

Sexual trauma and body image

An easy read PDF



Body image & sexual trauma

After experiencing sexual trauma, it is common for survivors to not feel comfortable or safe in their bodies and this often translates into having poor body image.

What is body image?

Body image is how we **think and feel** about ourselves physically, and how we believe others see us.

Body image isn't always about how much we weigh, it can also be about:

- comparing one's appearance to that of friends or online users they follow
- struggling to love and accept your body
- feeling as though your body shape is not represented in the media
- feeling as though your body does not match your gender

There are numerous ways in which you may feel a **negative emotion towards** your body. Experiencing sexual trauma can often exasperate these feelings, especially if you've always felt negatively about your body.



Body image after sexual trauma

You may have thoughts about your body that sounds like:

- My body isn't good enough
- My body is simply just an object for people to use
- My body is just here for sexual practices that is all
- I hate how my body looks
- My body just reminds me of them
- I wish I wasn't so _____.

Common myths around body image

Myth #1: Unlike anorexia and bulimia, poor body image isn't a big deal.

Poor body image can be a very big deal—particularly when it's rooted in trauma. You do not need to be struggling to the point of controlling your eating habits or how you behave in order to get support.

Myth #2: Experiencing sexual violence means I will always hate my body.

It is possible to gain back control and acceptance with your body, *even after sexual trauma*. With the right support and possible treatment, you will get better.

Eating disorders

Some survivors turn to controlling their appearance, developing an obsession with eating or exercise, as a coping mechanism. This can often quickly develop into an eating disorder.

An eating disorder is a mental health condition where you use the control of food to cope with feelings and other situations.

Unhealthy eating behaviours may include eating too much or too little or worrying about your weight or body shape.

It is important to acknowledge that despite how much you weigh, *you still deserve support.*

The most common eating disorders are:

- **anorexia nervosa – trying to control your weight by not eating enough food, exercising too much, or doing both**
- **bulimia – losing control over how much you eat and then taking drastic action to not put on weight**
- **binge eating disorder (BED) – eating large portions of food until you feel uncomfortably full**

The link between poor body image and sexual trauma

A survivor of sexual violence could feel disgusted by their own body. Other such feelings that a survivor may experience as a result of sexual abuse include repulsiveness and hatred towards himself or herself.

A survivor of abuse may hate their body because it aroused dangerous feelings in another person. Especially if they observe a bodily reaction to the abuse, abusers frequently make their victims believe that they "liked it,".

The survivor might believe that the body is unreliable, repulsive, embarrassing, or dangerous. Sexual dysfunction and self-harm are two ways that these emotions can show up. Another cause of eating disorders is a person's attempt to retake control of their lives.

Some survivors utilise self-inflicted starvation, binges, or binge/purges as a coping mechanism. Low self-esteem, sadness, and anxiety may also have an impact on whether or not a survivor develops an eating disorder.

The focus of the survivor is on molding, punishing, controlling, and treating the body as something external (an object).

A person may want to reject their own body in order to avoid being sexually attracted to others or they may want to externally empower themselves by achieving the cultural ideal of beauty.

Support

[NHS Information on Eating Disorders](#)

[Beat Eating Disorders](#)

[Talk Ed](#)

[Mind Information on Eating disorders](#)