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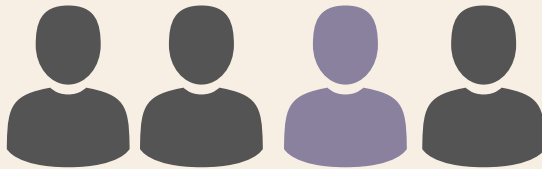
# Providing healthcare for young people who are survivors of sexual violence and abuse

A guide for healthcare professionals



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The Survivors Trust and Brook are collaborating as part of the **#CheckWithMeFirst project** to help raise awareness of the small adjustments healthcare professionals like you can make to help make healthcare services more accessible for young people who make be survivors of rape, sexual abuse and sexual violence.



**1 in 4 girls and women\***

**1 in 6 men and boys\***

experience sexual violence or abuse at some time in their life



Many survivors of sexual violence and abuse find healthcare appointments and physical examinations difficult, triggering and anxiety-inducing. This can apply to every kind of healthcare appointment, from check-ups with a GP, visiting the dentist, accessing sexual health services, or undergoing a medical procedure at a hospital. Some survivors find healthcare appointments so distressing that they actively avoid making or attending them.

## How can you help?

This guide outlines some simple actions healthcare professionals can take to make healthcare appointments and procedures easier for young people who might be survivors of rape or sexual abuse.

***If you would prefer this guide in a different format, please contact [nhs.checkwithmefirst@thesurvivorstrust.org](mailto:nhs.checkwithmefirst@thesurvivorstrust.org).***

\*The above statistics refer to girls/women and boys/men. This is because there's a lack of data about trans and non-binary survivors of sexual violence, but everyone deserves help, support and understanding regardless of their sexuality or gender.



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# Tips for healthcare professionals

As a healthcare professional you will know that many people find healthcare appointments and procedures uncomfortable, stressful, and even traumatic.

However, for survivors of sexual abuse or other psychological trauma, these appointments may be **particularly difficult** and can sometimes trigger unwanted thoughts and memories of abuse.

Triggering elements of screening can include: the invasive and intimate nature of the examination; the language used; the sense of an unequal power dynamic between healthcare professional and patient; physical pain; and much more. This can lead to **severe distress, dissociation** and can further **re-traumatise** the individual.

With 1 in 4 girls and women and 1 in 6 boys and men experiencing sexual abuse in their lifetime, it's likely that you will be screening and examining people who are survivors of rape and sexual trauma on a regular basis. **In this guide we've outlined some simple actions you can do to help make your patients and service-users, many of whom will be survivors of sexual violence or abuse, feel more comfortable.**



The **SMALLEST** action by a healthcare professional can make a **BIG** difference to a survivor's experience.



# 3 SMALL ACTIONS

to help survivors of rape, sexual abuse or assault feel more **comfortable** and **empowered** during healthcare appointments



## CHECK

Ask the individual if they are comfortable **before & during** each step of the appointment. This is especially important if you need to touch the person, even if they have given you consent to touch them elsewhere.



## EXPLAIN

Help the service-user feel at ease by **explaining each step** of the examination **before you do it** & encourage them to ask questions.



## REASSURE

Remind the individual that they can **stop the procedure** at any time – they are in control. Agree with the service-user a non-verbal signal they can use to ask you to stop, and be mindful that freezing up and not responding to you is also a sign that you should stop and check in with them.

# Dissociation & non-verbal communication

Many survivors of sexual abuse dissociate when they are in triggering situations. Make sure to always use the person's name, as this can help to avoid this. If a service-user seems distracted, like they are not 'present', or confused, they may be dissociating. **It can help to talk to the person about what is in the room and to encourage them to engage in their five senses.** What can they see or hear? Remind them where they are, what is happening, and that they are safe. [Click here for more information about dissociation and practical tips for survivors.](#)

A survivor of sexual violence or abuse experiencing a trauma-response may be unable to speak, or raise their hand, so **be aware of subtle non-verbal cues.** Not everyone will be able to raise their hand, or speak during an appointment, so alternative signals may be needed.



## Aftercare

At the end of the screening, try to take a moment to remind the service-user to take time to look after themselves following the appointment. Acts of self care such as calling a friend or enjoying a warm drink can help ease feelings of anxiety they may have.

If a service-user has become particularly anxious or distressed it can be helpful to offer them a quiet space to help calm down before they leave, if such a space is available.

The Survivors Trust runs a **free, confidential helpline** (0808 801 0818) for anyone affected by sexual violence, including survivors and the people who work with them. You can **signpost survivors to the helpline for emotional support** following the appointment and are welcome to use it yourself. [Click here for full details.](#)



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## QUESTIONS for healthcare practitioners to ask patients and service-users

Many young people accessing your services will feel nervous, especially survivors of sexual trauma. Here are a few questions you can ask every patient and service-user to help them to feel more comfortable and empowered:

- Is there anything I can do to make this appointment more comfortable for you?
- Are there any phrases or words you want me to avoid saying?
- How will you let me know if you want me to stop?
- Do you have any questions or concerns you would like to discuss?

## Looking after yourself

It can be difficult to support someone through a trauma response and to hear disclosures of sexual violence and abuse. Additionally, some of your colleagues are likely to be survivors of trauma, or perhaps you are a survivor yourself.

It is important for you to take steps to look after yourself and recognise any signs that you are experiencing burnout or being affected by the work that you do. For more information and resources to support you with this, click here to visit The Survivors Trust resources webpage on [Wellbeing](#), or click here to visit the webpage on [Supporting Survivors](#).

**The Survivors Trust helpline is available for anyone affected by sexual violence, including professionals who work with survivors. For free, confidential support and signposting, call 08088 010818.**





# Responding to disclosures

**The majority of survivors accessing your service will not disclose their experiences of sexual assault or abuse to you.**

However, if a survivor does disclose to you, it can be helpful to follow these tips:

- There is no legal requirement to report a disclosure of non-recent sexual assault or abuse made by a non-vulnerable adult. However, if a survivor discloses something which raises concern about a current risk to a child or a vulnerable adult, you will be required to report this under statutory duty. Familiarise yourself with your department's safeguarding policy and procedures so you feel confident that you know exactly what to do in this situation.
- Remember that the person has chosen to speak to you because they **trust** you and feel **safe** with you. Just be yourself, don't try to be an expert.
- Listen to the person and convey genuine belief at what they are telling you. Recognise that harm has been done to the person.
- Be non-judgmental and let the person know that they reacted and coped in whatever ways have been available to them.
- Let them retain control. Ask them what they would like from you – perhaps they would just like you to listen, to tell other healthcare professionals they might see, or would like you to refer them to a specialist service that can offer further support. **[Click here](#)** to find out which The Survivors Trust member agencies offer services in your area.
- Keep communication open. If you do have to report what they say to you, let them know exactly who will have access to that information and why.
- Remember to look after yourself. If you would like support following the disclosure, speak to your supervisor or counsellor, or call The Survivors Trust helpline on 08088 010818.

**For more information on responding to disclosures, [get in touch with The Survivors Trust](#).**



## 5 QUESTIONS for reception staff to ask when service-users book an appointment

It's important to remember a service-user's experience begins long before they arrive at an appointment. A survivor of rape, sexual abuse or sexual assault may be particularly nervous when booking an appointment. It may have taken months, or even years to overcome their anxiety to take this step and pick up the phone.

When booking the appointment, a survivor might feel embarrassed to ask for adjustments, so it's key that administrative and reception teams help put them at ease and support them with any adjustments they need.

**For any service-user booking an appointment screening it can be helpful to ask:**

1. Do you require a single appointment, or if you need more time we can book a double appointment?
2. Would you like to bring someone with you? (If this is possible at your service centre)
3. Would an appointment or phone call with a doctor or nurse before your screening be helpful for you?
4. Do you have a preference for the gender of the healthcare professional carrying out the screening/procedure?
5. Is there anything else we can do to make the appointment more comfortable for you?

**These simple questions can help a survivor of rape, sexual assault or sexual abuse feel empowered and supported from the beginning!**







## Useful links and contacts

### Brook

National charity offering both clinical sexual health services and education and wellbeing services for young people.

**[Click here to visit the Brook website](http://www.brook.org.uk)** ([www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk))

### The Survivors Trust

Membership organisation representing over 120 specialist support services for survivors of rape, sexual abuse, and sexual violence in the UK.

**[Click here to visit The Survivors Trust website](http://www.thesurvivorstrust.org)** ([www.thesurvivorstrust.org](http://www.thesurvivorstrust.org))

Helpline: 08088 010818 (For survivors, professionals, family and supporters)

Email: **[info@thesurvivorstrust.org](mailto:info@thesurvivorstrust.org)**

**[Click here to visit the TST resources website](http://www.tstresources.org)** to access information, survivor videos and practical self-help tips for survivors and anyone who wants to learn more about the impact of sexual violence. ([www.tstresources.org](http://www.tstresources.org))

### #CheckWithMeFirst

- **[Click here](#)** to view our #CheckWithMeFirst animation
- **[Click here](#)** to download the #CheckWithMeFirst Grounding Techniques resource for survivors from The Survivors Trust website
- **[Click here](#)** to download a template survivors can take with them to their healthcare appointments
- **[Click here](#)** to download our guide for young people who are survivors from The Survivors Trust website.



## #CheckWithMeFirst Project

The Survivors Trust has been commissioned by NHS London to run an awareness project which will provide healthcare professionals with resources for treating potential survivors of sexual abuse, giving them the tools and knowledge to confidently engage with and best support these patients and people under their care. [Click here to find out more.](#)

Get in touch with us via email –  
[nhs.checkwithmefirst@thesurvivorstrust.org](mailto:nhs.checkwithmefirst@thesurvivorstrust.org)



If you would prefer this guide in an alternative format, please contact us.