) 9035 1135</p> <p><a href="http://www.nspcc.org.uk">www.nspcc.org.uk</a></p>

<p>Parents Advice Centre</p> <p>Telephone (028) 9023 8800  <a href="http://www.pachelp.org">www.pachelp.org</a></p>	<p>Rape Crisis &amp; Sexual Abuse Centre  29 Donegall Street  BELFAST</p> <p>Telephone (028) 9032 9002  (10 am – 6 pm)  <a href="http://www.rapecrisisni.com">www.rapecrisisni.com</a></p>
<p>Regional Suicide Prevention Helpline  - Lifeline</p> <p>Telephone 0808 808 8000</p>	<p>The Rowan  Sexual Assault Referral Centre</p> <p>Telephone 0800 3894424</p>
<p>Samaritans  5 Wellesley Avenue  BELFAST</p> <p>Telephone 0845 790 9090  <a href="http://www.samaritans.org">www.samaritans.org</a></p>	<p>Stop It Now</p> <p>Telephone 0808 100 0900 (24 hour  helpline)</p> <p><a href="mailto:help@stopitnow.org.uk">help@stopitnow.org.uk</a></p>
<p>Victim Support Northern Ireland  Annsgate House  70-74 Ann Street  BELFAST</p> <p>Telephone (028) 9024 4039  National Support Line: 0845 303 0900  <a href="http://www.victimssupportni.org.uk">www.victimssupportni.org.uk</a></p>	<p>Young Witness Support Scheme  (NSPCC) (NI)</p> <p>Antrim Courthouse (028) 9448 7533</p> <p>Belfast: (028) 9024 0847  Foyle: (028) 7126 6789</p>

## **Health and Social Care Trusts**

**Look in your telephone directory for the telephone number of your Local Office or telephone:**

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust  
(028) 90 507000

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust  
0300 100 0300

Northern Health and Social Care Trust  
0300 1234 333

Southern Health and Social Care Trust  
0800 7837745

Western Health and Social Care Trust  
028 7131 4090

**Regional Emergency Social Work Service**  
028 9504 9999