

How to cope with the trauma of a false allegation

This FACTsheet was created with the help of a psychiatrist and a general practitioner, both of whom had experienced the trauma of a false allegation. In addition, the coping strategies are based on the responses to a questionnaire in 2017 returned by 43 people who had either been the victim of a false allegation of CSA or were their friends and relatives.

More **detailed advice** can be found on our website at factuk.org/how-to-cope/

The following description of the suffering of the wrongly accused is given in the hope that it will reassure you that your experience is quite normal for someone in your situation. Although you may be in a very dark place right now, and may want to give up, please read this FACTsheet and try to follow the strategies our members have found so helpful.

The suffering of the wrongfully accused can be worse than a bereavement

The wrongly accused and their family and friends suffer horribly. The experience of a wrongful allegation can quite reasonably be compared with the loss of a loved one.

A bereaved person may have lost their life partner or child. The wrongfully accused may lose their reputation and sense of self-worth, their respect, their place in their community, their career, their friends, partners, and sometimes their freedom. They may have to spend their life savings on their legal defence and even their pension can be at risk.

Whereas time may dull the pain of bereavement, the fallout from a wrongful allegation can last for ever. Both the bereaved and the wrongfully accused are in dire need of support. However, while the bereaved are usually supported by their families, friends, and communities, many wrongfully accused are vilified and isolated and alone.

The landmark study from Oxford University titled [‘The Impact of Being Wrongly Accused of Abuse in Occupations of Trust: Victims’ Voices’](#) made the following comment.

“The majority reported high anxiety levels, severe depression, ill health and associated symptoms of trauma, with short and longer-term symptoms, with some experiencing permanent behavioural and personality changes. The effects of false allegations were felt by their partners and children too, with anxiety and depression experienced by many family members, in addition to consequential financial burdens. The stigma of a false allegation is felt by the whole family and can lead to family breakdown, or permanently damage the relationship”

The wrongfully accused go through many stages in their suffering

The victim of a wrongful allegation, together with their family and friends may go through different stages following the trauma of a false allegation. These are like the stages of bereavement first described by Dr Kubler-Ross.

Shock, withdrawal, and panic

Initially it is not unusual for the victim to be in shock, sometimes paralysed into inaction. Some may remain in this state of paralysis right throughout the investigation and possible trial.

'From the word 'go', he went into a kind of cocoon... you would think that [someone with his knowledge and experience of criminal justice] would leap into action and start gathering evidence left right and centre... not ever. I did all that... he removed himself from the process and zoned out during court proceedings.... The whole thing was distasteful in the extreme to him... we never discussed his mental health, there was no point talking about it.' (1)

The victim can experience panic attacks, insomnia and be extremely anxious about the future (2).

Anger

However, after the initial shock, many will react to the grievous hurt that has been done to them. Most will be incredibly angry against their accuser, the police, the justice system, the state, and maybe their employer and colleagues. Their extreme anger and combative attitude can be misunderstood by those who have not been in a similar situation and may cause an unfavourable impression when they try to defend themselves.

Loss of self-confidence and fear

The victim will feel they have had their reputation and sense of self-worth destroyed and the result of this is that their self-confidence can be wrecked. (3). Some will feel anxious, hypervigilant and even paranoid in public places, believing that they are being judged by others.

Depression and guilty feelings

Depression and unwarranted self-blame ('what is it about me that would lead someone to make such a vile accusation?'), even to the point of feeling suicidal, are common feelings (4).

Post-traumatic stress disorder

Some experience symptoms of post-traumatic distress disorder with panic attacks and flash backs.

Acceptance

Many people will find it extremely difficult to reach this stage, because the consequences of a wrongful allegation may be lifelong.

One person who was never prosecuted said *'the wounds do, now and then, re-open and throb painfully. We will never be quite the same again.'* (5)

Acceptance doesn't mean pretending that a grave injustice never happened or accepting the status quo; in fact, it may be helpful to campaign for the changes in the justice system that are needed.

Acceptance in this context is about letting go of anger. The problem is that although it is quite reasonable, normal, and understandable to feel extremely angry, in the long term this anger is destructive and harmful to the victim of the wrongful allegation.

How to cope

The following advice is a summary of strategies recommended by over 40 of our members including a psychiatrist and a GP.

In the immediate aftermath of the investigation

1. **Talk** about your situation with close family and friends. You may be surprised how supportive they are. The majority of those responding to the questionnaire found them helpful. If your work place prohibits you from speaking to anyone, get legal advice because this avenue of support is vital and could be lifesaving.
2. **Phone FACT's helpline** on 0333 335 5934 or contact us by email on at support@factuk.org. You can also **speak to the Samaritans** on 116 123 (in the UK and the Republic of Ireland). Don't keep it all to yourself. We will listen and understand what you are going through.
3. Get good **specialist legal advice** from a team that will support you and believe in your innocence. FACT can help you find a good solicitor.
4. **See your GP as soon as possible**. Your doctor can help you look after your mental and physical health at this difficult time and can keep a record of your suffering. Don't be afraid to take medication such as antidepressants and sleeping tablets if recommended by your doctor.
5. **Contact your Union** and/or professional indemnity insurance provider.
6. **Don't talk to the media**; if necessary, let your legal advisor do the talking for you.

In the longer term

1. Keep in touch with family and friends and **keep talking**.
2. Make use of **FACT's support**, come to FACT conferences, and speak to other members of FACT who are in the same situation as you. We understand what you are going through because we have been there too. FACT's website has many helpful resources.
3. Continue to **visit your doctor** and take medication if prescribed.
4. You will feel better if you can take active steps to **regain some control** of the situation.

Some of the strategies recommended by our respondents are:

- Get involved in **campaigning for justice** for the wrongfully accused.
- **Support others** in the same situation.

- Research the allegation and/or the complainant
 - **Help your legal team** prepare your defence.
 - Keep a diary, including detailed notes of meetings, correspondence, and phone calls.
 - Research false memories and the phenomenon of wrongful allegations.
 - Read accounts of other victims of wrongful allegations.
5. These **psychological strategies** can help control your anxiety and depression.
- Try to keep your anxiety in a **separate “compartment”** of your mind.
 - **Limit** the amount of time during the day during which you and your partner/spouse discuss the situation.
 - Try to live in the moment because brooding over the past causes depression and anger and thinking too much about the future causes anxiety. You may want to learn and practise the technique of ‘**mindfulness**’.
 - Recognise **destructive thoughts** early before they spiral out of control, don’t bottle them up, talk to someone.
 - **Positive framing** is another useful tool for neutralizing destructive thoughts. See factuk.org/how-to-cope/the-psychological-basis-of-trauma-and-how-to-cope-with-it/
6. These distraction techniques can also help control your mood.
- **Exercise**, such as long walks.
 - Keep busy.
 - Go on weekends away or **holidays** somewhere completely different.
 - Visit family and friends.
 - Listening to music, watching escapist or comedy films and TV can be helpful.
 - Start a creative hobby or find a constructive project.
 - Do voluntary work.
7. **Counselling** can be helpful but check their confidentiality policy first. Some counsellors will feel they need to pass on information about you if they (mistakenly) think you are a risk to others.
8. **Cognitive behaviour therapy** (CBT) is different to counselling and is often available on the NHS via your GP. CBT is a practical therapy that aims to improve your mood by altering the way you think about yourself and helps you to neutralize and overcome destructive thoughts.
9. If you visit your **priest or faith leader** bear in mind that they may have an obligation to take safeguarding measures which may restrict what you can do in your faith community. You may want to seek spiritual support elsewhere.

10. Keep **drugs and alcohol under control**, over indulging can damage your health and can make your anxiety and depression worse.

Useful Apps



Stay Alive This app is a suicide prevention resource for the UK, packed full of useful information and tools to help you stay safe in crisis. You can use it if you are having thoughts of suicide or if you are concerned about someone else who may be considering suicide.

The app includes:

- A safety plan with customisable reasons for living
- A **LifeBox** where you can store photos and memories that are important to you
- Strategies for staying safe and tips on how to stay grounded when you're feeling overwhelmed
- Guided-breathing exercises and an interactive Wellness Plan

The app also links you directly to local and national crisis resources, with space to add in your own as well.



Calm is available on iPhone and Android. It is designed to improve sleep quality, reduce stress or anxiety and help you focus.



Headspace is another app designed to teach you mindfulness. To quote from their website:

'There are thousands of studies that have shown mindfulness and meditation can positively impact mental and physical health, whether it's by reducing stress, improving sleep, increasing focus, or improving relationships. The proof is in the science: Headspace can make a big impact on people's lives — and it doesn't take long to see the benefits.'

References

1. The Impact of Being Wrongly Accused of Abuse in Occupations of Trust: Victims' Voices Carolyn Hoyle, Naomi-Ellen Speechley, and Ros Burnett. 2016. University of Oxford Centre for Criminology. p38
2. ditto, p16
3. ditto, p31
4. ditto, p34
5. ditto, p32