

# KEEPING YOURSELF SAFE

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There are many aspects to keeping yourself safe. One is taking care of your body and not hurting yourself. People who've suffered sexual abuse as children sometimes hurt themselves by:

- **Cutting themselves.**
- **Burning themselves.**
- **Getting involved in fights.**
- **Abusing alcohol or drugs (if this applies to you see 'Finding your way through addiction').**
- **Getting themselves in dangerous situations (e.g. where they're likely to be assaulted).**
- **Taking risks with their physical safety (e.g. driving drunk).**
- **Getting involved with people who abuse or assault them.**

There are many reasons why individuals take it out on their own body or put themselves in situations where they might get hurt:

- **As a child you may have been constantly scared. Fear like that can affect the way the body works, making it hard to relax and calm down. This can get carried through into adulthood. Hurting yourself may become a way to get relief and calm down.**
- **If all you've ever known is pain and hurt, then you grow up expecting it. When it's not there you may create it yourself – almost like an addiction.**
- **Hurting yourself is a type of self-preservation. As a child you had no control over the abuse – but if you inflict pain on your own body now, there may be a sense that you can control the amount of it.**
- **Your abuser may have tried to brainwash you into thinking that your body deserved to be hurt.**
- **You may hurt so badly inside that there seems just no way to express it. Hurting your body is a way of saying just how bad you feel.**
- **You may feel completely numb – like you have no feelings. As painful as it is, hurting yourself proves that you feel something, even if it's only pain.**
- **You may feel so overwhelmed by anger and hate and worry that if you express it you may hurt someone. The only place for this rage to go seems to be in on yourself.**

If you do hurt yourself it is important to remember that it's something you've done to survive. It's not just the same as wanting to kill yourself. (If you do want to kill yourself see 'Staying Alive.')

You have to live and handle intolerable levels of fear, rage and pain. People are rarely encouraged to express their feelings, let alone deep distress. You coped as best you could given a bad situation. Try to hold onto that thought if you feel the way you've coped is wrong.

### ***What to do if you feel caught in a pattern of hurting yourself***

- **Tell someone you trust about it. Use your support system. (See 'Getting Support In A Crisis.')** Like abuse, self-harm occurs in secret and seems filled with shame. Sharing feelings with trustworthy people breaks into the cycle of shame.
- **Do something about physical stress. See 'Reducing Physical Tension.'** You may have got used to high levels of tension when you were abused as a child. Hurting yourself, or putting yourself in situations where you might get hurt, is a way of handling this tension. It's important to learn new ways.
- **Control the pace at which you address abuse issues. This applies whether you're having 'therapy', talking to friends, or reading books. You have the right to control when you look at issues and how fast. Hurting yourself may have been a way of dealing with feelings inside. If you go too fast, to deep, too soon, you may find that you are harming yourself more to deal with the feelings that come up. If therapy is getting too 'heavy' you could tell your counsellor you need a break, or need to focus on other issues. Give some thought to when it feels safe for you to read books on abuse.**
- **Think up some safe ways to express anger and rage. This helps form the habit of getting feelings from inside to outside without hurting yourself or anyone else. Some ideas are:**
  - Hard exercise: running, swimming.
  - Punching something that can't hurt your hand such as a punch bag, (with boxing gloves on), or some big thick pillows.
  - Smashing glass bottles at a recycling plant.

If you're not physically fit, don't push yourself too hard.

- **Your anger and rage may include fantasies of revenge against your abuser. This is understandable. It's important to talk about this to those who are supporting you. You have every right to these feelings. But in order to keep safe don't act on them. You might end up getting physically hurt or suffering even more than you already have. Although you have every right to your feelings**

**you don't have the right to physically hurt anyone. You may want to consider taking legal action against your abuser and you should contact a solicitor for more advice on this.**

- **Avoid alcohol and non-prescription drugs. They impair thinking and make it more likely you'll put yourself in a situation where there's danger. If you feel addicted to these substances, see 'Finding a way through addiction.'**
- **Try to take care of the basics of physical health: eating, sleeping, taking exercise. This may be difficult if you're feeling down. But it's important in helping you move away from harming yourself towards looking after yourself. (If sleep is a problem see 'Coping with Sleep Difficulties.')**
- **Explore ways of caring and nurturing your body. You could have regular physical treats such as:**
  - **Hot baths with oils.**
  - **Your favourite foods.**
  - **A day at a health club.**
- **The issue of touch is important. As a child you may not have had control over who touched your body. Now you can say who is allowed to touch you and where. This goes for both intimate and casual touch. Take some time to consider what touch you want and what touch you don't want. Then tell those around you what you expect.**
- **If you're in a pattern of cutting, burning, or harming your body try to identify when it occurs. Do certain triggers seem to make you do it? Does it occur at particular times of the day? After you've been doing certain things? How are you feeling before it happens? If you can identify when you're likely to harm yourself you may be able to come up with a plan to avoid it. Like doing some relaxation, or hitting the punch bag. Your plan could include contacting someone from your Support Team and sharing how you're feeling with them. The idea is to find ways of expressing and coping with the way you feel inside without harming yourself.**
- **If you continue to do it despite your best efforts, try not to criticise yourself. Self-criticism is just another way of hurting yourself! If you feel trapped in a pattern it can be very difficult to get out. Try to look after your body after you've hurt yourself. If you've burned yourself use cold water to lessen the damage to your skin. If you've cut yourself gently clean and dress the wound. See if a member of your Support team is prepared to help you look after your burns/wounds. They'll need to know that you're not to be criticised for what you've**

**done – you coped as best you could with the feelings you have inside.**

- **If you cut or burn yourself you may consider going to casualty. If it's a deep cut which needs stitching you may need to go. Casualty staff have not always been supportive or understanding of people who harm themselves. <sup>1</sup> Survivors have reported being stitched without adequate anaesthetic or not being given pain relief. There are some excellent staff as well. If you go to casualty always try and take someone with you – a member of your Support team – who'll help you argue for your rights. You deserve good medical care.**
- **If you're finding it hard to control the way you're cutting / burning / harming yourself you could consider carrying a first aid kit. This might consist of plasters, bandages, butterfly stitches, antiseptic ointment, cotton wool – things you can buy at a chemist. Survivors who feel they cannot stop cutting themselves have even carried a sterile blade so they can reduce the risk of further harm from infected cuts. This might not seem like looking after your body, but self harm can be a difficult pattern to break, and it may be the only way some Survivors have learned to cope with stress. Whilst you're tackling the difficult task of learning new ways you may as well minimise the damage your body suffers.**
- **Try to remember that you don't have to punish yourself now in order to recover. Remember the pain of the little child inside you who was abused has suffered enough. You are in no way to blame for the abuse.**