Road to recovery

Question

I was sexually abused as a child and now I self-harm and suffer from depression and anxiety as a result. I have flashbacks and nightmares that I can’t control at all. I’m already taking some medication but I was wondering if there is anything I can take, or do, to help specifically with the self-harm.

Answer

It’s understandable that the sexual abuse you experienced has had a significant impact on you and has produced some very difficult feelings for you to cope with. The anxiety, depression, flashbacks and nightmares must be terribly hard to face on a day-to-day basis.

It can be hard to know how to cope with feelings from events in the past, as opposed to the present. In some circumstances the emotional and psychological impact of abuse is delayed until later on in life. This is sometimes referred to as post-traumatic stress and can cause some of the things you mentioned, like self-harm, nightmares, depression, or anxiety. In addition, people may experience a lack of confidence or self esteem, problems with relationships or issues surrounding sex.

Have you been referred to a counsellor or therapist to help support you through this difficult time? Sometimes it’s easier to talk to a stranger about things, to explore thoughts and feelings in an honest, confidential and non-judgemental environment. Local counselling services can be found via the British Association For Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). If you’d like to talk to someone in the meantime you can call Safeline on 0808 800 5005. You can talk to them in confidence about the feelings you’re experiencing because of the abuse. If you would prefer, they also offer a confidential email service you can contact onsafeline@healthyplace.com.

Self-harm is often a coping strategy used by people to deal with very difficult feelings, as a way of communicating when things cannot put into words or even thoughts. It may also be a way of releasing painful emotions, like rage, sadness, emptiness, guilt or fear.

There is no specific medication available for self-harm, as it is viewed as a symptom of various mental health issues, like depression or anxiety, both of which are usually treated with antidepressants. Although you do not say what you are taking, you mentioned that you are on medication. If you feel that this is not helping you, it might be worth returning to your prescribing doctor (GP) to discuss this further.

There are also a number of methods people use to avoid self-harming when they get the urge, for example, snapping elastic bands on the wrists or crushing ice in the fist. If you would like to talk to
someone, about your self-harming and the reasons why you do it, Bristol Crisis Service for Women offer support on 0117 925 1119.

Finally, you do not say if you have spoken to any friends or family about your feelings. This can seem difficult at first, but it may give them a better insight into your situation, so they can offer you more effective support and understanding. But, understandably, this can be hard and if you feel uncomfortable talking to your parents or friends at this stage, you might like to consider talking in confidence and without judgement to a volunteer at Saneline on 0845 767 8000. You can talk through any feelings and worries you have with them.