

A Guide for Survivors



Useful Numbers and Links

If you are experiencing distress and feel that you are at risk from harming yourself please call **999**

If you feel distressed and would like to talk to someone immediately please call:

Samaritans - 116 123

Leicestershire Mental Health Crisis Support - 0808 800 3302
0116 225 6000

If you, or someone you know is experiencing or has experienced Domestic Abuse or Sexual Violence, you can access our services in one of the following ways:

Freeva - 0808 80 200 28

24 hour National Domestic Violence Helpline - 0808 2000 247

Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) / Juniper Lodge - 0116 273 3330

Juniper Lodge provides a free and discreet service to anyone aged 18 years and over, male or female that has been subject to a sexual assault.

Victim First - 0800 953 9595

Free, independent and confidential service for victims and witnesses of crime in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland.

First Step - 0116 254 8535

Free, confidential services to male survivors of sexual abuse and their supporters living in the city of Leicester, Leicester and Rutland.

New Dawn New Day - 03333 444 304

Deliver a range of services to vulnerable and socially excluded women designed to meet their multiple and complex needs.

Leicester Rape Crisis / Jasmine House - 0116 255 8852

Provide a safe space where women and girls can access free and confidential services following any form of sexual violence either recently or in the past.

Trade - 0116 254 1747

Trade Sexual Health is a health charity working with the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGB&T) communities of Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland (United Kingdom).

Useful Numbers and Links

The New Futures Project - 0116 251 0803

Support women and young people who are at risk or are currently being sexually exploited. We offer support and counselling services for adults, young people and workers.

Zinthyia Trust - 0116 254 5168

Charity providing information, advice and practical support to alleviate poverty and abuse.

Leicestershire LGBTQ+ Centre - 0116 254 7412

providing support to LGBTQ+ individuals in Leicester, Leicestershire, and Rutland via resources, support services (including counselling) and connecting with others.

Panahghar House - 0800 055 6519

A dedicated specialist BME support service for women and children fleeing domestic violence and other gendered abuse. Providing outreach support, advice, and safe refuge across Leicestershire and Coventry for individuals fleeing abusive relationships.

Hub of Hope

Hub of Hope are the UK's largest mental health support directory. Whether you want to find a service to help you feel better or you want to support someone who is struggling, we can help.

Need help fast? - LLR ICB

The NHS in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland is making it easier for you to get help when you need it quickly, for situations when it isn't life threatening, with two simple steps.

Mental Health Support NHS

Find information, support and resources for your mental health.

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Introduction



This guide is for survivors who may be beginning to explore their experiences and feelings. It is not about rushing or forcing recovery, but about gently supporting you as you take steps toward healing.

Everyone's journey looks different. Some people feel ready to talk, while others may prefer to read, reflect, and take small steps on their own first. Wherever you are, that is okay.

What matters most is knowing:

- The abuse was not your fault.
- You are not alone.
- Healing is possible.

Quetzal is here to walk alongside you, at your pace, when you feel ready.

What is Sexual Abuse

Although this guide mainly focuses on childhood sexual abuse, we think it's important to first understand what sexual abuse is more broadly. This helps clarify some of the questions many of our clients bring with them; one of the most common being "Was I somehow responsible?". Even after surviving the trauma in their childhood, some survivors can find themselves in unhealthy relationships, where their partners can use this belief to subject them to more abuse.

*The definitive answer in all sexual abuse experiences
is that it was NOT YOUR FAULT.*

Abuse is always a misuse of power. It happens when someone forces, pressures, or tricks another person into unwanted sexual activity. This may involve physical contact, or it may happen without touch, such as showing a child pornography or making them keep secrets.

For many survivors, confusion comes from wondering: "Was it really abuse?" or "Was it my fault?" The answer is always the same: you were never responsible. Abuse is always the choice of the person who caused harm.

If you recognise parts of your own experience here, please know that you are not alone. Support is available.

How Confusion Can Happen

-Learning To Trust Yourself Again

When we experience trauma, memories and feelings can become tangled or even blocked out. This can lead to doubt: about what happened, about how we reacted, or about whether we will be believed.

It is common for survivors to ask themselves questions like:

- Why didn't I tell someone?
- Why did I go back?
- Was it my fault?

These questions are natural — they come from the confusion created by the person who caused harm, not from anything you did wrong. People who harm others often blur boundaries, mix fear with false affection, or create situations where children feel they cannot speak out.

At Quetzal, we want you to know: the responsibility always belongs to the person who caused harm. With time and support, you can begin to untangle these doubts and trust yourself again.



How Our Minds and Bodies Try to Protect Us

Our brains and bodies are built to keep us safe. When something frightening happens, we may:

- Fight back,
- Run away (flight),
- Freeze in place,
- Or flop (shut down).



These are automatic survival responses. You don't choose them - your body reacts in the way it thinks will keep you safest in that moment.

Later, survivors sometimes wonder: "Why didn't I scream?" or "Why couldn't I fight back?" The answer is simple: your body was doing its best to protect you.

These protective responses can sometimes stay with us, leading to feelings of anxiety, panic, or disconnection even when we are safe. This is a normal reaction to trauma, not a personal weakness. With gentle support and healing, it is possible to calm these responses and feel safer in the present.

Working with Intrusive Thoughts

-Finding a Kinder Inner Voice

Many survivors describe having thoughts that feel negative or relentless, such as “I’m not good enough” or “It was my fault.” These thoughts can feel loud and hard to switch off.

Rather than trying to silence them completely, one helpful step is learning to respond with kinder, more compassionate words. You might imagine speaking to a younger version of yourself, or to a friend you care about. What gentle words would you offer them?

Changing the way we talk to ourselves takes practice. Even small shifts, repeated over time, can help soften the harshness of intrusive thoughts.



Exercise:

- Write down a difficult thought you often notice.
- Then write down a kinder, opposite thought you’d offer a younger you (perhaps a 7-year-old child).
- Try doing this for a few thoughts each day.

It can help to repeat this for 21 days. Habits form slowly, and the more often you practise, the easier it becomes to speak to yourself with compassion.

Making Space for Difficult Feelings

Feelings like anger, shame, guilt, or loneliness can feel overwhelming. They are not wrong or destructive — they are natural reactions to what happened. The difficulty comes when feelings are pushed down, ignored, or turned inward.

By gently naming and exploring feelings, you begin to take back your voice and your power.

ANGER

Anger tells us our boundaries were crossed. It can come out as resentment, frustration, or rage.

Exercise:

Try writing a letter where you let your anger out fully. You don't need to send it or show anyone. You can keep it, tear it up, or burn it safely. What matters is giving your anger a place to be heard.

SHAME

Shame can silence us but remembering that shame is a defence - not a truth - can help loosen its grip.

Exercise:

Start a shame diary. Write down thoughts that make you feel not good enough (e.g. "I'm not attractive enough," "I don't know enough"). By noticing them, you begin to see when shame is speaking — and that it doesn't define who you are.

GUILT

Guilt is common but misplaced. Survivors often carry responsibility that never belonged to them.

Exercise:

Spend a few minutes each day imagining what self-forgiveness could look and feel like. What would change if you forgave yourself? Who would you want around you? Even if forgiveness feels far away, just imagining it opens the door to gentler thoughts.

LONELINESS

Loneliness can make us feel unseen or unloved. Yet recognising our own strengths can reconnect us to hope.

Exercise:

Think of three people you admire. Under each name, write down five qualities you value in them. These qualities live in you too - that's how you could recognise them in others. Keep the list somewhere visible as a daily reminder of your strengths.

Notes:

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Grounding Techniques

-Coming Back to the Present

When painful memories, panic, or flashbacks arise, grounding techniques can help bring you back to the here and now.

Some ideas you might find useful:

- Focus on your breath, slowly in and out.
- Use the 5-4-3-2-1 method (notice 5 things you see, 4 you feel, 3 you hear, 2 you smell, 1 you taste).
- Hold something comforting, like a warm mug or soft blanket.
- Repeat a kind phrase: "I am safe now. This moment will pass."



Extra grounding exercises:

- Put your hands in warm, then cold water. Notice the difference.
- Take a short mindful walk, counting your steps.
- Savour a food or drink slowly, noticing taste and smell.
- Listen to the sounds around you. What do you hear?
- Try gentle stretching, focusing on how your body feels.

These practices are easier to use in difficult moments if you try them regularly, even when you feel okay.

Practising Self-Care and Self-Love

Self-care doesn't have to mean big changes. Small, everyday acts of kindness toward yourself can build strength over time.

Some gentle ideas:

- Write down compliments or kind words people have said to you.
- Take a mindful walk, noticing your surroundings.
- Do something playful or creative, even for a few minutes.
- Rest when you need to.
- Speak to yourself as you would to a close friend.

More self-care ideas:

- Try cloud-watching or listening to music you love.
- Declutter a small space.
- Stretch or move your body for a few minutes.
- Write a list of favourite things (foods, books, places).
- Unplug from social media for an hour.

Each small act of care is a reminder that you are worthy of love, kindness, and healing.



It's Never Too Late to Talk

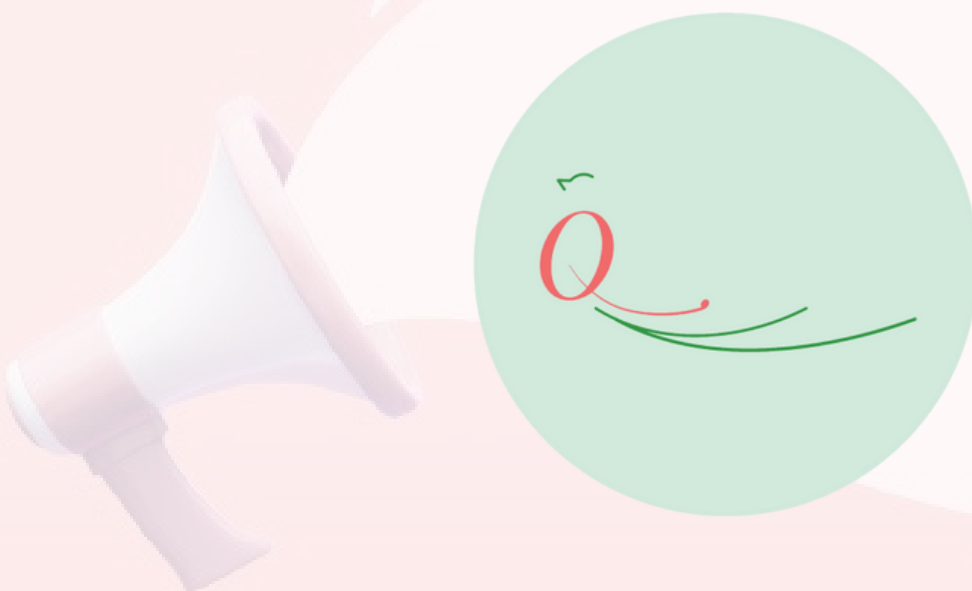
You may have kept your experiences private for a long time. That's okay. Healing has no deadline - you can begin at any stage of life.

Talking about what happened can feel frightening, but many survivors describe it as a turning point toward feeling lighter, freer, and more connected.

At Quetzal, we offer a safe and confidential space where you will be listened to without judgment. You don't have to go through this alone. When you feel ready, we are here to walk alongside you on your journey of healing.

Closing Message

You are strong. You have already survived so much. And with the right support, it is possible to heal, to find peace, and to live the life you deserve. Quetzal is here for you whenever you are ready.



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