

# Flashbacks



**Herts Area Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse  
Centre (HARCSAC)**

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# About Herts Area Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre (HARCSAC)

Herts Area Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre (HARCSAC) have been operating since 1986, and are located in Hatfield. We are a registered charity (No. 800325).

Herts Area Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse centre (HARCSAC) offer support to any woman aged over 18 living in Hertfordshire who has experienced rape, sexual assault, or any form of sexual abuse at any time in her life.

## **Our Group Objectives are:**

- To listen to, and believe, the women in distress who call the helpline.
- To support and assist them in reviewing their options confidentially, by providing free and confidential counselling both face to face and over the phone.
- To provide them and their friends and their family with information.
- To obtain help from other agencies if requested by a client, through close contact with local authorities, the health service and other organisations.
- To promote education and research into rape-related issues.
- To give ongoing training to our women counsellors.
- To set up and maintain a co-ordinated group of contacts.
- To receive training on related issues for our ongoing professional development.
- To provide training for any local group wishing to increase their awareness of the needs of rape/sexual abuse survivors.
- To obtain funding for all of the above and for the continued employment of our Service Support Co-ordinators.

# Who is the booklet for?

HARCSAC has produced this booklet to help adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, rape or sexual assault deal with and understand the function and purpose of flashbacks.

This booklet will also help supporters of survivors and there is a section specifically for supporters on page 9.

We hope that this booklet will be useful to professionals who support survivors and also provide a source of guidance and information to you in your work with survivors of sexual violence.

Throughout we have used the term “survivor” because we believe those of you who have experienced trauma have survived and therefore you are not a victim. You are a survivor and we want to acknowledge this.

We have used the terms “event” and “abuse” to cover all experiences of childhood sexual abuse and adult sexual assault. We refer to *she* and this also applies to *he* as we recognise abuse happens also to men and boys.

# What are flashbacks?

Flashbacks occur as conscious or unconscious images and thoughts, resulting from part of the central core of your memory of the abuse. Flashbacks are temporary states of remembering something painful or traumatic, which have been hidden for some time in the subconscious mind.

They can last for a few seconds to a few hours. They can appear as vague or vivid recurrent body sensations for which you may have no conscious memory. The sensations and memories occur when triggered by either internal or external circumstances, evoking the original trauma.

A flashback, or involuntary recurrent memory in which an individual has a sudden, usually powerful, re-experiencing of a past experience or elements of a past experience.

These experiences can be happy, sad, exciting or any other emotion. The term is used particularly when the memory is recalled involuntarily, and/or when it is so intense that the person "relives" the experience, unable to fully recognise it as memory and not something that is happening in "real time".

Flashbacks are scenes that return us to events in the past. They cause us to relive a past experience and you have a sudden and very clear memory of the event. They are a natural process of healing.

*The following by Emily Shadowdove (hopeforhealing.org) defines flashbacks really well:*

“Terrifying, unbearable, scary, uncontrollable, confusing... These and many more words are what a survivor uses to describe how a flashback feels.

“Flashbacks are one of the most frightening ordeals a survivor faces after a sexual assault. Although they are frightening and feel out of control they are a healthy sign that we are ready to heal.

“Our minds are wonderful devices. They protect us from extreme pain and suffering, sometimes by blocking out traumatic events in our lives. Only when our minds know that we are ready to cope with the memories and feelings does it bring them to our attention.

“Many times this happens in the form of a flashback, or in a more gentle and manageable term, an involuntary reflection.

“Not knowing why flashback happens makes dealing with them confusing for survivors.

“Emotionally loaded, flashbacks bring back feelings from the original attack. Thoughts, actions and emotions that a survivor kept repressed during their attack may be to blame for some of these vivid memories.

“The very fact that flashbacks seem to be uncontrollable and unpredictable makes stopping flashback memories seemingly just another pain to bear.

“When we begin to understand why we have flashbacks and are not paralysed by them, we can move further along the path to healing. Flashbacks are a natural process of healing and they are safe. Your mind is now telling you that it is no longer necessary to block such memories”.

# When do flashbacks occur?

Flashbacks are generally unpredictable and can occur at unexpected times. Sometimes they are triggered by anything that serves as a reminder of what happened to you. Triggers are often linked to your senses:

- Smell
- Sight
- Taste
- Sound
- Touch

You may also experience flashbacks when you are feeling any of the following:

- Low or vulnerable
- Helpless or powerless
- Exhausted or tired
- Sad or tearful
- Angry
- Embarrassed or ashamed
- Anxious or worried
- Trapped
- Sexual or intimate
- Happy or excited
- Calm or relaxed

The list above is not exhaustive and as the list shows, flashbacks can happen regardless of how you are feeling.

If you are embarking on counselling for what's happened to you, it may be that flashbacks seem worse for a while.

This can be normal and it's important that you discuss this with your counsellor if you are concerned. Part of the normal process of counselling is for thoughts and feelings to surface more as you begin to talk and work through what has happened to you.

## **Can flashbacks be controlled?**

Flashbacks can happen anywhere, at any time and without realising what the trigger might be. This makes it difficult to make sense of what's happening and difficult to have any control over. You may be having fun one minute and then the next, because of a flashback; you may feel and behave like a quivering, sobbing, frightened child. The following are some examples of situations, which could trigger a flashback.

Please remember that everyone is not the same and the following differs from person to person:

- A survivor whose abuse included posing for pornographic pictures may experience a flashback by the appearance of a camera or flashing lights at a concert or at the cinema etc.
- A survivor left alone for long periods of time after being abused may flashback to the event, when they feel isolated or lonely or in confined spaces.
- Someone standing behind you or close to you. If you smell them or feel them breathing next to you or you hear particular sounds.
- Someone touching you in a particular way and on a particular part of your body.
- A partner wanting to be intimate with you or initiating a particular sexual act.
- Having a medical examination, in particular gynaecological examinations



In many cases, the more often a trauma has been repeated, the more intrusive its nature, the deeper and stronger the survivor's memory of the event.

If a trigger occurs recalling previous abusive events, a chain of associations occurs, often unconsciously and you re-experience the abusive incidents.

This re-experience creates a blurring between past and present in that you unconsciously withdraw from the present and past memories and feelings appear to be as if they are happening to you right now.

Repressed memories also return as flashbacks; emerging in the form of nightmares, and you have dreams that explicitly recall your abuse or recurrent nightmares of being pursued that symbolically evoke themes of abuse.

In order to physically and psychologically survive the abuse, the survivor usually buries her confusing and painful experiences deep within her subconscious mind and tries to live a normal life.

The memories are buried and stored in the subconscious mind until the individual feels able to deal with them.

When flashbacks are initially triggered, the survivor may not have had any previous memory of the event (abuse), or she may just have fragments of memories, which do not make sense. The survivor may also remember all of the event but not how she felt at the time.

Flashbacks are not a sign that you are mad or crazy, they are an indication of the body's need to express very painful and frightening experiences. Flashbacks are one of the primary ways that the survivor can get information about past experiences.

When initially triggered, flashbacks may throw the survivor into confusion or horror. She may be unable to make sense of feelings, images, sensations etc. and she may attempt to deny what happened to her.

She may try to bury the surfacing memories through fear of being overwhelmed or out of control. She may feel shame and guilt, believing that the abuse was her fault. She may feel helpless and powerless and alone just as she did when she was being abused.

Although these reactions and many more are natural responses to flashbacks, they can have a massive impact on the survivor. The survivor may recognise the triggers and attempt to avoid them at all cost, believing that if the trigger is avoided, she will have no more flashbacks.

This however is not realistic. Flashbacks cannot be prevented through the avoidance of specific triggers.

## **Do flashbacks differ in any way?**

Flashbacks can be experienced in many forms as stated earlier. They can be visual, auditory or sensory:

### **Visual flashbacks – sight**

This is like watching a film or slideshow of what happened to you. You may experience this as happening inside your head or you may experience it as happening outside of you and involving other people.

This might be likely to happen if someone who's physical appearance reminds you of the perpetrator. Also mannerisms, facial features, behaviour, clothes etc. You could also be triggered by something you see on TV or read in a newspaper or magazine, at the theatre or cinema on an advertisement billboard etc.

You may find yourself watching and/or re-experiencing all of what happened to you or parts of what happened or even tiny fragments of what you remember. The images you see could be clear or distorted and you may see the same picture from different angles at different times.

For example you may see a picture of the perpetrator coming towards you, or grabbing you. You may then re-experience the feeling you had when you were assaulted or you may see yourself and the perpetrator in the same picture or as if you are an observer watching what happened. You may feel cut off from any feeling.

## **Auditory flashbacks – sound**

This is described as hearing conversations or sounds, which are associated with the attack. You may experience sounds as being inside your head or outside, i.e. in the same room. The sounds could be clear or distorted and may sound near or far away. You may hear the voice of the perpetrator, traffic sounds or any other sound that was around at the time you were attacked. As with visual flashbacks you may be triggered by something you hear on TV or in a newspaper or magazine, at the theatre or cinema etc.

## **Sensory flashbacks – taste, touch, smell**

This is where you are feeling bodily sensation associated with what happened to you. This type of flashback can manifest in the following ways:

- Feeling as if you are being touched on any part of your body, when in reality there is no one there. You could feel as if someone is touching your arm to feeling as though someone is on top of you.
- Depending upon the severity of the experience, you may feel anxious, frightened, confused or that you are going mad, particularly if you don't understand what's happening to you in the here and now. You may also try to consciously stop it happening and are unable to.
- During this type of flashback you may re-experience the physical sensations and/or the pain you felt when you were being abused or sexually assaulted or raped.
- These sensations could be experienced as happening anywhere on or inside your body.
- They can also include strong, overwhelming sensations of taste and/or smell.

## **How will I react to a flashback?**

There are no specific reactions to a flashback. Every reaction to a flashback is an individual response, usually based on the ways in which you coped with the event. For example:

- You may feel nauseous, as if you are going to be physically sick and you may even vomit.
- You could feel absolute terror. You could feel as if you are going to die.
- You may feel very numb. You may have shut your feelings down (dissociate) or watch the flashback as though it is happening to someone else.
- You may experience panic attacks and feel totally out of control.

## **Helping yourself during a flashback**

During a flashback you may be feeling frightened, confused, disorientated and/or overwhelmed. These feelings are understandable and they are normal reactions to what can be a terrifying experience.

Although flashbacks can feel very frightening, they are actually a good sign that you are unearthing the buried trauma and that you are working through things and a sign that you are working towards recovery.

It is important that you reassure yourself with the knowledge that flashbacks are a temporary state. What you feel / experience will not last forever. They can be a good sign that your mind is working through what it needs to.

Through time it is likely that flashbacks will reduce in frequency and intensity. You may find yourself trying to avoid situations that could trigger memories.

While it is not possible to control the nature of the flashback or the strength of it, you can do things to help lessen the power and impact that they have in your life.

### **Take yourself to a safe place**

This may be in your home, curled up on the settee with a warm blanket, or in the bath, or in your favourite chair, or at a good friend's house. Go wherever you need to in order to feel safe and where you know you will be safe.

If this is not possible at the time of the flashback, remind yourself that what you have experienced is a memory.

### **Ground yourself**

Remind yourself of the day / date / time etc. Look at your surroundings, where you are right now. Remind yourself of how old you are / where you live etc.

Look at colours and objects around you. Look at people and buildings etc. Notice what you are wearing and if possible look at something that makes you feel good, e.g. an object, photo, plant etc. – anything that makes you feel good and brings good memories to you.

### **Remember to keep breathing**

Breathe in deeply and let it out slowly. Keep doing this until you feel calmer. Breathing will help especially if you are panicking. Remind yourself this will pass and you will be okay, this will pass.

## **Don't fight the flashback**

Although this may feel difficult, try to breathe deeply and let the memory surface. Using alcohol, drugs, food and/or self-injury etc. to bury the feelings from a flashback can actually add to and prolong the trauma of recovering buried memories.

It can be hard to change these familiar coping mechanisms and old habits, however it will be very helpful in the long term if you can manage to avoid coping with flashbacks in these ways.

If you try to ignore or push away emerging memories they are likely to feel stronger and more powerful as they fight for recognition.

## **Remind yourself that this is a memory**

This is something in the past that has already happened to you and you have survived it. Reassure yourself that you are not being hurt in the present, even though it may feel as though it is happening now.

It is vital to keep reminding yourself that you came through it and you are now on the road to recovery.

## **Give yourself time and space to recover**

Reliving memories can be painful and exhausting. It may take several hours or days for you to feel okay again, but you will. If you need to rest, sleep, cry, or be angry, give yourself permission to do so.

Don't jump up and try to do something else straight away if this isn't what you really want to do.

## **Comfort yourself**

Following a flashback you may feel vulnerable and low. This is the time to give yourself a reward or treat for all your hard work. It will be helpful if you can do something that makes you feel good.

You could have a warm bubble bath, something nice to drink such as hot chocolate or milk. You could buy yourself flowers, go for a long walk, meet a friend, watch a film or listen to music. You could also cook your favourite food. These are just a few suggestions. The list could be endless, do what you feel is best for you.

## **Write about your memory**

If you feel able to, write down what you remember from the flashback. This helps to “get it out” and is a good way of processing what’s happened to you. You could use a journal or diary.

Useful things to write about may include what you remember, how you felt, any sounds you recall, pictures, sensations, smells etc. You could also reflect on how you feel here and now.

## **Talk about the flashback**

Even though you may feel like keeping it all in, it can be really helpful if you share the flashback with a supportive person. In talking it through you may gain more insight to yourself and it may help you to put the experience into perspective.

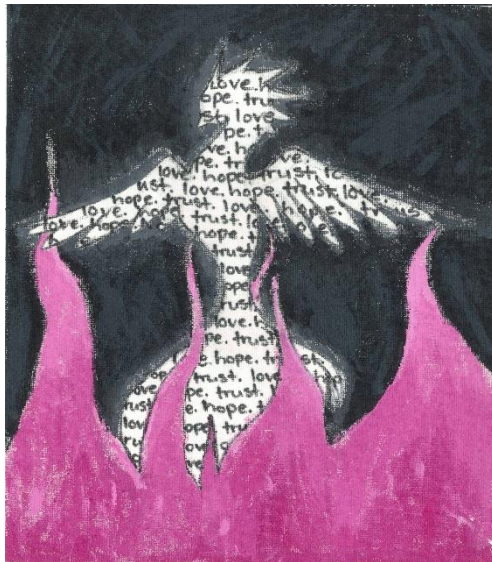
Remember, what happened to you was not your fault and you have done nothing wrong and you do not have to suffer in silence. Give yourself permission to receive support and understanding from others.



## Be proud of yourself

You have come through a frightening experience and you have survived. You have allowed yourself to remember a very traumatic event in your life and that takes a lot of courage and strength.

You have moved deeper into your journey of healing and have grown more each time. You are doing well.



Artwork created by a service user

# **Supporting Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse and Sexual Violence**

This part of the flashback booklet has been produced to guide and support you, the carer / supporter of a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, rape and other forms of sexual violence.

This booklet does not claim to have all the answers and it can only guide and provide a basis for your own methods of support.

Each survivor is an individual, and therefore will react differently to the trauma and will need different kinds of support. It is inevitable that you too will have many strong feelings about what has happened.

You may feel angry, sad, frustrated, and you may not know how to help. Feelings like this are natural and normal.

## **Belief**

It is vitally important that you show the survivor you care for her and that you believe her story. She will be feeling very insecure and might be faced with many people who are going to question her honesty and credibility.

As someone close to her, your belief and support is necessary for her to begin to come to terms with what has happened. Never at any time voice any doubts you might feel. People do not lie about rape and other forms of sexual violence.

## **Control**

Give her back the control. During what happened, she was overpowered and helpless to the perpetrator. She needs to feel that she has control over her life again. You can begin to help her achieve this by letting her make the decisions.

Give her options about what you can do together but let the final decision be hers. Do not force her to do anything she is unsure of or does not want to do.

## **Listen**

Let your friend / lover / relation know that you are there if she needs to talk. Just listening to a survivor can be the key to helping her through the flashback. Never force her to talk when she is not willing to.

Do not try to offer advice, just listen and follow her lead. Knowing that you are there if she needs you is very important.

Let her talk when she needs to and preferably when you are not rushing to go out etc. Go at her pace. Be honest about what you can offer in terms of support and be consistent.

If you cannot listen to the details of her experience then it is vital that you are honest about this at the onset. She is likely to be sensitive and she could take this as a rejection if you have not discussed your limitations in advance.

If you cannot listen because this is too difficult for you then help her to find someone who can listen, for example a counsellor.

## **Dispel the myths**

There are many myths around childhood sexual abuse, rape and sexual assault. For example she may feel that she provoked the rape through wearing “provocative” clothing or that she should have ‘known better’. She is not at fault; it is the attacker who should be blamed.

Let her know that you know she is not to blame. Many people she encounters will try to discredit her and she will need your support and belief. She may feel guilty because she accepted a gift from her abuser and therefore if she hadn’t he wouldn’t have abused her.

The myths are endless and it’s vital you gently challenge them and help the survivor to understand that they are not helpful.

## **Don’t blame her**

Never say, “you should have done . . .” or, “if only you had . . .” The attack was no fault of hers and by making such remarks; you are blaming her for instigating or provoking the attack. No one wants or asks to be raped or abused in any way and by making such remarks you will make it harder for her to put the blame where it belongs - with the perpetrator.

You may be the first person she has told even if the attack happened a long time ago. Your reaction is so important and may determine if she ever speaks to anyone else about what has happened to her.

Many survivors feel guilt, shame, blamed and judged for what happened. Try to help her to identify that what happened to her was done to her by someone else and therefore it is not her fault - she is not to blame.

## **Let her feelings show**

Each survivor will have individual feelings, attitudes and emotions about what happened. She may feel guilty, shameful or dirty. She may be angry, tearful or dismissive about what happened to her.

Let her show how she is feeling, allow her to cry, shout or be quiet. Never say, “don’t cry” or “forget it”, such suggestions are asking the impossible of her and may enforce messages from her past.

## **Support her**

Try to support her in the decisions that she makes but be as clear as possible about what you can or cannot do. If she wants to report what happened to the police, offer to go with her if you can, she may find it difficult and distressing.

If the report leads to a prosecution it may be many months before the case comes before the court. She might be anxious and worried about giving evidence and may want someone to go through the process with her.

## **Sexuality**

She may not want the intimacy of cuddling, holding hands etc. and she may feel that sex brings back painful memories. Be patient. Try to talk about both of your feelings and needs, but remember she may need time.

On the other hand she may be able to carry on with her life. Both situations are very normal. If she experiences a flashback during sex it is vital that you help her through this and listen to what she needs.

Hearing your voice and seeing that it is you she is with is really important and will help her realise that she is in the here and now and not in the past.

Gently talk to her; let her know she's safe, let her see your face and if she feels able to, to touch you and know it's you and not the perpetrator.

## **Support yourself**

You too are faced with a difficult experience and will feel many emotions, from hurt and protectiveness to anger and guilt etc.

Find ways of getting support for yourself, whether through counselling, taking "time out" or (with her permission) talking to a friend.

## **What survivors have said they want**

- To convey to us that we are not to blame.
- To understand that we have mixed feelings.
- To be listened to.
- Not to ask too many questions.
- Patience – not rushing and taking things in our own time.
- To be believed, not doubted.
- It is important that we have control over when, where and who we tell.

## Books for Survivors

We find it difficult to recommend books as we feel this is a very individual choice. However the books below are books other survivors recommend and have said that they have found useful.

<b>Title / Author</b>	<b>ISBN</b>	<b>Publisher</b>
Allies in Healing by Laura Davis	10:0060968834	Harper Collins
Assert Yourself by Gael Lindenfield	978-0-007-12345-2	Harper Collins
Beginning to Heal by Ellen Bass & Laura Davis	978-0-06-056469-8	Harper Collins
Breaking Free by Carolyn Ainscough & Kay Toon	10:0859698106	Sheldon
Ghosts in the Bedroom by Ken Graber	10:155874116X	Health Communication
Overcoming Low Self- Esteem by Melanie Fennell	1-85487-725-9	Robinson

<b>Title / Author</b>	<b>ISBN</b>	<b>Publisher</b>
Self Esteem by Gael Lindenfield	978-0-7225-4007-7	Harper Collins
Strong at the Broken Places by Linda T. Sanford	10:1853813745	Virago Press
Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse Workbook by Carolyn Ainscough & Kay Toon	13: 978-1-55561-290-0	Da Capo Press
Surviving Sexual Violence by Liz Kelly	0-7456-0463-3	Polity Press
Quest for Respect by Linda Braswell	0-934793-20-4	Pathfinder
The Courage to Heal Workbook by Laura Davis	0-06-096437-5	Harper & Row
The Survivor's Guide to Recovery from Rape or Sexual Abuse by Robert Kelly & Fay Macted	0-9551037-0-3	Rugby RoSA



## Other support organisations

### Survivors of Rape, Sexual Assault or Childhood Sexual Abuse (Adults)

Rape Crisis England & Wales

[rapecrisis.org.uk](http://rapecrisis.org.uk)

National Helpline: 0808 802 9999

Daily: 12 noon-2.30 pm & 7-9.30 pm, plus 3-5.30 pm Mon-Fri

Rape Crisis (England and Wales) is the national umbrella organisation for Rape Crisis Centres across the country.

Survivors UK

[survivorsuk.org](http://survivorsuk.org)

Web chat: [www.survivorsuk.org/ways-we-can-help/web-chat/](http://www.survivorsuk.org/ways-we-can-help/web-chat/)

Text chat: 020 3322 1860

Both available Mon-Fri 10:30 am-9 pm; Sat & Sun 10 am-6 pm

For men who have experienced sexual abuse either as a child or an adult, their close friends and family.

### Children and Young People

Childline

[childline.org.uk](http://childline.org.uk)

Freephone Helpline: 0800 1111

24 hours a day, 7 days a week

NSPCC

[nspcc.org.uk](http://nspcc.org.uk)

Helpline: 0808 800 5000 | Text 88858

24 hours a day

NSPCC enables anyone who is concerned about the welfare of a child or young person to have someone to turn to. NSPCC can offer help, advice, guidance, support or take action on if there are concerns about a child who is either being abused or at risk of abuse.

## General Helplines

Mind

[mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk)

Infoline: 0300 123 3393 or text 86463 Mon-Fri 9 am-6 pm exc Bank Holidays

Mind helps people to take control over their mental health. We do this to make it possible for people who experience mental distress to live full lives, and play their full part in society.

Samaritans

[samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)

Helpline: 116 123 (free) 24 hours a day, 7 days a week  
or email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

## Specialist agencies

Cruse

[cruse.org.uk](http://cruse.org.uk)

National Helpline: 0808 808 1677 Mon & Fri 9 am-5 pm, Tues-Thurs 9 am-8 pm, or email [helpline@cruse.org.uk](mailto:helpline@cruse.org.uk)

Cruse Bereavement Care promotes the well-being of bereaved people and enables anyone bereaved by death to understand their grief and cope with their loss.

Freedom from Torture

[freedomfromtorture.org](http://freedomfromtorture.org)

020

7697

7777

Freedom from Torture is the only organisation in the United Kingdom that works exclusively with survivors of torture and organised violence.

Karma Nirvana

karmanirvana.org.uk

Helpline: 0800 599 9247

Support victims and survivors of forced marriage and honour based violence. Also seeks to increase the reporting of victims and also survivors many of which are disowned by their families.

One of the key aims of the network is to reduce the isolation of victims, increase confidence with agencies and offer a network of support.

Relate

relate.org.uk

0300 100 1234

Live Chat with a counsellor: [www.relate.org.uk/relationship-help/talk-someone/live-chat-counsellor](http://www.relate.org.uk/relationship-help/talk-someone/live-chat-counsellor)

Relate offers advice, relationship counselling, sex therapy, workshops, mediation, consultations and support face-to-face, by phone and through this website

Rights of Women

rightsofwomen.org.uk

Advice line: <http://rightsofwomen.org.uk/get-advice/>

Criminal Law, Family Law and Immigration & Asylum Law advice.

Rights of Women works to attain justice and equality by informing, educating and empowering women on their legal rights

Women's Aid

womensaid.org.uk

0808 2000 247

24 hours a day, 7 days a week

Helpline: 01707 276512

Thursdays: 7.30 pm – 9.30 pm

Administration: 01707 276539

E: [admin@hertsrapecrisis.org.uk](mailto:admin@hertsrapecrisis.org.uk)

W: [www.hertsrapecrisis.org.uk](http://www.hertsrapecrisis.org.uk)

Charity no. 800325

