Male Survivors

Supporting recovery from childhood abuse

NAPAC The National Association for People Abused in Childhood

A note for all male survivors

If you are reading this, it may be because you are looking for answers, reassurance or a sense that you are not alone. At NAPAC, we understand that seeking support is no easy feat and we hope that these pages provide you with something helpful, wherever you are on your recovery journey.

Although NAPAC is here for all survivors of any type of childhood abuse, **this booklet was specifically designed for those who identify as male.**

The information included reflects what we have heard from tens of thousands of male survivors via our support service, and its aim is to provide you with support, solace and guidance.

Now that you're here, we want to remind you of a few things:

1. You are not alone. We're here for you when you're ready to talk. You can call us on 0808 801 0331, or email support@napac.org.uk.

2. You are not the only one. At least 16% of UK men have experienced abuse in childhood, and more than a quarter of callers to NAPAC's support service each year identify as male.

3. It wasn't your fault. It did not happen because of anything you did or did not do. Abuse is never, under any circumstances, the child's fault.

4. There is no hierarchy of abuse. Whether it was physical, sexual, emotional, ritual abuse or neglect, if it felt like abuse to you, then you have every right to call it that and to seek support.

5. How you feel is not who you are. Given time and support, you can recover, feel better and learn to live with what happened to you.

6. If you're feeling panic or extreme anxiety, it can be managed. Head to page 17 for grounding tips and breathing techniques.

7. Stigma and stereotypes are not facts. On page 6 we address some of the common stigmas around male survivors.

Male survivors – the facts and the figures

Abuse is isolating. It brings with it shame and guilt. It compromises our view of ourselves and leads us to believe that what happened to us is somehow our fault, that it couldn't have possibly happened to anyone else, and no one else will understand.

The truth is very different. At a conservative estimate there are over 3.3 million adult male survivors of childhood abuse in England and Wales alone.

There can also be a tendency amongst men to downplay childhood abuse where there was no physical element – if it was just words, does it qualify as abuse?

It absolutely does. In fact, after sexual abuse, emotional abuse is the most frequently disclosed type of abuse to NAPAC by men.

Thousands of men have also disclosed physical abuse or neglect, with hundreds speaking about their experiences of organised or ritual abuse.

Men are disproportionately affected by violent physical abuse from their fathers, particularly where it has been viewed as 'discipline'.

It is important to note that men also disclose being emotionally, physically and sexually abused by their mothers. The traditional perception of a mother being inherently protective of her children can sometimes make it difficult to disclose, but it is still abuse, and if you experienced it, you deserve to be supported.

This normalisation of violence in childhood can leave survivors a) worried about continuing the cycle of violence with their own children and b) confused about their relationship with their own parent, particularly when they cannot or will not understand that their actions were abusive.

These concerns are common, and the NAPAC support service is here to help you talk them through.

Men are also more likely to have experienced institutional abuse. Through years of insights from our support service, we understand that there is a cycle whereby a child is abused at home, which manifests itself in 'bad' behaviour at school, and the child is then sent to another institution such as a boarding school, approved school or borstal.

We know that at such institutions the child is then more likely to witness or experience additional abuse, particularly in cases of boys' boarding schools.

It is fundamentally unfair that a system designed to protect and educate can treat children this way, and we often hear from survivors who feel confused, betrayed, angry, guilty and abandoned.

> Regardless of the type of abuse you have experienced, or what you may be feeling, **it was not your fault,** and we are here to support you in your recovery, however that may look.

Separating stigma from fact

Part of the recovery process involves identifying and understanding the different forms of stigma that surround male survivors of abuse. Sometime these stigmas come from other people, and sometimes they become internalised and we turn them against ourselves.
We use the term stigma because it refers to a negative belief or feeling – not a fact.

Below we've outlined some of the common stigmas that male survivors may encounter and why they are untrue.

'My body responded so I am to blame'

You are not to blame. The human body naturally reacts to stimulation; it is an involuntary response. You did not choose to be abused; you had it done to you. You are not to blame for how your body responded to an act that was forced upon you.

‘He was abused so he’s a danger to kids’

The majority of survivors do not go on to harm children.

In fact, they are often their fiercest protectors. Framing a survivor as a threat completely diverts accountability from the people who have actually abused children.

You have control over your own actions. The fact that you were abused does not make you a threat to others.

We hear regularly from men who are triggered when their own children reach the age they were when they were abused. This trigger may cause a trauma response or flashback which can feel incredibly overwhelming – it does not make you a danger to children.

‘I was raped by another man and I’m gay because of what happened to me’

Your sexual identity comes from within you, and it is your own. It is understandable that sexual abuse may cause confusion, but it does not automatically define your sexual identity.

You are in control of that determination, and you are allowed to explore your sexuality without feeling the shame that can be brought on by abuse.

‘Real men don’t get abused and I won’t be believed’

You were a child when this happened to you, and all children are vulnerable. You would not blame a boy for being abused now, so please try to apply that same understanding to your own situation.

Nobody is immune to the possibility of experiencing abuse and it is not a reflection of a person’s strength or weakness.

You will be believed. NAPAC starts from a place of belief, a practice which we are working hard to instill across the healthcare and justice sectors too.

‘My mates think I was lucky because it was with an attractive older woman’

This statement is reflective of a harmful and untrue attitude that boys should be grateful for sexual attention from attractive older women.

Regardless of the gender or perceived attractiveness of the perpetrator, if you were underage, and what happened to you felt like abuse, then you have every right to call it that and to seek support.

Understanding the emotional impact of childhood abuse

Abuse cannot happen without betrayal, manipulation and the misuse of power, so it is natural that there are a wide range of emotional responses to it.

It may take years before you connect the way you are feeling with the abuse you experienced, and even when you do, your emotions may not make sense to you. This is completely normal; everyone reacts to trauma in different ways.

Anger

One of the emotions that is often experienced by male survivors is an overwhelming sense of anger.

Anger is a perfectly valid response to childhood abuse, but it can become amplified when you do not allow yourself room to express other emotions.

Historically there have been societal pressures on men not to be seen as 'sad' or 'weak' because these have been perceived as feminine qualities. **In some cases, these pressures have resulted in men feeling that the only emotion they are 'allowed' to express is anger.**

This can be harmful to yourself and others. But if you can find a way to open up about the other emotions you are feeling, you can engage in techniques that focus on regulating emotion in a healthy way.

Self-blame, shame and guilt

Another common theme amongst male survivors is feeling disappointed in themselves as they believe they 'should be over it by now'.

This self-blame is typical of abuse, but it is misplaced. The blame and the guilt are the responsibility of the perpetrator. Abuse has life-long ramifications and recovery is not a linear process; there is no set pace or route that you must take. Recovery is about doing things in your own time, and on your own terms.

Shame is a word repeatedly used by male survivors to describe how they are feeling. Shame is defined as a 'feeling of distress, caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behaviour.'

> Shame is a by-product of the grooming process which makes the survivor feel like they chose to participate in the abuse. **But as a child you could not consent, and it was not a conscious choice.** Like blame and guilt, shame is the responsibility of the perpetrator.

Pain

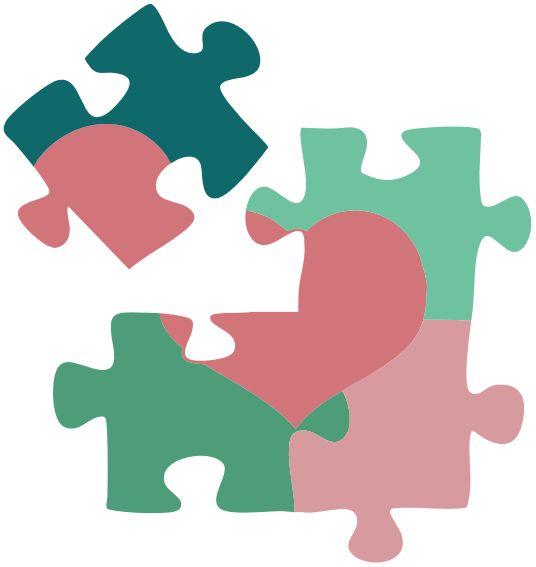
Though it may seem obvious that abuse causes pain, it regularly goes unacknowledged. **Men particularly can struggle to identify that the huge emotional weight they feel is pain.** The pain of injustice, the pain of betrayal, the pain of grieving a lost childhood, even the physical pain caused by the health conditions that survivors of abuse are more susceptible to.

There is no denying that pain is persistent and can feel all-encompassing, but if we acknowledge it, we can confront and treat it. This may be via medication, mindfulness, therapy or lifestyle changes, and it may take some time, but it can be managed so that you can move forward with your life.

Relationship issues

Abuse can affect how we relate to others. **Many men describe finding it hard to trust partners, friends or colleagues, even when those people have done nothing wrong.**

Others find that their relationships are negatively impacted because their partners or loved ones can only see the maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as drinking or using drugs, but not the trauma that can lead to this.



Intimacy can also feel complicated. For some, closeness with a partner can bring up memories of abuse or leave them feeling unsafe. If loved ones cannot understand this, survivors often blame themselves for not being able to engage intimately.

These experiences are common and nothing to be ashamed of. They do not mean you are broken or incapable of having strong, healthy relationships. Many survivors have found that, with support, it is possible to build trust again, set healthy boundaries, and enjoy closeness and intimacy without fear.

Support can help you explore these challenges at your own pace and find safe ways to create and maintain the relationships that matter to you.

Coping Mechanisms

Coping mechanisms are behaviours that we all use to manage stress, regulate emotion and deal with difficult situations. However, while they can provide relief in the short term, some of these mechanisms can become dangerous and damaging over the long term.

At NAPAC we do not judge how anyone copes, providing they are not harming others. We offer the following observations because these are prevalent themes amongst men who contact our support service.

- **Drinking** or taking drugs to cope with memories of abuse, which often leads to addiction and dependency
- **Self-harming** to ground themselves and regain a sense of control
- **Risky sexual behaviours** or compulsive consumption of pornography, which can morph into addiction or dependency
- **Compulsive gambling**, which can lead to huge financial problems
- **Overworking,** resulting in burnout and exhaustion

If you are struggling with any of the above issues, you can call and talk to NAPAC's support service, and we can signpost to other organisations that will be able to support with information on healthy coping mechanisms.

MIND offers useful short term coping strategies that can help you get through the next few minutes or hours, whilst CALM explains different coping styles and suggests **14 long term strategies that you may find useful.**

> Thousands of male survivors have told us that the emotions connected to abuse can feel overwhelming and hard to make sense of. In addition to the above information on emotions and coping, these feelings can show up as severe anxiety or panic attacks.

Understanding what is happening in your body can help reduce the fear that comes with them, and we will address them in the following section.

Crisis and safeguarding

If you're in immediate danger or worried you may harm yourself or someone else right now:

» Call 999 or go to your nearest A&E
» If you can't make the call, ask someone nearby to call for you.

Need to talk now (24/7 listening):

» Samaritans: 116 123 (free, UK & ROI)

Urgent medical or mental-health advice (not 999):

» NHS 111 (phone or online)

If a child is currently at risk of harm:

» Call 999 and ask for police involvement
» To report a concern about a child, call the NSPCC on 0808 800 5000 or email help@NSPCC.org.uk. You can also contact the NSPCC website for information and anonymous reporting - **Report child abuse | NSPCC**

What NAPAC can and can't do

» We can listen without judgement, help you make a simple safety plan and signpost options.
» We are not a 24/7 emergency service and we can't contact emergency services for you.
» If someone is at immediate risk (including a child), we will talk with you about what needs to happen to keep people safe.

Anxiety and panic attacks explained

Over half of all male NAPAC service users report experiencing anxiety. Anxiety is the feeling of being worried, tense or alert. It can show up as constant unease, difficulty sleeping, racing thoughts or feeling on edge.

Panic is different. Panic is when the body's alarm system switches on suddenly and powerfully. It can bring a pounding heart, shaking, breathlessness or the feeling that something terrible is about to happen. Panic often comes quickly and can feel overwhelming, but it usually passes within minutes.

Both anxiety and panic can be triggered by reminders of past abuse. A trigger is anything that causes the body to react as if the abuse is happening again. It might be a smell, a sound, a place or even a certain expression on someone's face. Here we have used the example of a smell.

Trigger

A man is in a shopping centre/ department store, and he accepts a free tester for an aftershave/cologne.

Response

It is the scent worn by his abuser. The smell reminds the brain of the abuse. Thinking it is in immediate danger, the brain activates the stress response.

Chemical increase

When the brain senses danger, it signals the body to release powerful stress chemicals that flood the system and prepare you to fight, flee or freeze.

Physical symptoms

The body does what it is designed to do and reacts to the chemicals, causing symptoms such as heart palpitations, muscle tension, shaking, tingling, shortness of breath, dizziness and nausea.

This is your body's in-built alarm system behaving as it should, and whilst these symptoms are frightening, they are not harmful.

Mental symptoms

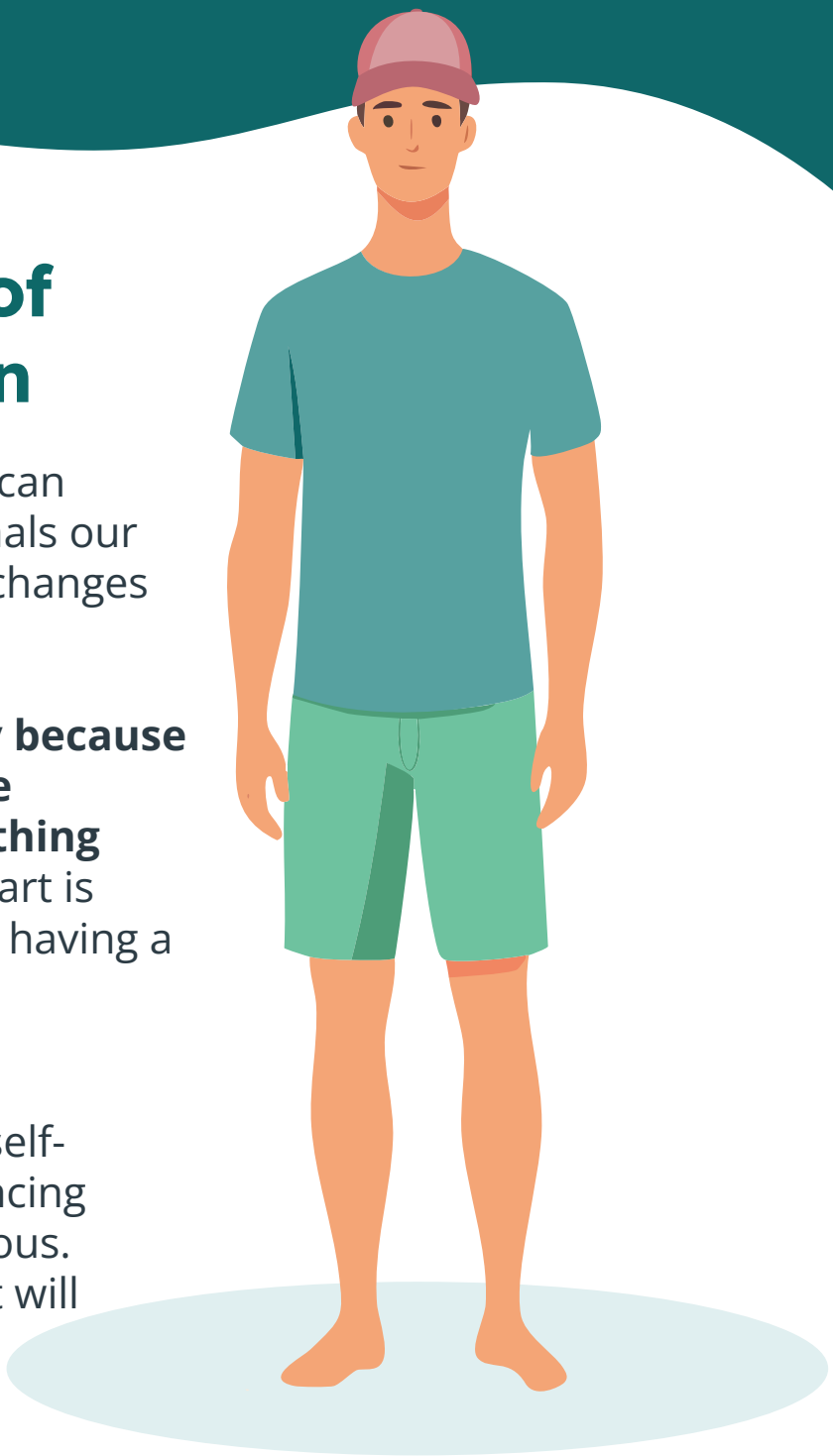
Cortisol (a stress chemical) increases the brain's fear response, which leads to an overall feeling of impending doom or death, the sense that you are 'going crazy' and in some cases, dissociation or derealisation.

These feelings will peak and pass. Most panic attacks will last between five and 30 minutes.

How to manage a panic attack

Before we look at specific techniques for managing panic attacks it is vital to remember that while incredibly unpleasant and frightening, they are not dangerous, and they usually pass on their own.

The feelings can seem overwhelming, but there are ways to manage them.



Break the cycle of misinterpretation

When we live with anxiety, we can become hyper-alert to the signals our body sends us, noticing small changes in our heartbeat or breath.

Panic attacks often intensify because we are misinterpreting these changes and believing something is seriously wrong, i.e. 'my heart is beating faster than usual, I am having a heart attack.'

You can break this cycle of misinterpretation with gentle self-reassurance, i.e. 'I am experiencing a panic attack. It is not dangerous. If I stick to my coping routine it will subside, and I will be fine.'

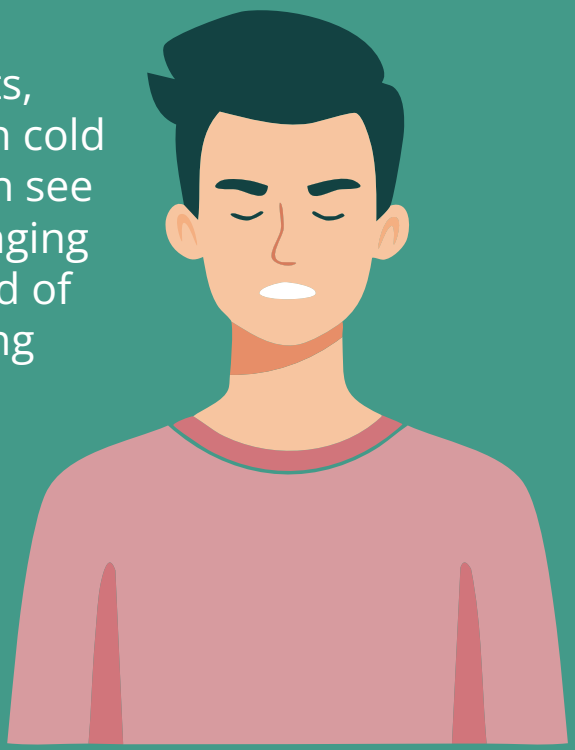
Control your breathing

It may seem basic, but a learned breathing exercise is one of the most powerful ways to control a panic attack and restore a sense of calm.

The 4-7-8 technique is popular amongst those who experience anxiety or panic attacks. **Breathe in for 4 seconds, hold for 7 seconds and exhale gently for 8 seconds. Keep repeating this for as long as necessary.**

Ground yourself in the present moment

Clenching and unclenching your fists, holding ice, splashing your face with cold water and noting five things you can see around you are all methods for bringing yourself back to the present, instead of allowing your brain to continue along that 'what if' cycle.



Telling someone you trust what you are experiencing and trying out different techniques can also be helpful, especially if you are at the beginning of your journey in managing panic symptoms.

It can be hard to talk yourself to safety in the middle of a panic, particularly while you are still learning what works for you.

Having someone else understand what is happening means they can support you when it feels most overwhelming.

Building your own road to recovery

There is no one size fits all approach to recovery from childhood abuse and no definitive 'right' way to do it. It is rarely a linear process, and for most people it takes years.

Over those years your needs will probably change. The type of support you wanted when you first disclosed is likely to be different to what you require if you are triggered unexpectedly a decade later.

It can be useful to build up a network of trusted individuals, services and techniques, so that you have options and choice depending on where you are in your life.

There is nothing you have to do. Your recovery is under your control and what it looks like is up to you.

That being said, it is often difficult to know where to begin. So before interacting with any support services, the police or solicitors, we would suggest asking yourself some questions that may better prepare you for the process of disclosure.

Why do I want to disclose?

What do I want to get from interacting with support?

Do I know what type of support I am looking for?
For example, is it legal, emotional or medical?

Do I want to communicate via phone or email?

Do I have a quiet, comfortable space in which to disclose?
And do I have space and time to process what has happened after the call?

What may happen if I disclose? For example, if I report to the police, will I then have to disclose repeatedly and attend court sessions?

We recognise that asking yourself these questions is difficult, and if you are in a state of crisis, it may not be possible. However, if you are able, we believe it will make a positive difference to your experience.

Though it is a hard and tiring process, disclosure is important because it may give you a different perspective on what happened to you, and how it is affecting you now.

Survivors disclosing to NAPAC regularly speak of a weight being lifted, feeling lighter and more positive as a result of sharing their experiences. **Talking to a confidential service can give you the judgement-free, supportive space you may need to process what happened and move forward.**

Pursuing recovery

Recovery is not easy, but it is possible. In reading these words you have already taken a step in the right direction. Know that NAPAC is here for you at any point along the way. You can call or email our support service to talk about how you are feeling or access our survivor support resources via the website.

No matter how you may feel, you are not alone, and there is always hope for recovery.

What to expect when you contact NAPAC

- **You stay in control.** You never have to give details you don't want to. You decide the pace and can pause or stop at any time.
- **A calm, trauma-aware space.** We'll listen and believe you. If you'd like, we can explore coping options and next steps together.
- **Your information, your choice.** We won't pressure you for personal details. We'll explain how your information is handled and your options.
- **Safeguarding.** If we're worried someone is at immediate risk (including a child), we'll talk with you about what needs to happen to keep people safe.

Reach out when you're ready

Call our free, confidential support line:

0808 801 0331

Monday to Thursday: 10 AM – 9 PM
Friday: 10 AM – 6 PM
Saturday and Sunday: Closed

We also offer support by email – support@napac.org.uk

A roadmap for healing

Find the right support for you

Whilst some people may benefit from CBT with a therapist, others might prefer to speak to a support service for emotional support.

Some might want medication to manage symptoms associated with conditions like PTSD, whereas others may find an exercise plan or a combination of the two better suits their needs.

It is about finding the support system that works for you. Keep trying until you alight upon the combination that feels right.

Put yourself first

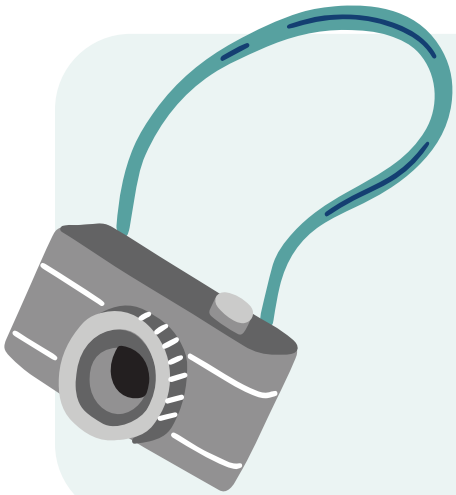
It is not selfish to prioritise your own needs. You can't care sufficiently for others until you learn to love and care for yourself. In practice this might mean pursuing mindfulness activities to cultivate a sense of wellbeing or saying no to the pub on a Friday night because you just don't feel up to it.

Acknowledge your feelings and pursue the activities that bring you stability and comfort.

Learn how to safeguard yourself

Identifying your own triggers and learning to manage your emotional and physical responses to them is an important part of recovery.

Over time, a licensed therapist can help you build self-awareness and teach you techniques to control your emotions and minimise the impact of things like panic attacks and flashbacks.



Find a healthy outlet

Activities such as journaling, painting, yoga, swimming and cycling have all been proven to be beneficial to your mental health.

The point is to find an activity you feel passionate about, and to keep doing it.

Keep going

Recovery is not a linear process. There will be ups and downs, moments of joy, moments of sadness, and moments of doubt. Recovery is trial and error.

But if you keep trying, there is hope for a healthy, happy life in which you move on from what happened to you.

NAPAC
The National Association for People Abused in Childhood

napac.org.uk
Support line 0808 801 0331
Free from landlines and mobiles

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