

Quick Guide: Self-care for university staff, students, survivors and campaigners working to combat sexual misconduct

This guide has been created by [AVA \(Against Violence and Abuse\)](#) to support university staff, officers, students and campaigners working to improve responses to sexual misconduct in university settings. This guide is designed to support you to **stay safe and look after your wellbeing as you manage the impacts of working with trauma**. For example:

- You may be receiving disclosures and supporting students/staff experiencing sexual misconduct
- You may be reading, writing and sharing information about sexual misconduct
- You may be working alongside survivors of violence and abuse
- You may be a survivor of violence and abuse yourself

This guide sets out the impacts of working with trauma, supports you to spot the signs of secondary trauma and develop self-care strategies that work for you.

- **Quick guide:** Consulting with students and survivors
- **Quick guide:** Asking and responding to disclosures of gender-based violence

If you are experiencing sexual misconduct or gender-based violence and need support, or if you are worried about someone else, visit <https://avaproject.org.uk/need-help/>

About Combat Misconduct

This guide has been developed by [AVA \(Against Violence & Abuse\)](#), a national charity committed to creating a world without gender-based violence and abuse. AVA is a feminist charity, particularly recognised for specialist expertise in multiple disadvantage and children and young people's work. Our core work includes training, policy, research and consultancy.

This guide was produced within the Combat Misconduct project. Combat Misconduct is a partnership between AVA, [NUS](#) and [UUK](#) aiming to improve university responses to sexual misconduct. The project is funded by [Rosa](#), the UK fund for women and girls. For more information about the project, visit www.avaproject.org.uk/combatmisconduct.

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What is trauma?

Trauma is an overwhelming and life-threatening situation that makes you question your survival and your faith in the world as a safe place. It has emotional and physical impacts and can be a one-off event or ongoing. Examples of situations and events that can be traumatic include:

- Sexual violence
- Sexual harassment
- Domestic abuse
- Racism, homophobia, oppression
- Bullying
- Accidents
- Conflict
- Physical illness

What is secondary trauma?

Secondary trauma is the result of exposure to trauma experienced by other people, for example by hearing them describe their experience or by reading a detailed written account. The impact can be:

Burnout: being overwhelmed, physical and emotionally exhausted. Burnout is not only related to trauma – it can be the result of high workload and stress.

- **Compassion fatigue:** erosion of your sense of self and the ways you usually relate to and empathise with other people. You may find you have little patience or energy for challenging situations and that your usual ways of looking after yourself are no longer working.
- **Vicarious trauma:** a profound shift in your worldview as a result of secondary trauma, which may happen suddenly or gradually. You may find you no longer view the world as a safe place.

Spotting the signs of secondary trauma

Your most important self-care tool is self-awareness. Have you spotted changes in the way you are feeling, thinking, behaving or reacting?

- **Avoiding** certain situations, people or types of work
- **Intrusive** thoughts
- **Hyperarousal**, e.g. being easily startled
- Changes in your **worldview**, e.g. habitually thinking about the worst-case scenario
- **Behaviour** changes, e.g. how you interact with food, alcohol or technology
- **Physiological** changes, e.g. sweats, migraine, panic, twitches, stomach/digestive issues
- **Cognitive** changes, e.g. becoming cynical, judgemental, lacking hope
- Reduced **creativity, problem solving** and **hope** for the better

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Looking after yourself

Effective self-care includes activities from four key categories. You may find that a particular category of self-care feels more familiar or appealing to you. It is important to find a balanced set of self-care activities from **across the four categories** to keep you safe and well.

<p>Processing</p> <p>Writing notes or speaking to a trusted person – creating a verbal or written account can change the way your brain stores the information</p>	<p>Distraction</p> <p>Activities that engage your brain and your senses – washing hands, strong scents, listening to music or a podcast, tidying, puzzles, creative activities</p>
<p>Soothing</p> <p>Activities that are calming and regulate your nervous system – for example breathing exercises, baths, yoga, walking, sports</p>	<p>Integration</p> <p>Making sense of what has happened – taking time to talk, write or think through the situation to ‘get the story straight’ in your mind</p>

Breathing Space, the AVA online tool, designed by and for survivors of gender-based violence, has further ideas and resources for self-care and support: <https://www.breathingspace-ava.org.uk/>

Working in a trauma informed way

Use the prompt questions below to think about how you work, and how you could make changes or advocate for changes to support your safety and wellbeing:

- **Safety:** What strategies can you use to keep yourself feeling safe and grounded? Think about soothing and distracting self-care activities and how you manage the pace of your work.
- **Choice and control:** There are likely issues affecting your work that are outside your control. Feeling a lack of choice and control can increase the impact of secondary trauma. What aspects of your work can you control? Identify small choices and changes you can make, if needed.
- **Integration:** Exposure to trauma can make things feel fragmented and unclear. How can you communicate and collaborate with others to make sense and move forward?
- **Strength and growth:** How do you celebrate your strengths and wins? Creating and keeping a positive narrative about why you are doing this work is important for your wellbeing.

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