A photograph of a city skyline at dusk. The sky is a deep purple and blue, with a thin crescent moon visible in the upper left. Several multi-story buildings are visible, some with lit windows. The central building has a prominent glass facade reflecting the sky. The text 'RETURNING TO WORK' is overlaid in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the image.

RETURNING TO WORK

AFTER SEXUAL ASSAULT

A resource for sex workers in Victoria





This booklet was developed as part of the work of RhED's Health Educator team.

Sex work isn't inherently violent, exploitative, or dangerous. It's a job. It is the conditions of labour, cultural attitudes, and stigma that make sex work a potentially dangerous occupation.

Perpetrators of violence against sex workers need to be held to account. This booklet is designed for sex workers who have been let down by the wider community, clients, our institutions and systems, and have experienced sexual assault at work.

DISCLAIMER

The information supplied in this booklet is not legal or health advice. To the best of our knowledge it was correct at the time of publication. It should only be used as a guide and you should seek assistance from qualified health, legal or other advisers as required.

Thanks to our previous RhED colleagues for developing the POWER booklet in 2002, which informed part of this work.

Thanks also to the Sexual Assault Resource Centre who developed the Care Package: For adults who have experienced sexual trauma, which we also drew information from for this resource:



Thanks to Bigger Sister Channel and Victoria Police for reviewing this document and providing invaluable feedback.

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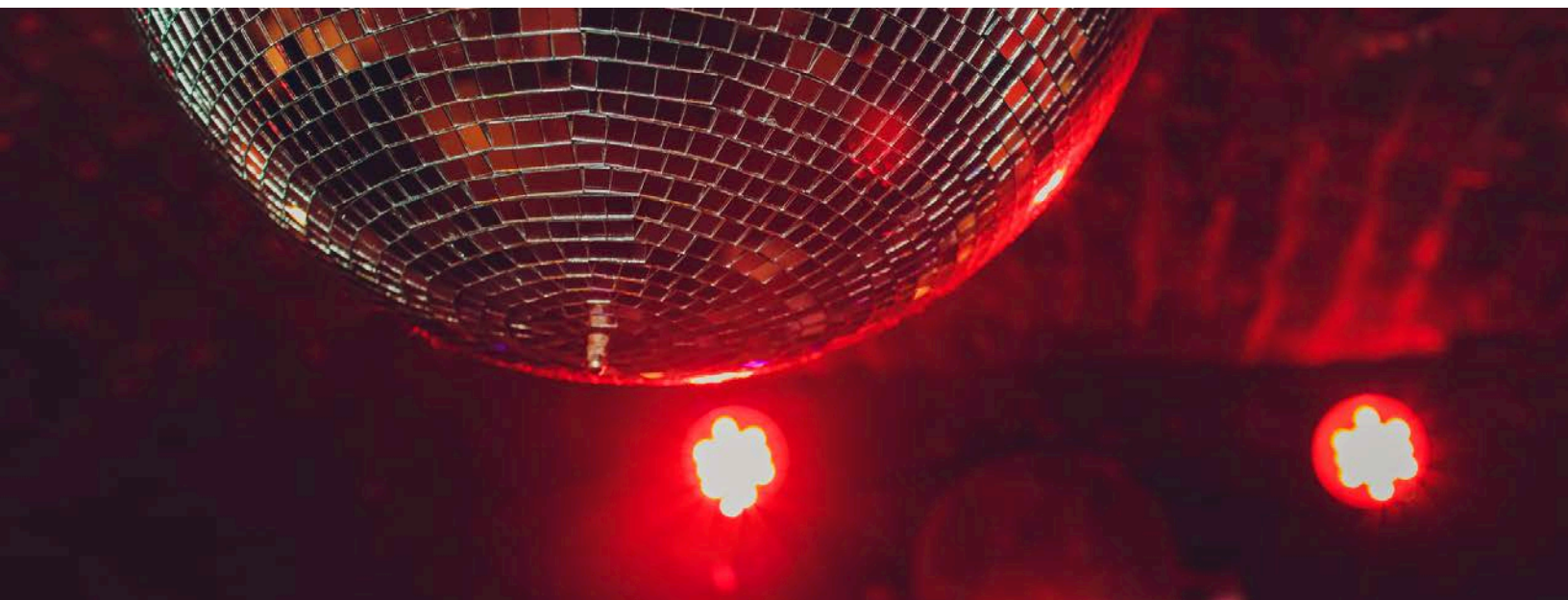


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Workplace Violence

Sex work isn't inherently violent, exploitative, or dangerous. It's a job. It's the conditions of labour, cultural attitudes, and stigma that make sex work a potentially dangerous occupation.



All workers have the right to safe workplaces, including sex workers. In Victoria, workers are protected by work health and safety legislation known as the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004. This legislation outlines workplace and worker responsibilities in establishing and maintaining safe workplaces, including the elimination or reduction of the risk of occupational aggression. Any incident of violence or sexual assault in the workplace is a crime and is absolutely not 'part of the job.'

Occupational violence and sexual assault is perpetrated by some clients towards sex workers due to a complex interaction of factors including:

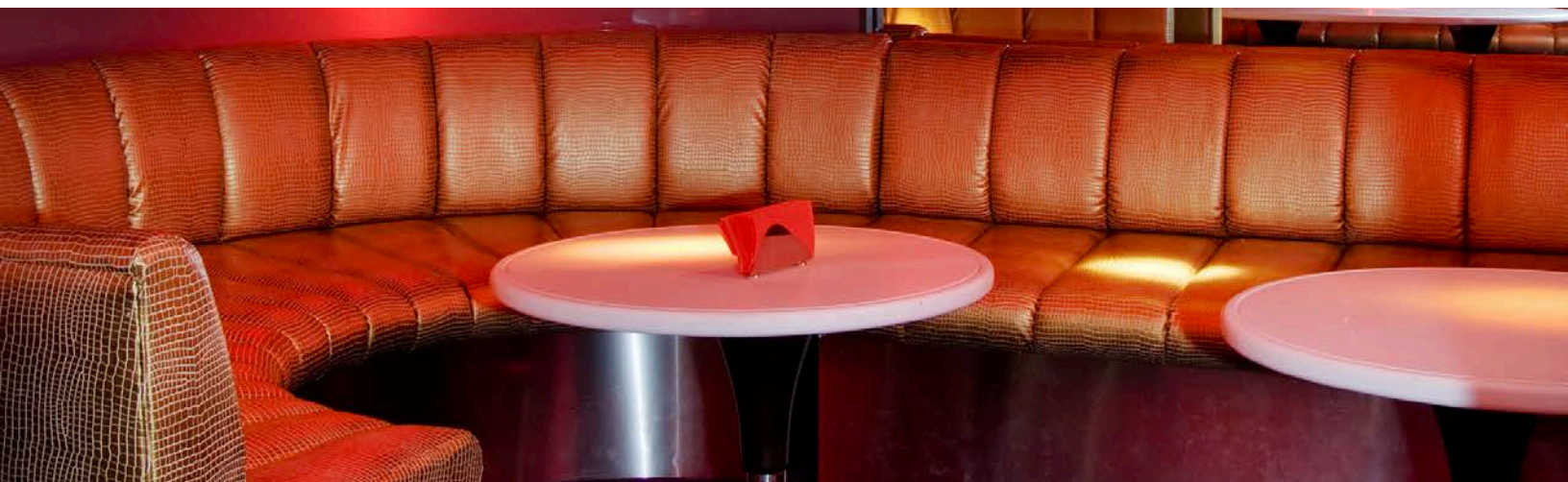
Person: The main cause of violence is the perpetrator themselves. A perpetrator's level of intoxication, their individual beliefs and values, and their socialised behaviours can influence likelihood of violence perpetration.

Cultural: Cultural gender expectations, traditions, and patriarchal and misogynist views can legitimise violence for some and reinforce power imbalances.

Environmental: Sex workers working alone or in relatively isolated ways face additional risks due to clients believing their behaviour is out of sight and away from the scrutiny of others. Venues that treat their workers poorly are role modelling disrespect which may influence a client's behaviour.

Societal: Misogyny and sex work stigma in the community lead to the dehumanising of, and lack of respect for sex workers. These attitudes are perpetuated in media via news stories, movies, books, music, as well as through individual and group language and behaviour.

Structural: Legal systems that are overly burdensome, complex, not trauma informed, and stigmatising (especially to victim/survivors who hold one or many marginalised identities) result in victim/survivors not reporting crimes committed against them. This leads to perpetrators not being held to account, giving them confidence they will 'get away with' crimes, and leaving them free to commit similar crimes against others.







After an Incident



Everyone responds differently following workplace violence or sexual assault. You will respond in your own way, and often the response will feel out of your control. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to react, and your reaction may last a day, a week, a month, or a year (or more). You may have a delayed reaction, a strong reaction that fades quickly, or feel like your response to the event is rollercoaster-like with many ups and downs.

Common responses to sexual assault

Body		Muscle tension Headaches Feeling dizzy Sweating	Dry mouth Diarrhoea Constipation Loss of appetite	Tight chest Exhaustion Rapid heart Pains
Thoughts		'It was my fault' 'I should've done more' 'I'll never be the same'	Intrusive memories Flashbacks Nightmares	Poor memory Confusion Difficulty concentrating
Feelings		Hopeless Afraid Guilty Detached Angry	Depressed Ashamed Irritable Insecure Hurt	Anxious Alone Numb Alienated Inadequate
Behaviour		Neglecting self care Self-harming Nail biting Impulsivity	Changes to eating Easily startled Avoiding people	Lack of interest in things Very alert Withdrawn

Source: Care package - For adults who have experienced sexual trauma.
Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC) Western Australia



Thinking about it

It is very common and normal for you to constantly think about an incident of violence afterwards. It can feel as though you are thinking about it all the time and that you have no control over your thoughts. This can be very upsetting and frustrating, especially if all you want to do is move on from what happened.

While distressing, thinking about an incident over and over again is a way for your mind to process what has happened. You might find yourself analyzing every detail of what happened, and playing out different scenarios in your mind. It makes sense to want to avoid these thoughts (sometimes with the help of alcohol or other drugs), however these thoughts are an important part of figuring out and understanding what happened. There are times when it is not safe for you to process these thoughts and you might need to block them out, however it is important to not block them out forever as it may negatively impact your recovery.

What might help:

Reassurance

As your mind processes the event, the frequency of these thoughts and their emotional intensity will reduce over time. Reassuring yourself that you are in the process of recovering from a traumatic event, and the intrusive thoughts will reduce in the future might help you cope with them in the present.

Confronting thoughts gradually

Having something to distract you while you work through thoughts related to the event may help the thoughts feel more manageable. This could look like watching a trashy TV show, reading an interesting book, playing a game online, making a collage, or doing some exercise. The intrusive thoughts may make it harder to do these activities so make sure your expectations during this time aren't too high (e.g. it might take you twice as long to read a page if you are distracted by your thoughts).

Sex workers constantly weigh up risks while working, however it's impossible to know exactly how a situation is going to play out.

Challenging unhelpful thoughts

It is common after workplace violence or sexual assault to have thoughts that shift the blame for what you experienced onto yourself. These could be thoughts such as 'I should've done...', 'I shouldn't have done...', or even 'I deserved it because...'. Know that these thoughts are very normal after a traumatic event, however they are not helpful. During the incident you made the best choices for yourself at the time. It is easy to look back with hindsight and criticise yourself, however past you didn't know what you know now.

Sometimes these thoughts centre around not fighting back or challenging the perpetrator. Know that it is very common to not fight back in instances of violence or sexual assault. When you are in a threatening situation often not challenging the perpetrator can keep you safe from further harm or escalation.

Sometimes these thoughts centre on criticising yourself for taking a booking even though you felt unsure, or like it was a risky choice. You might also criticize yourself for not getting the money upfront, disclosing too much personal information, or staying with a client who had been a boundary pusher in the past. Sex workers constantly weigh up risks while working, however it's impossible to know exactly how a situation is going to play out. You likely made the same choice a lot of other sex workers would have made in the same circumstances, and sometimes choices are impacted by external forces that can be hard to ignore (such as financial need, a client being a regular, etc.).

Common thoughts to avoid and challenge

It's my fault for not getting the money at the start of the booking.

I should've known better.

I should've cancelled the booking earlier.

If I was nicer to him, maybe he wouldn't have done that.

I should've fought back.

It's my fault for not checking the condom was still on.

I should've tried harder to stop him.

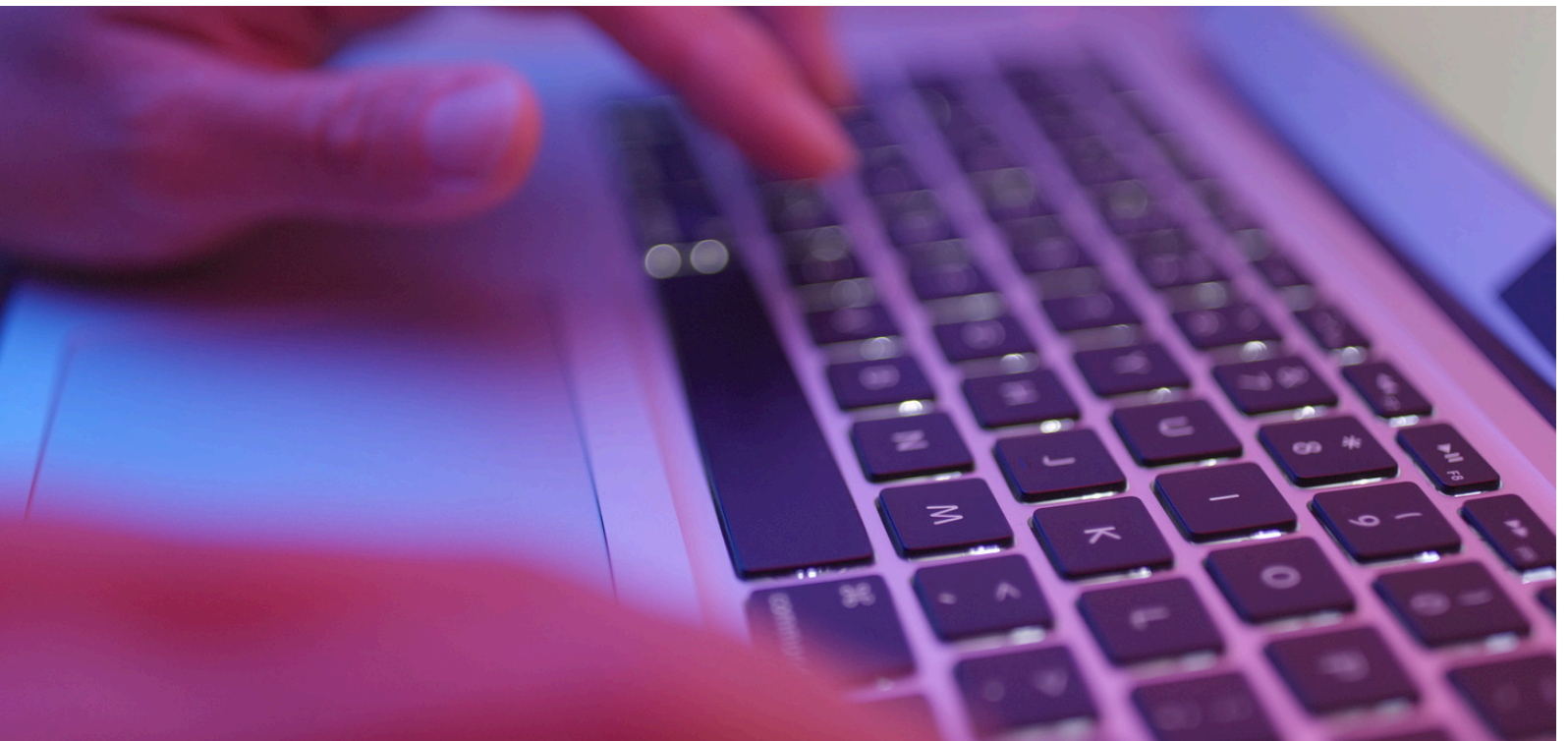
I wasn't strong enough with my boundaries.

Reminder: You are not responsible for violence perpetrated by someone else.

Talking about what happened

Putting your thoughts into words in the presence of a trusted support person or counsellor can help you work through what happened with the benefit of receiving emotional support from someone else. Talking with someone who doesn't respond in the right way (someone who makes you feel unheard, puts blame on you, or minimises your feelings) might make you feel worse, so choose who you share your experience with carefully.

You can call or email RhED's Health Educators who are experienced in debriefing with workers after violence or sexual assault at work. They can also refer you to specialized sexual assault support services.





Changes in behaviour

Drugs and alcohol

Some people drink alcohol or take other drugs at an increased rate following workplace violence or sexual assault. It's a very common response to seek reprieve from your thoughts. Over time as you process what happened, it is likely that you'll find yourself wanting to take substances less and less.

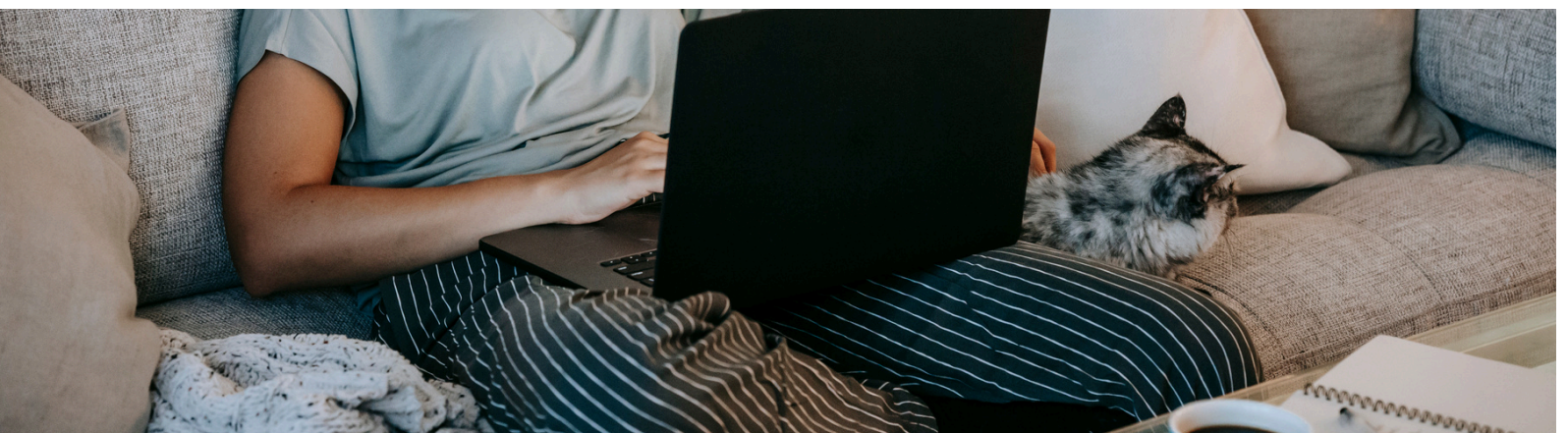
There are lots of services you can reach out to if you feel like your substance use is creating a barrier between you and what you want to do day-to-day. You can get in touch with RhED for more information.

Not being able to do anything

Following a traumatic experience, motivating yourself to do anything can feel impossible. Some people find that day-to-day tasks can feel pointless, and the waves of emotion they experience can be exhausting. You should try to give yourself some grace while processing what happened. If you have commitments that you can't ignore, try to focus on one task at a time rather than everything you have to do in a day, which can be overwhelming.

Trying to do just one or two tasks of your usual routine, can have a big impact on your mindset and motivation. Setting one goal such as to shower when you wake up, or make a healthy lunch, can help maintain a sense of normalcy and routine in the aftermath of a workplace incident.

Sometimes reaching out to a friend can help you complete your daily tasks. Often known as body-doubling, calling someone and having them stay on the phone while you complete a task can sometimes be just as helpful as them being there in person, even if you don't talk much.



Being hypervigilant

Following a traumatic experience, many people find themselves more easily startled and alert, this is known as hypervigilance. Hypervigilance is a normal reaction, and is a survival instinct to keep you safe from further harm. As you process the incident over time, this hypervigilance will reduce.

Hypervigilance can impact your ability to fall and stay asleep. If you find you are having trouble sleeping, you might want to consider speaking to a medical professional who can explore different sleep interventions with you.

If you find yourself being hypervigilant long after an incident has happened and it is concerning you, you can reach out to a mental health professional for support. You can contact RhED for sex worker allied mental health referrals.



Returning to work

Following an incidence of violence or sexual assault it's important to take time to process what happened, rest, and regain a sense of safety. For many, this may include taking some time away from work if possible.

This period of rest and recovery isn't always an option for everyone, and if you find yourself needing to return to work before you feel ready, the following tips and ideas may make returning to work feel more manageable.

The work environment

The environment you work in can influence how you work, how you feel about work, and how others interact with you. Making changes to your work environment can help you feel more safe and secure, as well as reduce anxiety you may be feeling regarding working again.



A quick note on weapons

A weapon that you carry for self-defence can be turned against you and you can end up being the one who gets injured.

It is also illegal in Victoria to carry, possess or use a weapon to hurt people or to defend yourself. You could carry some sort of loud personal alarm or talk to your peers or RhED Health Educators for self-defence information and ideas for sex workers.

Returning to work

If you can, avoid working in the room, area, or location where the assault happened on your first day back.

Control your workspace

Have as much control over your environment as you can. If you are working privately, consider providing an incall from a familiar space, or if you're a brothel-based worker see if you can do bookings from a familiar or favourite room. If you're working on the streets, tell the client where to park, don't let him pick a spot. It can be difficult to control your workspace as a stripper, but deciding to return to work on a weekday and lowering your money goals for the first shift back, may make returning to work less overwhelming.

Lean on your peers

If you work at a venue or alongside others, confiding in a trusted friend can help you feel supported when returning to work. Rostering on the same shift, doing a double, buddying up for the night, or getting ready for work together may help you to feel better. Socializing with others releases hormones that reduce stress, and can help you feel more settled and calm.





The work itself

Take it slow

When people return to work after an incident or injury, it's normal for them to return to work under 'light duties.' It doesn't matter if you have been off work due to a physical or mental injury, you shouldn't be expected to return to work at full capacity straight away. If you're a brothel-based worker you can speak to management about requiring breaks between bookings, or perhaps you only feel up to doing one booking on your first shift back. If you're a stripper you can talk to your house mum about extra break times.

You could also consider asking to do a shorter shift. The thought of returning to work can be really overwhelming, and sometimes just going in for a couple of hours, or finishing a few hours earlier than usual can help you feel safe in the space again, and get you ready to return for a longer shift at a later date.

Be choosy

Consider what types of bookings or shifts you typically enjoy. You may even have a regular client or customer that you feel you can trust. These shifts or bookings may be the best way to ease back into work. If you are a venue-based worker, talk to management about how you are feeling and that you are only going to see certain clients or customers (e.g. ones who aren't overly intoxicated, who want a standard booking or non-VIP dance, or ones you have seen before.) If you're a showgirl maybe you only want to do a show and not offer private dances (or the opposite).

Strengthen your safety practices

The onus shouldn't be on sex workers to keep ourselves safe, the responsibility lies with our clients who shouldn't commit acts of violence against us. However, as we can't always rely on others to do the right thing, tightening your safety practices can help you feel more comfortable returning to work:

Brothel workers

- Have a discussion with management around your venue's safety practices. Knowing everyone is on the same page can give you some confidence in what steps you'll take if something goes wrong.
- Request a room close to reception for your bookings.

Private workers

- Increase your screening practices and don't accept bookings with anyone who refuses your standard screening procedure.
- Have someone drive you to your booking and wait outside for you.
- When you arrive at the booking call a friend, driver, or even your own personal number and let them know you're arrived and you should be done by X time. This lets the client know you're not alone.
- Use the Life360 app to share your location with trusted others. The app has an SOS feature to alert the police in an emergency.

Strip club workers

- Request security frequent private dance areas more often, and ask them to walk you to your car after work.
- Talk to your House Mum/Dad about your workplace's safety practices. Having knowledge around what you can do if something goes wrong can give you some confidence.

Street-based workers

- Note down the client's rego and text it to a friend if you can.
- Ask the client to wind down the window and turn on the inside light so you can check inside the car before you get in. Look for any weapons on seats or on the ground, or any people hiding in the back.
- Get the client to park where you want, don't let him pick the spot.
- Leave your DNA in the car. Put your fingerprints on the dashboard or leave a hair on the floor.
- Use the Life360 app to share your location with trusted others. The app has an SOS feature to alert the police in an emergency.

Tighten your boundaries

Violence and sexual assault are both violations of personal boundaries. If you experience this at work it is not because you lack boundaries, but because someone chose to ignore them. Sometimes a way to regain a sense of safety following an incident is to tighten your boundaries so that services feel more predictable.

This could look like:

- Only offering a standard service,
- Only offering lapdances or table dances (as opposed to VIP bookings),
- Declining group bookings,
- Declining any clients that request extras,
- Declining any clients that seem like they might be boundary pushers,
- Telling clients you have a one-strike rule (if they do anything outside what has been discussed you will end the booking immediately).



The worker (you)

Try to be early

Getting to work early so that you're not rushing will help reduce your overall stress and anxiety, and can help you feel more settled.

Wear your favourite outfit

Your favourite work outfit isn't just about making money. It can help you feel more confident, secure and prepared. It is also something familiar to you, which can support feelings of predictability and safety when going back to work for the first time.

Plan your whole day

Think about what you are doing before and after work on your first day back. Trying to cram too much into the day could leave you exhausted by the time you reach work, which may impact your emotional resilience.

Some people might consider doing nothing before or after work on their first day back if they are feeling like they need rest. Others might be worried they will be anxious before work and might want to do something that is both relaxing and gives them some positive energy. This could be seeing a friend, going to the gym, or cooking some food.

For some workers, having something to look forward to after work can help get you to work in the first place. This might be brunch/drinks with peers or something else you enjoy like going to the market.

Go easy on yourself

Sometimes people tend to be harsher and expect more of themselves than they would expect of someone else in the same situation. Think about the kindness, patience, and understanding you might give someone returning to work after sexual assault and show yourself the same grace. Remind yourself that everything you do is an important step in recovering from your experience regardless of whether it is a big or small step.

Other tips for healing



Taking Action

Sexual assault involves someone taking your personal power away from you. You are entitled to restore that control for yourself and get that power back.

While some people might just want the situation to go away, for others taking action can reduce feelings of powerlessness and move towards a sense of justice.

You can take action by warning other sex workers about this client to improve safety within the community. You can do this personally (by talking to colleagues) or report the client through RhED or Vixen's Ugly Mugs programs, on an online database, or in online peer only spaces.

Reporting to police

Some sex workers want to report a crime they have experienced to police. If this is you, it is good to have an idea of what to expect regarding police and legal system processes.

Unless you call 000 at the time of an incident, you should report sexual assault (including stealthing and non-payment) to your local Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Team (SOCIT) as opposed to your local police station. SOCITs are more experienced in supporting people who have experienced a sexual offence.

Depending on when you get in touch with police, they may recommend you have forensic evidence collected. Forensic evidence is collected at a local hospital by a Forensic Medical Officer. As there are only a few FMOs in Victoria, you may be waiting hours to be seen.

If you can, it's important to not shower or go to the toilet until you are seen by the FMO. This can be challenging, however there is a higher chance of forensic evidence being collected if you don't do these things. If you have been assaulted orally, you should also refrain from eating, drinking, brushing your teeth, or rinsing your mouth.

You can bring a support person with you, and consider bringing something to do while you wait. It might also be a good idea to bring some food and a drink (but remember to wait to eat or drink until you have seen the FMO if you've been assaulted orally).

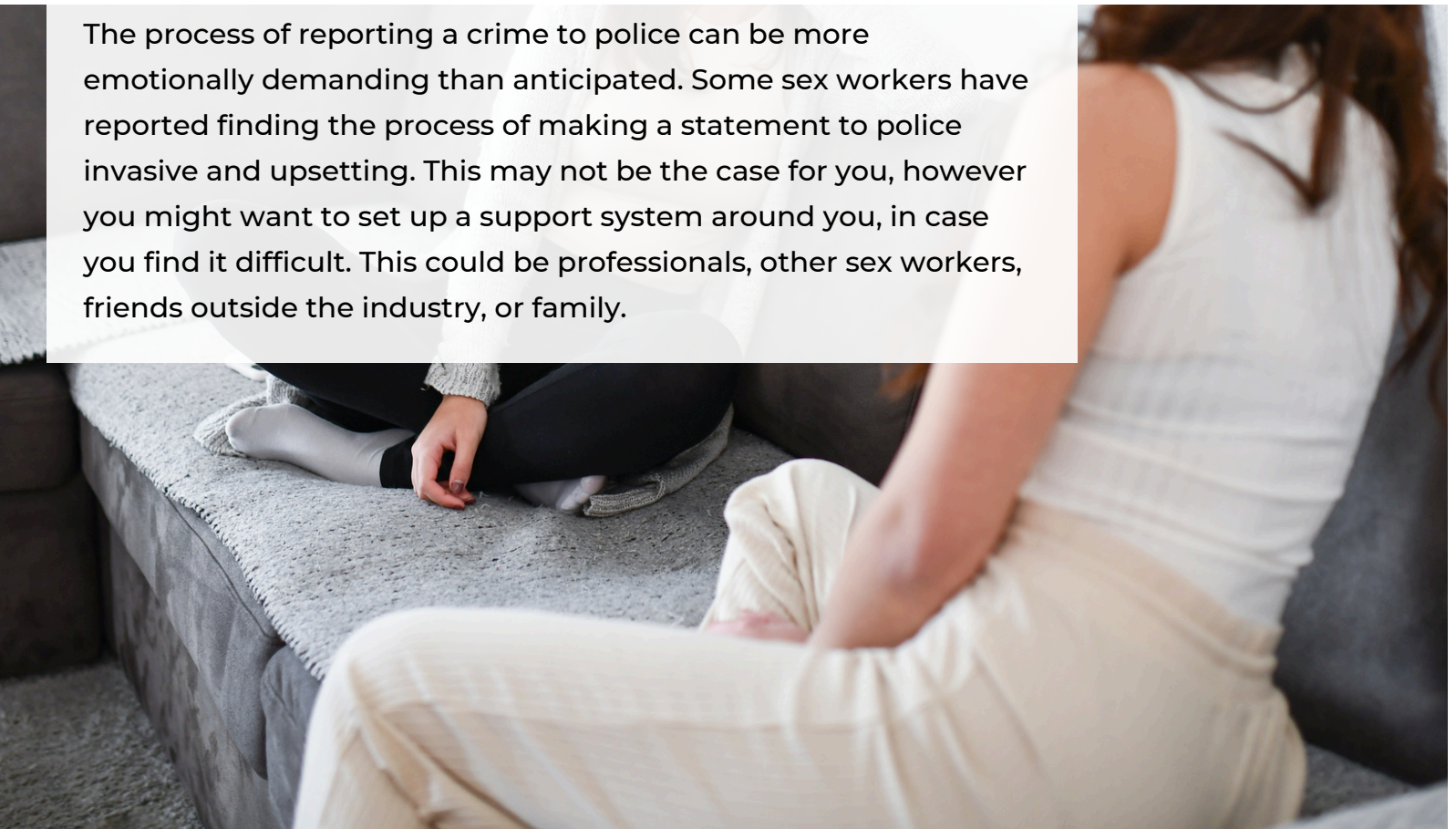
Other tips for healing


After contacting SOCIT, a detective will arrange a time to speak to you about what happened. You will be given the details of a SOCIT detective who will be the main point of contact for your case.

You can ask the SOCIT detective how long you might be at the police station, as this varies. When giving your formal statement to police, be prepared for police to ask you to go into very specific detail about what happened. This is important for their investigation, however might feel invasive.

After taking your statement, police will undertake their investigation. If they have enough evidence they will arrest the perpetrator, however if they don't have enough evidence they may close the case.

The process of reporting a crime to police can be more emotionally demanding than anticipated. Some sex workers have reported finding the process of making a statement to police invasive and upsetting. This may not be the case for you, however you might want to set up a support system around you, in case you find it difficult. This could be professionals, other sex workers, friends outside the industry, or family.





RhED can support you throughout the process of reporting a crime to police through to attending court.

If police have enough evidence to arrest the perpetrator they will do so, and charge them with a crime. The perpetrator will then either plead guilty, or not guilty.

If they plead guilty, they are agreeing they broke the law and they will attend court to be sentenced. If they plead not guilty, there will be a contested hearing where both the Office of Public Prosecutions and the perpetrator will present their arguments regarding the incident and what did/didn't happen. This hearing may happen a year (or more) after the incident took place.

If there is a contested hearing, you will likely need to provide evidence in court as the main witness. When you give evidence, you are cross-examined. This means the accused's lawyer will ask you questions to test your evidence, which can be a tough and upsetting process.

There are limits to the sort of questions defence lawyers can ask, to help reduce your stress when giving evidence. You can give evidence by:

- using closed circuit television
- having support people standing or sitting beside you
- having screens placed so you cannot see the accused

Police will be able to answer any questions you have about the court process if your case eventually goes to court, however this will be quite some time after you initially report to police.

Know your rights

Even though the likelihood of you experiencing a crime when you return to work is low, having knowledge about your rights, and about crimes that sex workers sometimes experience at work, can help you feel more confident and secure while working.

It also means you have knowledge that you can pass on to other sex workers. This might help them in situations where they experience a workplace incident.

All of the offences on the next few pages are contained within the Crimes Act. This means they are criminal offences and are of the jurisdiction of Victoria Police.



Know your rights

What are the laws?

Sexual Assault

CRIMES ACT 1958 - SECT 40

Sexual assault

- (1) A person (A) commits an offence if—
- (a) A intentionally touches another person (B); and
 - (b) the touching is sexual; and
 - (c) B does not consent to the touching; and
 - (d) A does not reasonably believe that B consents to the touching.

Consent

CRIMES ACT 1958 - SECT 36

Consent (1) Consent means free and voluntary agreement.

Note

See also [sections 37A](#) and [37B](#) which set out the objectives of Subdivisions (8A) to (8G) and the guiding principles that the courts are to have regard to in interpreting and applying those Subdivisions, including this section and [section 36AA](#).

- (2) A person does not consent to an act just because they do not resist the act verbally or physically.
- (3) A person does not consent to an act just because they consented to—
- (a) a different act with the same person; or
 - (b) the same act with the same person at a different time or place; or
 - (c) the same act with a different person; or
 - (d) a different act with a different person.

Know your rights

What are the laws?

Stealthing

CRIMES ACT 1958 - SECT 36AA

(1) Circumstances in which a person does not consent to an act include, but are not limited to, the following—

- (o) the person engages in the act on the basis that a condom is used and either—
 - (i) before or during the act, any other person involved in the act intentionally removes the condom or tampers with the condom;
- or
- (ii) the person who was to use the condom intentionally does not use it;

Non-payment

CRIMES ACT 1958 - SECT 36AA

(1) Circumstances in which a person does not consent to an act include, but are not limited to, the following—

- (m) the act occurs in the provision of commercial sexual services and the person engages in the act because of a false or misleading representation that the person will be paid;

NOTE:

Police are unable to get your money back from a client who hasn't paid you. They will need to undertake a full investigation into the crime. You are able to apply for the Victims of Crime Financial Assistance Scheme to try and recover money, or take the client to VCAT.

Know your rights

What are the laws?

Non-consensual capture and distribution of intimate images

CRIMES ACT 1958 - SECT 53R

Producing intimate image

- (1) A person (A) commits an offence if—
- (a) A intentionally produces an image depicting another person (B); and
 - (b) the image is an intimate image; and
 - (c) A knows that the image is, or probably is, an intimate image; and
 - (d) the production of the intimate image is contrary to community standards of acceptable conduct.

CRIMES ACT 1958 - SECT 53S

Distributing intimate image

- (1) A person (A) commits an offence if—
- (a) A intentionally distributes an image depicting another person (B); and
 - (b) the image is an intimate image; and
 - (c) A knows that the image is, or probably is, an intimate image; and
 - (d) the distribution of the intimate image is contrary to community standards of acceptable conduct.

CRIMES ACT 1958 - SECT 53O

Definitions

"intimate image" means an image depicting—

- (a) a person engaged in a sexual activity; or
- (b) a person in a manner or context that is sexual; or
- (c) the genital or anal region of a person (whether bare or covered by underwear); or
- (d) if a person is female, or a transgender or intersex person identifying as female, the breasts of the person;

Who can help

RhED

sexworker@sexworker.org.au
1800 458 752
Text Only: 0400 674 217
www.sexworker.org.au

Vixen

info@vixen.org.au
(03) 9070 9050
www.vixen.org.au/

Sexual Assault
Crisis Line

1800 806 292
www.sacl.com.au/
You'll be directed to your local Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA) during business hours.

Southside Justice

info@southsidejustice.org.au
(03) 7037 3200
www.southsidejustice.org.au

Victoria Police

131 444 (police assistance line)
000 (emergency)

WorkSafe

1800 136 089
www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/



IT'S LEASE

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