

Guide to Counselling & Self-care



The Rowan Project

Counselling for Survivors of Sexual Abuse in Breckland

Part of The Daisy Programme

The first step...



First of all – well done! You have already done the hardest part by deciding to come to counselling. It takes enormous courage to make that call.

Now, as you wait for your first session, it's totally normal to feel worried – you might even feel like cancelling. Hopefully this booklet will set your mind at rest.

We at The Rowan Project know how hard it is to decide to deal with the past. We want to reassure you that we are not expecting you to talk in detail about your trauma on day one. Our counsellors have a lot of experience and training working with survivors of sexual abuse and will take you through the process at a pace that works for you.

We understand that you may find therapy initially challenging. Sexual trauma often impacts how you relate to others, and you may have some of the following issues:

- Trusting other people (especially someone you have just met, even a trained therapist)
- Feeling unsafe
- Anxiety
- Worried about triggers
- Feeling disconnected from the present moment
- Being defensive or angry
- Being too open, having no boundaries, therefore often feeling vulnerable after meeting new people
- Confusion and difficulty expressing yourself
- Shame
- Feeling undeserving

Our counsellors aim to make you feel safe first and foremost. We know how difficult this is for you and can help you manage triggered emotions as well as give you the space and time to find the words to talk about your experiences.

We will help you see that the shame you feel belongs to the perpetrator(s), not you. You have nothing to feel ashamed about and you deserve the space to be heard; respectfully, confidentially and with care. We will talk through all of this with you in our sessions and beforehand if you have any concerns.

We look forward to working with you

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One

Preparing for Counselling



I'm on the waiting list: What happens now?

It may take a few weeks from your initial contact before you can begin your regular counselling sessions with us. We want to use this time to help you prepare and get you in the best possible place to begin our work together.

Our counsellors will call you every few weeks (as agreed) to see how you are doing. These calls generally last around **30 minutes** and are not counselling sessions; the focus is on how you are coping in the here-and-now rather than going into details about the past. In these calls you can tell us how you feel, what you need and ask us any questions about counselling.

How do I know if I'm ready to commit to counselling?

Our counsellors will have called you to check you are ready to begin counselling, to make sure there is nothing too challenging going on in your life, such as a recent bereavement or house move.

In the early stages of therapy, things may come up and you will need to feel supported and safe in between sessions.

If you are going from therapy to a stressful life situation it will be hard to process your feelings: it may also dominate your therapy sessions, instead of dealing with the trauma and its impact. You may know in your heart that you are not quite ready and that's okay. We can keep you on the waiting list if you still need time to settle things, or you can come back at a later date.

How can I help myself in the meantime?



Self-care is one of those terms that is often bandied about, but basically means looking after yourself. If you are low or depressed, this can be as simple as getting up in the morning, showering, brushing your hair and teeth, wearing clean clothes and having a healthy breakfast.

It's important to realise – self-care is not selfish. It is just taking responsibility for your wellbeing.

Many of our clients are used to putting other people before themselves. Showing yourself – as well as others – acts of kindness is an important part of your healing as you may have lacked this as a child and learned not to expect it.

Kindness and compassion are at the heart of self-care – we know you care for other people, despite everything you have been through, so we want you to try to turn that care on yourself.

Imagine you are your own best friend. What do you need to feel better?

- A hug?
- A luxurious bath or time spent painting your nails?
- A delicious, nutritious meal?
- A chat with someone you love and trust?
- A moment to sit with a warm drink and gaze at a beautiful view?



Sometimes doing small things can make a huge difference: you are telling yourself you matter. Not taking care of yourself may trigger feelings related to neglect and abuse and further damage your self-esteem. Whatever you have been led to believe as a result of your experiences, *you matter.*

What will my first session be like?



You will be greeted at the front door by your counsellor, who will lead you to one of the counselling rooms and make sure you are comfortable. They may offer you water, but many clients bring their own water bottles. You may feel awkward and nervous – this is totally normal.

The room will be plain with a box of tissues and a clock. The counsellor and client sit on two comfy armchairs.

Counselling is a kind and supportive conversation, but with the focus on your needs and how you feel. Your counsellor creates the space to tell your story safely so that you can begin to heal.

In the first session you may discuss:

- The number of sessions and times
- Confidentiality
- What to do if you cancel or miss a session (all of these are covered in your contract)
- What led you to come to counselling
- How you are feeling and coping at the moment (at Rowan we ask you to fill out a brief psychological questionnaire beforehand and will discuss this in the first session)
- Your current relationships and support network
- Your aims and goals (don't worry if you don't have any at first – working this out may be part of the process)
- Any worries or concerns you have about counselling.

You are a unique individual – there is no one-size-fits-all with counselling – so we need to find the best ways to help you.

In the early sessions, you and your counsellor will:

- Begin to get to know each other
- Establish trust (this can take a few sessions or be instant)
- Explore your support and self-care strategies to make your journey with us as stress-free as possible
- Deal with any current real-life issues you are facing.

You may feel you just blurt everything out and weep; you might be more guarded or shy. It's all fine. Your counsellor will be there to support you.

Our counsellors are here to walk alongside you in your journey, to see what you see, feel what you feel – as much as we can. We don't want you to feel alone. If you have had to deal with things on your own in life, this can feel very strange at first, but you will soon get to understand how it works.

Whatever you feel, tell your counsellor if you are able.

This will help both of you make sure you are okay. Tuning into how *you* feel is an important part of counselling, and again it might be totally new or difficult at first.

Many people who have experienced abuse will have learned to bury, numb or disconnect from anything emotional. They may not feel their feelings until they suddenly spill out over something else. Many of our clients are used to putting other people's feelings before their own.

This is your time

What if I find it upsetting?

Counselling isn't easy at first: you are opening up things that may have been closed a long time. You have developed an amazing psychological defence system to help you cope. You may also not be used to someone being kind to you and listening.

You may react emotionally to all of these new experiences:

- opening up and being able to speak the truth
- being listened to non-judgementally, with compassion
- being believed and understood

You may feel an enormous relief at finally being heard. But you may also feel upset because you haven't been listened to this way before. Each client responds differently: there is no right or wrong, but we will support you in whatever comes up.

How will I feel after my first session?

Make sure you have arranged to take at least a few hours off – counselling can be exhausting at first. Do something pleasant and relaxing, treat yourself or arrange to meet a trusted friend.

After some sessions you may experience a range of emotions such as:

- **Relief** – you may feel you have finally got things off your chest and been understood
- **Exhaustion** – talking for an hour and trying to manage strong emotions can take it out of you
- **Upset or overwhelmed** – if the session brought up some distressing memories
- **Frustration** – if you didn't get what you wanted

Keep an eye on how you feel over the following week – things may bubble to the surface, or you may find you rely more on your coping mechanisms or self-sabotaging behaviours.

All these worries and feelings may put you off going to your next session, but all of this is useful information that will help you and your counsellor discover what you need to heal.

In the meantime, you can:

- Try the **grounding techniques** in Part Two of this brochure
- Try not to judge yourself
- Write things down on your phone or in a journal – it can be useful to keep notes
- Practice the **self-care techniques** in Part Two of this brochure

- Talk to someone you trust
- Begin your next counselling session by telling your counsellor how you felt

*If you are really struggling, call the Samaritans on **116 123** or the Rape Crisis Helpline, which is open daily between 12 noon – 2.30pm; 7pm – 9.30pm daily on **0808 802 9999**.*

Our counsellors do not offer an emergency service but can help develop a support strategy for more difficult times.

You may also feel that counselling isn't right for you, or that you need to speak to a **different therapist**. *As the relationship with your counsellor is one of the most important factors in your healing, you must listen to and voice any doubts you have.* Your counsellor will respect your feelings and should be able to signpost you to a service or person that can offer more appropriate help.

It's important to know that while our counsellors can support you in the counselling hour, you are responsible for your own wellbeing. Now is the time to put your needs first and step up your self-care.

How many sessions and how long?

We offer a maximum of **18 sessions** in total, but you may not need that many. Each session is the **same time each week** and lasts **60 minutes**. This is an important boundary – having boundaries around our sessions acts as a safety rail for us both, to protect our work together. Of course, you and your counsellor will take planned breaks during this time, but you can expect to be with us for around five months.

All we ask is that you honour our scheduled weekly appointments. We understand that turning up is hard, or that life can be pretty chaotic, but sadly we have a long waiting list, so please make sure you have a system in place to remind you to come. If something happens, please let us know the day before so we can fill the time usefully. You can take a holiday or planned break, of course. Our counsellors need breaks, too, and will inform you of their annual leave weeks before they take it.

Don't worry if this is too much to take in right now – you can refer back to this booklet any time. We just wanted to reassure you and hopefully allay some of your fears.

Two

Self-Care



When preparing for counselling, we can begin to discuss resources that can help you cope with your symptoms, such as emotional or memory flashbacks, triggered emotional overwhelm, anxiety and coping mechanisms such as addictive or destructive behaviours.

Some of the things our previous clients recommend are:

- Practising deep breathing exercises
- Grounding yourself when you feel spacey, panicky or having a flashback
- Writing down anything that comes up for you or how you feel in a private journal

How can I calm myself if I get overwhelmed or panicky?



It is amazing to think that the most powerful tool to help us regulate our emotions is free, something we do without thinking – **breathing**.

People who have suffered trauma tend to take very shallow breaths, especially in situations that make you feel **hypervigilant**, constantly looking out for life-threatening danger even if you're just going to the shops.

This is simply because something terrible happened to you, and you don't want it to happen again. You are on constant alert against any potential danger. Your body is poised to run away, fight or hide if you feel something isn't right.

The trouble is that you are already acting as though there is a danger, so your body is highly stressed, taking everything in so that it becomes too much – too loud, too many colours, too many people. If something did happen and you needed to respond quickly, you would be too overwhelmed to do anything. **The safest state to be in is calm yet aware.**

When you are calm, you can think more clearly.

We can use deep breathing exercises to calm us. Shallow breathing quickens the heartbeat as if we were running a marathon – plus a fast heartbeat can trigger a feeling of panic even if nothing scary is happening. **Deep breathing slows your heartbeat.**

It sends your body and mind the message that **you are in control and everything right now, in this moment, is okay.**

It helps you focus on what is happening now, rather than running potential disasters that haven't happened through your mind and triggering even more unnecessary and unhelpful feelings.

The best thing to do is **practise these exercises at home as often as possible** – ideally 5 minutes a day, at the same time every day (not much when you think about it, but it could be the most important part of your self-care ritual). Accept it may be difficult at first, but that after a while it will become second nature. Whenever you feel a spike of fear, you will instantly take a deep breath and feel yourself calm down.

1. Triangle breathing

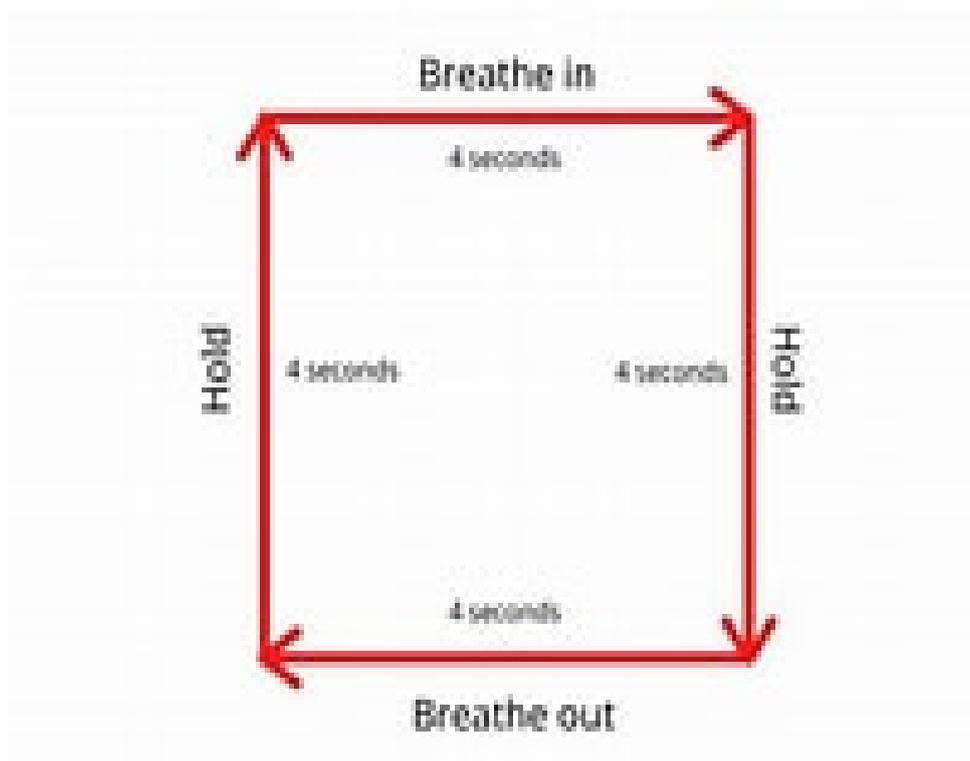
- Set a timer on your phone for 5 minutes
- Make sure you are sitting comfortably and upright. Close your eyes if you wish
- Take a deep breath into your belly and breathe slowly out
- Now imagine a triangle
- **Breathe in** counting slowly 1-2-3 imagining one side of the triangle
- **Breathe out** counting 1-2-3 imagining the downward side of the triangle
- **Hold** for 1-2-3 imagining the base of the triangle
- Repeat. Count 1-4 or 1-5 if you can



2. Box breathing

This is a technique is also known as Square Breathing and is used by everyone from athletes to U.S Navy SEALs as it heightens performance, concentration and can relieve stress. It is also said to relieve symptoms of some respiratory diseases.

- Simply breathe in slowly for a count of 3 or 4 (one side of the box)
- Hold for 3 or 4
- Breathe out for 3 or 4
- Pause for 3 or 4 to make sure your lungs are empty before starting again



3. Belly breathing

If you are new to belly breathing (also known as diaphragm breathing or simply **deep breathing**) then it is probably easier to learn it by lying down. Once you get a hang of it then you can do this form of breathing while seated or standing – anywhere, anytime. Once you have mastered the technique it is a powerful and simple way to calm yourself whatever the situation – before a job interview or when you are upset.

- Lie down on a flat surface, you can use pillows under your head and beneath the knees for support and to keep the body in a comfortable position
- Place one hand on your chest and the other one below the rib cage on your tummy. This will help you gain awareness of the movement of your belly and chest
- Start by taking a **slow, deep breathe in** – count slowly **1-2-3** – through your nose and as you breathe in, feeling your chest expand and then your stomach
- Now **breathe out** for a count of **4 or 5** seconds (the exhalation is longer than the inhalation, which allows your heart rate to slow). While you do this, you should feel your belly moving downwards
- Repeat a few times, then **count your breaths** – 1 when you breath in, 2 when you breath out, 3 breathing in and 4 breathing out. Count to ten, then go back to 1 and start again
- When your mind drifts or you find your thoughts taking you away from the task, gently return your attention to the breath and go back to 1 again

Repeat until you notice you are feeling calmer and then breathe normally.

How can I manage flashbacks or panic attacks?



Flashbacks and panic attacks happen when you have been triggered. A trigger can be something so small you might not know what it was – it could be the smallest thing that relates to your trauma, from a raised voice to mention of a place related to your trauma or the smell of someone’s aftershave.

Once you have been triggered, your body will go instantly into **survival mode** – the fight, flight or freeze response. You feel you must run away or hit out to protect yourself from an attacker – except there is no attacker, so you freeze. With a flashback, you may have a vivid memory or emotional response that is so strong, you start to feel you are back in the past.

‘Grounding Techniques’ are really simple. The aim is to bring you out of the past – whether you are stuck in an overwhelming emotion and can’t think or are reliving a horrible memory – and into the present moment, where **nothing bad is happening and you are safe**.

If you are experiencing a flashback or panic attack it may be that you have been reminded of a traumatic event in the past. This can trigger a **memory that feels real** – as though it's happening in the here-and-now. You may have **emotional states** from when you were young and helpless.

You can try these **grounding techniques** to get you back into the present moment. Work through them yourself if possible – if not, hand this to whoever you are with, and they can guide you through it. ***You may need to repeat it several times to return fully to the present.*

Find a quiet, safe place (even if it's the loo) and begin

1. Say your name and age, where you are and what you are doing: ie "I'm Sally, I'm now 44, I am standing in my kitchen making a cup of tea."
2. Say: "I am having a flashback/panic attack. It's a memory, it's not happening now."
3. "I am afraid but not in danger. I am safe now."
4. "These are just physical sensations of fear. Nothing bad is happening, but my body has been triggered to react in the same way to protect me."
5. "This is a flashback/panic attack and **it will pass**. It won't last, they never do. I will soon feel okay again."
6. If having an **intrusive thought** – say "STOP". Shrink the image that comes with it to a tiny black-and-white image the size of a postage stamp. Turn down the volume of the words in your head. Then physically screw it up in your hand like paper and push/throw it away. Try to call it back and repeat until it has gone.

The senses – 5, 4, 3, 2, 1

7. Name **5 things** around you. Say out loud what they are – chair, plant, picture etc
Also name **5 colours**
8. **Touch 4 things**
Feel your feet on the floor, feel the ground beneath your feet.
Look at your shoes – what size are they?
Wiggle your feet and fingers
Touch your chair
Touch a piece of jewellery or any object.
9. Name **3 sounds**
10. Name **2 things** you can **smell**
11. Finally notice the taste in your mouth; take a sip of your drink or suck a sweet.

Self-Soothing

12. **Speak to the inner child** who has been triggered. Let her know that you are here and won't let anything bad happen to them ever again.
13. **Tense and relax** your fists, your shoulders, your jaw, your eyes, squeeze and relax your bum, legs and toes, dig in your heels, feel the ground beneath your feet.
14. **Breathe** deeply in and sloooowly out – take longer to breath out as it soothes your fight-or-flight parasympathetic nervous system.
15. Count breaths – take deep breaths, first counting 1 for each inbreath, 1 for each outbreath; when you can do that comfortably, increase to 2 counts for each inbreath and outbreath; when that is easy, increase to 3 and so on. Eventually, with practice, you may be able to count up to 7 as you breathe in and 7 as you breathe out. Each time you are lengthening your breath and slowing down your breathing, until you become calmer.
16. *Tell yourself it will all be okay.* [*repeat]

After:

Find a safe place to unwind and soothe yourself, maybe wrapping up in a blanket. Hold a stuffed animal or cup of warm drink.

Talk through your experience with your therapist or write things down. It can help to find your triggers and explore different survival responses after – at the time you just need to focus on being okay. This is useful in building your toolbox for trauma recovery.

How do I journal to help my mental health?



When preparing for counselling, lots of thoughts, memories and feelings may come up and you may have nowhere to put them.

Perhaps you feel talking about them is too vulnerable, or you don't yet know how to explain how you feel. The beauty of writing is that you don't have to explain or worry about upsetting others. You can pour your heart out and then put it all away, safely.

- Keeping a journal can be a way to check in on how you are feeling
- It can also be a useful record of how you are progressing

First, buy a notebook and find a place to keep it safe. You can write down anything you want, but we recommend reading these tips on journaling beforehand – unless you are already doing it, of course.

1. Begin by establishing a regular time and place to journal – commit if you can to just **5 minutes** a day. Make sure you are uninterrupted and comfortable, perhaps light a candle or play some soothing music. Start small if you find it too overwhelming.
2. There is no wrong way to journal. This is your own personal experience, and there is absolutely no way to mess it up. Also, don't worry about things like grammar and spelling – that will just block your flow.

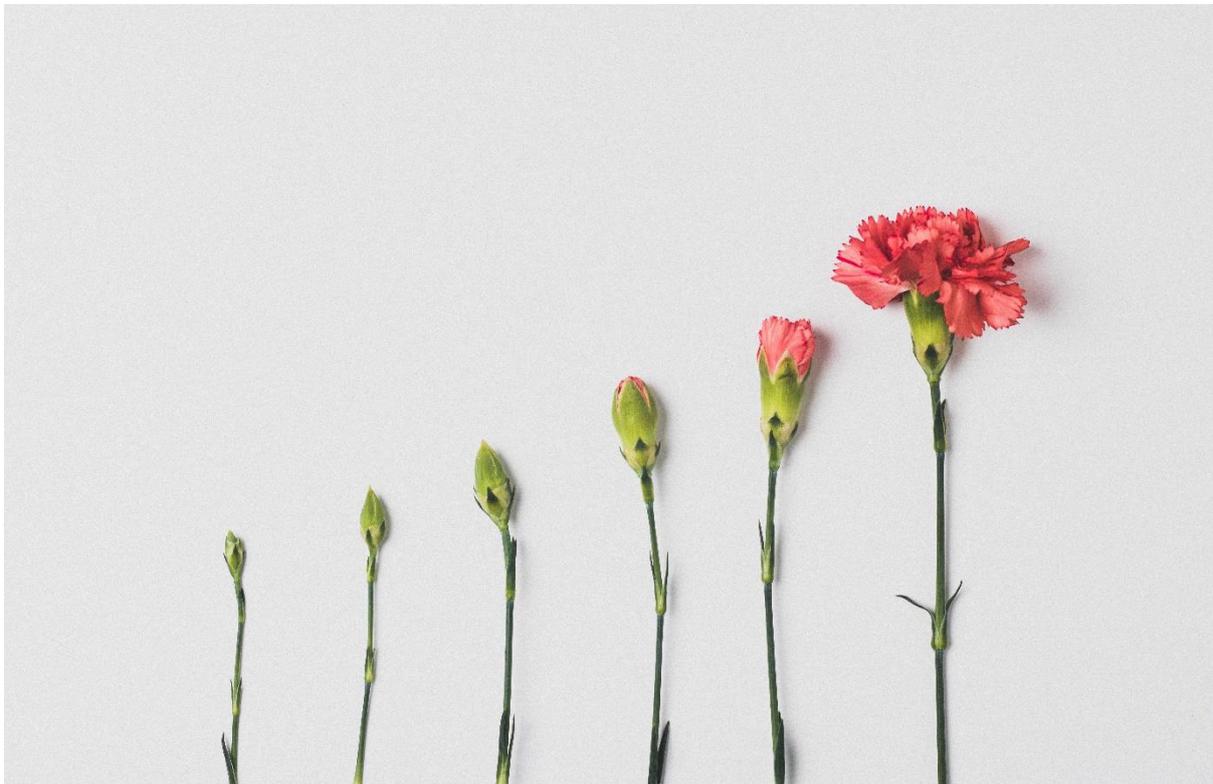
3. Drop any judgements, from criticising your own writing to feeling guilty about taking this time for yourself. Give yourself permission to express your feelings as you may not have been allowed to do this in the past – it's so important that you no longer bottle things up.
4. You can write about what has made you anxious or sad, or when you felt triggered or had a flashback. These are useful to record for your therapist, but you may also start to notice patterns and triggers – ask yourself what might have reminded you of the past just before you started to feel wobbly, or what is happening in your life right now? What are the things you can change to make you happier and the things you can't?
5. You can access your Self-Compassion by writing a letter to your past self, giving advice and reassurance, telling them they will be okay.
6. Studies show that focusing on positive feelings can help improve mental health by building resilience. What you focus on gives it power. Make sure you keep a regular gratitude journal. Every day, write three things you are grateful for, first thing in the morning or at the end of the day. Also include the reasons why you are grateful. For example, *I am grateful for my pet, they always make me happy.*

Most importantly, be aware of your Critical Voice – that's the mean voice in your head that can be so constant, you barely notice it. It may tell you that you aren't important, that you're making a big deal out of nothing, or worse, listing your faults and finding ways to blame you for everything.

We will work with this in counselling, but you can begin by turning down the volume on your Critical Voice and working on developing a more useful, compassionate and Kind Voice who encourages you, appreciates how hard it is. What would your best friend say – or what would you say to your best friend? Write yourself or your younger self a kind letter. List your positive traits, your strengths, or your values and beliefs. There is a strong survivor in you somewhere – that is why you are here and have decided to come to us.

Three

After counselling ends



The ending can be emotional for both client and counsellor, although some of us have a delayed reaction. We at Rowan care about you and while we are proud to let you go, we will miss you. We also find that our clients help us in our work and our lives through the insights and wisdom they bring: your healing extends and helps heal others. However, it is in the nature of our work that we have to say goodbye. We aim to empower our clients, to make ourselves redundant so you can be your own therapist.

You probably won't resolve *everything* all at once in 18 sessions, but a lot can be achieved in that time – sometimes it takes a few months for the work to settle. You may notice the effects of counselling for months or years to come; whether in the way you handle a crisis, a relationship issue,

or put your own needs first for a change. This may be thinking of ways to develop self-care and self-development, from joining a yoga or art group to exploring other types of therapy or coaching.

We hope that you will have gleaned valuable tools that will help you on your healing journey long after our work together.

We aim to have a good ending session to honour our work together as well as our therapeutic relationship. Endings can remind us of other endings, good and bad; it's important to notice and respect those feelings and give ourselves the best ending we can.

Now you have completed your counselling with Rowan, your journey has just begun. The important work – developing self-compassion, finding and achieving what you want in life – is still to come.

Continue to heal: self-care

Studies have shown that even researching self-care is a form of self-care. When you begin counselling, your self-care will be focused on feeling safe and being able to function. It will then develop into feeling valued and allowing yourself positive moments. From this point, you can begin to explore ways to feel inspired, valued and find purpose in life, whether it's helping others, working towards your dreams or developing your spiritual practice.

Check this list and make a note to work on or research the areas you struggle with:

- Getting enough sleep
- Exercising
- Eating in a way that supports your energy and health
- Finding alternatives to unhealthy coping patterns – anything that calms you without harming you
- Nurturing good relationships
- Nurturing your relationship with yourself
- Making time for hobbies, creativity or learning new skills
- Accepting some things are hard for you, or that you may lack the skill set; being able to reach out and ask for help or guidance

As you continue on your life journey, we hope you will allow yourself to grow your self-care practise and make it central to your routine.

Continue to know: self-awareness

Getting to know yourself – your patterns of thinking, feeling and behaviours – is something you will have started to do in counselling. It's almost like getting to know a new person as you may have lost yourself trying to cope with trauma and life's stresses.

Don't give it up now – this is just the beginning. Knowing your true self isn't always easy as we often adapt to the judgements and commands from our families, cultures and people who think they have our best intentions at heart. We become what they want or need rather than what we need to be to live our best life. People Pleasing or Avoiding are the learned behaviours we want to keep an eye on if we continue to heal.

You may now realise that there is no such thing as 'normal' or a 'right and wrong' way to be. You may also understand that everyone is different and sees the world from their perspective.

You are uniquely you. Your beliefs and feelings have emerged from your life experiences, good and bad. Other people with different lives will have different responses to things: they're not necessarily better or wrong, they're just different. You are free to make choices, to be responsible for your actions, to learn new ways to respond to things.

If you are unhappy or confused, it may be because you don't listen to your true self enough. Knowing and accepting who you are is an important part of finding your path and making the best choices in life and relationships.

Make sure you regularly ask yourself:

What do I feel?

What do I need?

You can continue to practise

- Catching the critical voice in your mind and being your own best friend
- Learning to know the difference between your good instincts and trauma triggers
- Accepting your emotions and learning to process them
- Making time to connect with your body through meditation, yoga or other physical activities

Continue to grow: self-development

While you may have felt stuck or held back by what happened to you for such a long time, there is every reason why you can now afford to look to the future and think about what you want from your life: to move from survive to thrive.

In the back of your mind there will be a store of forgotten dreams and plans that you have put on the backburner until you are strong enough. These may be things such as join a yoga class, work on your garden or learn a new language.

Some ways that may help you grow are:

- Reading self-help and personal development books – there are lots out there that cover every subject. You Tube is also a great resource for wellbeing, from meditation practices to talks on anxiety, relationships or spirituality
- Join a wellbeing class – for example, art, yoga or meditation groups
- Learn a new skill
- Continue to keep a journal and use it to make positive plans. Try writing a letter to your future self. Where do you imagine you want to be in five or ten years from now?

We hope you will continue healing and thriving, building resilience to cope with any difficulties and allowing yourself to enjoy the good parts of life. You deserve it.



Acknowledgements

Our counsellors are qualified, experienced therapists trained to work and abide by the standards of the BACP and UKCP ethical Framework.

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rowanproject@daisyprogramme.org.uk

01953 878488

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