



## Coping with nightmares

People who have experienced sexual assault or childhood sexual abuse may experience nightmares. These may be nightmares about the original abuse or might be dreams with disturbing, violent or frightening themes and images. This is one way your mind might respond to the traumatic events you have gone through.

### Some ways to deal with nightmares

- **Surround yourself with familiar things before you go to sleep.** This could be a soft toy or something that comforts you. (You may want to hold a cuddly toy or an object that helps you feel safe while you sleep). Perhaps someone you trust could sit with you until you fall asleep.
- **Sleep with a lamp/light on** so that if you wake up after experiencing a nightmare, you will be able to look around the room and see the familiar things that comfort you, helping you to relax more quickly. If you wake from a nightmare and it is dark turn on a light or lamp. This helps chase away the shadows.
- **Concentrate on breathing deeply and slowly.** Sometimes when people are stressed they forget to breathe, and freeze up. When this happens it is easier for the nightmare to take hold of you.
- **Remind yourself that the nightmare is just a dream.** It cannot hurt you even though it may feel scary and painful. Remember that it is a memory of the abuse that is not happening now.
- **Seek out a support person, someone you feel safe with, who you can sit with while you calm down.**
- **Imagine a safe place.** This can be anywhere or anything that helps you to feel safe. It may help if you draw or write it down before a nightmare occurs, so that you can have it ready beside your bed if you wake up from a nightmare.
- **Remember positive encouragement given by your support people.** Imagine that person is there with you, encouraging you. Think of what he/she would say to you to help you feel stronger.
- **Write the nightmare down and change the ending.** At the point where the dream becomes a nightmare, rewrite the parts which are distressing so that for example, the abuse does not occur, you get rescued or that you overcome the abuser. Over time you are rewriting the actual dream so that when it happens you will dream the new version that you have written about. Tell someone you trust your new version of the nightmare helps to reinforce the 'new' dream into your mind.