

Abuse

What do we mean by abuse?

Abuse is the name we give to behaviour which is felt to be inappropriate, intrusive and damaging, where the recipient feels powerless to stop it. Very often when we talk of abuse, we think of this in relation to the actions of an older person misusing their position of trust in relation to a child or young person. But sometimes adults can find themselves in abusive relationships, or they may experience an attack or assault which brings up feelings similar to those experienced by people abused in childhood.

Abuse can take different forms; it may have been physical, emotional or sexual or a mixture of all three, and it can happen to anyone regardless of gender, ethnic group, culture or age. It's not always easy to recognise that some of these experiences, particularly if you couldn't talk about them at the time, may be responsible for difficulties you are experiencing now.

Feelings and symptoms you might experience

- **depression, low self esteem:** you may feel vulnerable and withdrawn, and be feeling bad about yourself; you may even feel suicidal from time to time
- **anxious and panicky:** in certain circumstances you may have flashbacks or panic attacks
- **sleep disturbance:** you may find getting to sleep or staying asleep difficult or you may have recurrent nightmares
- **mistrustful:** you may find your relationships, particularly sexual relationships, are affected
- **difficulties in concentrating:** it may be hard to think about your university work, or you may find that particular topics or materials you're working on remind you of what has happened
- **self destructive:** sometimes these feelings may make you want to harm yourself in various ways; abuse may give rise to feelings about your body which result in urges to cut yourself, developing an eating disorder or misusing alcohol or drugs.
- **lonely, ashamed and embarrassed:** these feelings are difficult to talk about and it may be hard to realise how widespread this problem is; you may even feel as though it is your fault

It is often hard to begin to talk about these issues, since you may have been threatened by the abuser and worried about getting him or her and yourself into trouble. Often the situation is complicated by the fact that, as much as you hated the abusive behaviour, the abuser was someone you loved and, initially, trusted.

What might help

- remember to have come this far you have a lot of strengths and resources which can help you, if you can get in touch with them
- because of your experiences, you may feel embarrassed or scared to talk to someone else, but it is important not to bottle up your feelings; try to talk to someone you trust about what is troubling you; some suggested sources of help are given below
- you may be feeling that you are alone in having been through such experiences - sometimes it can help to know that abuse in childhood is unfortunately a lot more frequent than we might want to believe
- take time to look after yourself; make sure you get enough rest, relaxation, sleep, and that you eat properly; think about positive strategies you could use when you're feeling low, for example calling a friend, going for a walk, listening to music
- if you have been the victim of a recent attack, phone or go for help immediately; you could ask a friend or family to help you find appropriate help, for example, the Police, Rape Helpline, Women's Aid
- take your feelings seriously - talk to the counsellor in the University Counselling Service, go to your GP or use the Helpline numbers listed below. This is particularly important if your experiences have led you to resort to self-destructive ways of behaving that could affect your physical and emotional health.

If you have strong feelings of hopelessness, or are having suicidal thoughts and feelings, you should contact someone for help as soon as possible.

Further help/useful numbers

- Samaritans: 116 123
- Victim Support: 0808 16 89 111
- Rape Helpline: 0808 8029999 (freephone)
- Women's Aid National Helpline: 0808 2000247 (freephone)
www.womensaid.org.uk
- Solace Women's Aid: 0808 8025565 (freephone)
- Saneline: 0300 304 7000

How to contact the Counselling and Mental Health Service

Please see website for up-to-date service details:

<http://unihub.mdx.ac.uk/cmh>

The Counselling & Mental Health Service are based at Sunny Hill House on campus or you can contact us at **cmh@mdx.ac.uk**

Further leaflets in this series

- Addictive habits
- Anxiety and panic
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- Coming to Britain to study
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- Self-harm
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Mar 2018