

Understanding
what
happened
to me.

by
The Somerset Phoenix Project



This booklet has been given to the adult reading it with you because you have been sexually abused and you were brave enough to tell someone about it.

The adult is going to read the booklet with you and they will talk to you about each page.
They were given this booklet by the Somerset Phoenix Project Team.

The Phoenix Project Team have been asked to help you understand things like:

How you are feeling,

Why your behaviour or mood may have changed,

and

How to help you manage your feelings and behaviour.



Throughout the guide you will meet our friendly bear who will take you through this book. You will have your own bear to go with this guide, they don't have a name yet so you will need to give your bear one.

Notes for the adults reading this guide

This guide has been developed by the Barnardo's team in Somerset for use with families accessing the Somerset Phoenix Project. Our staff will always support parents/carers prior to use of this guide. If you are accessing this guide outside of Somerset, or are not receiving direct support from the Phoenix Team, we strongly advise that you take professional advice before seeking to use this guide with your child.

Please also follow all the advice outlined below.

When using this guide you need to be led by your child and go at their pace. Some children might only be able to do a page at a time and others may be able to tolerate more.

Before starting to use the guide you both need to be feeling emotionally 'ok', you will also need a quiet space free of interruptions.

It is important to read your child's cues and know when to stop, even if your child is saying they are ok, you know them best!

At the end of reading you will need to leave time to do something nice together that helps relax the both of you. Being sensitively playful will help ensure the transition from looking at potential tough material to being back in a safe space.

You might also need to have some time separately to your child to allow you to process emotions that you may have been holding whilst reading the guide and helping to regulate your child. It is so important to allow yourself this so that you can continue to be emotionally available to your child. Self-care is not a luxury, it is a necessity.

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What are a person's private parts?

Our private parts are the parts of our bodies that only we should touch. Depending upon how old you are, the people who look after you may need to help you wash and dry these areas but this should not make you feel uncomfortable! It is also ok for a doctor or medical person to look at your privates with another person there; they might need to make that part of your body better.



For boys

Their private parts are the bits covered by their pants/swimming trunks. This includes the bottom, penis and testicles. The penis and testicles are also known as genitals.



For girls

Their private parts are the bits of their body covered up by the two parts of a bikini. This can include their breasts, bottom, vagina and its outside part which is called the vulva. The vagina and vulva are also known as genitals.



What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse is when someone makes you take part in sexual activities; these might have made you feel confused, uncomfortable or even hurt.

The person may have made you touch or do things to their private parts and genitals or they may have touched or done things to your private parts and genitals.

Sexual abuse is NEVER okay!
Sexual abuse is NEVER your fault!



Changes in your life

Because you have been abused your life may have changed. It may have changed only a little bit or it may have changed a lot.



You may have had to talk to lots of new people like the police or a social worker.

You may have given evidence to the police (told them about what happened to you) and you may have even been videoed while you did this.

You may have had to go to court and told them your story and been asked lots of questions by different people.

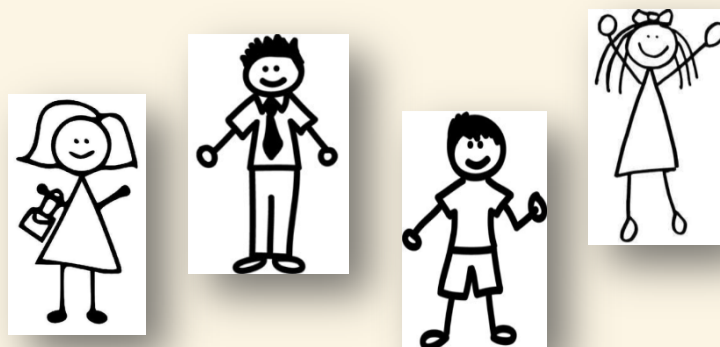
You may have had to move to a new area and changed your house.

You may have had to change schools.

You may have had to live with someone else.



You might not see, or be allowed to see, some people anymore; this might include;



- The person who abused you (they or you may have had to move, they may not be allowed to see you or they may have been put into prison)
- Some members of your family, this could include certain aunts, uncles, cousins, a granny or a grandpa
- Some friends

None of this is your fault – you did nothing wrong!

You may be happy with some of these changes but you may be finding not being able to see some family members or friends quite hard. Later in this booklet there are going to be some ideas that you could try to help you cope and feel better.

How you might be feeling

Because of the changes in your life, and because of what has happened to you, you might be feeling some of the following. However, you might not be feeling any of these, we are all different and that is ok.

ANGRY



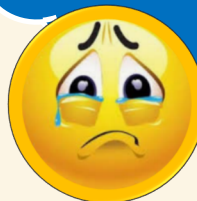
CONFUSED



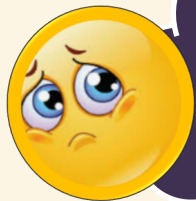
GRUMPY



SAD OR
UPSET



WORRIED
OR
ANXIOUS



GUILTY





It is okay and normal to feel all of these things!

At other times you might also be:



This is okay too!



Things you may be doing

Because of the abuse and because of the changes that have happened in your life, you may be finding that you are experiencing things you have never experienced before and that you have started to do certain things that you have not done before or that you haven't done for a long time. However, you might not be doing anything different; we all deal with experiences differently.

Getting angry for no obvious reason

Biting your nails

Chewing or sucking your clothes

Not wanting to go to school

Not wanting to leave Mum or Dad, possibly even clinging to them sometimes

Wetting or pooing yourself

Getting an upset tummy (diarrhoea) or not being able to do a poo (constipation)

Finding it hard to stay friends with people

Having lots of tummy aches and / or head aches

Wetting your bed

If you have asthma or eczema it may have got worse

You may want to tell people about what happened to you or you may not want to talk about what happened and try to forget it

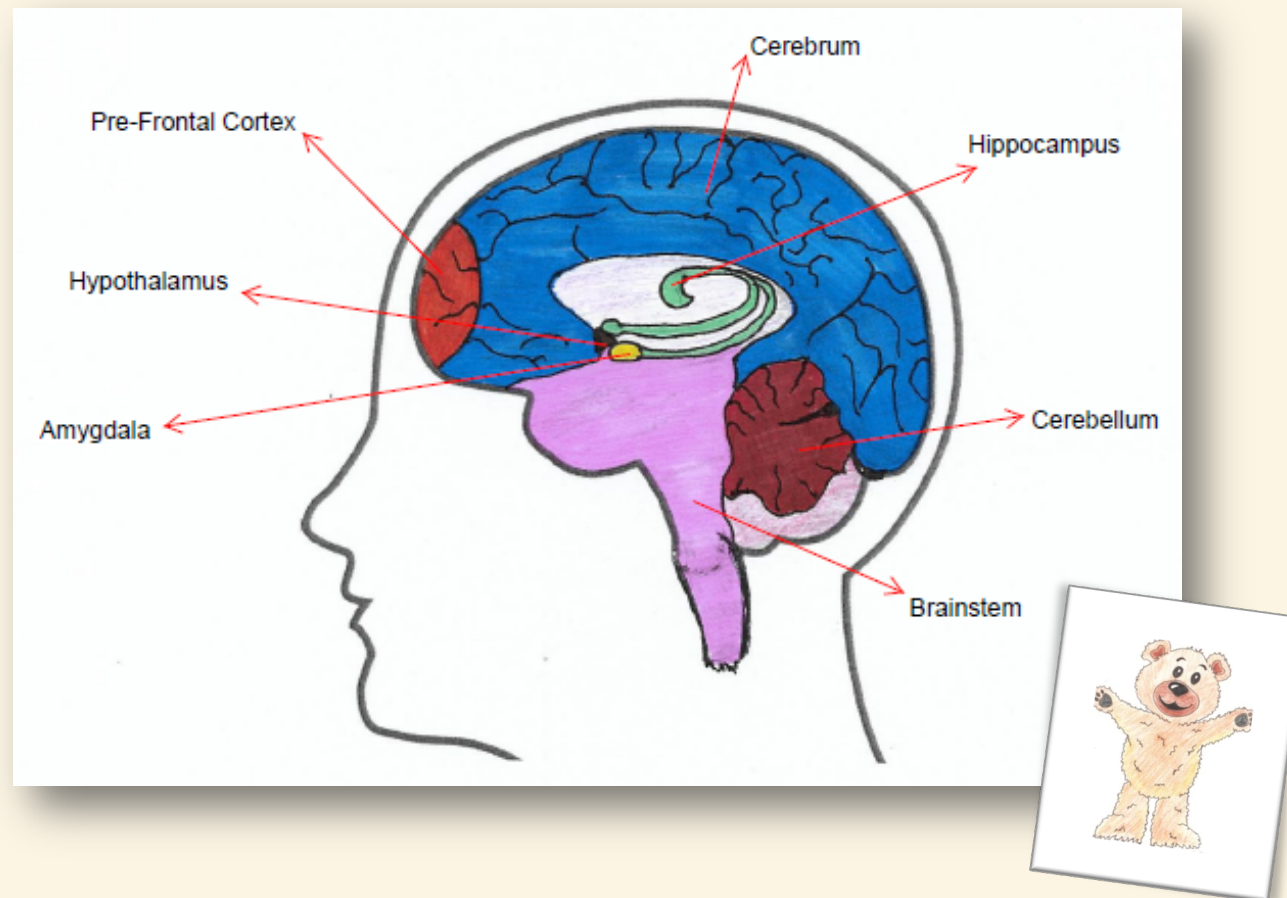


DO NOT WORRY – these are normal feelings for someone who has experienced abuse. In time things will get better if you get the right support. The Somerset Phoenix Project is here to try and help you get the support that you need.

The brain and the jobs it does

This is the science bit; it may be a bit confusing but the adult reading this with you will help you understand it. Don't worry if you have to read it more than once.

The brain is a complicated thing made up of lots of different parts, each part doing a different but very important job.





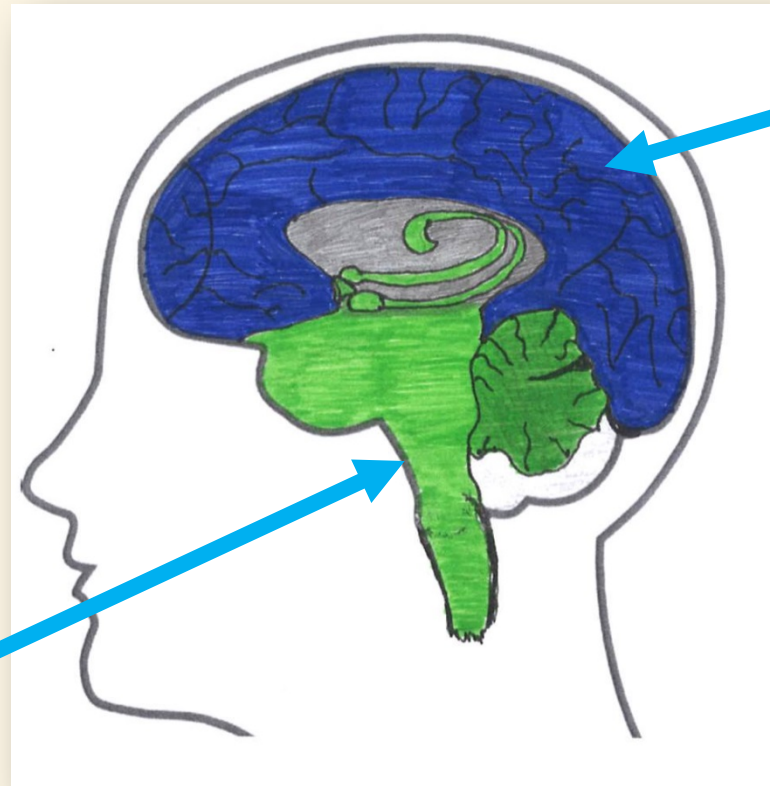
All these parts of the brain can be really tricky to remember so a scientist in America, Dan Siegel, has made things much simpler for everyone by calling the:

hippocampus, cerebellum, brainstem, amygdala and hypothalamus the **DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN**

and the

cerebrum and pre-frontal cortex the **UPSTAIRS BRAIN**

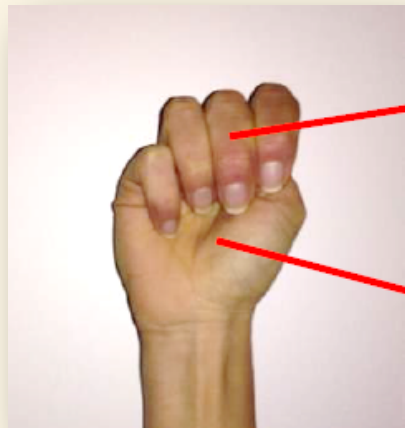
DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN



UPSTAIRS BRAIN

Hand Model

Dan Siegel also thought up something called the Hand Model. This is his quick and simple way of being able to show people the upstairs and downstairs brain.



UPSTAIRS BRAIN

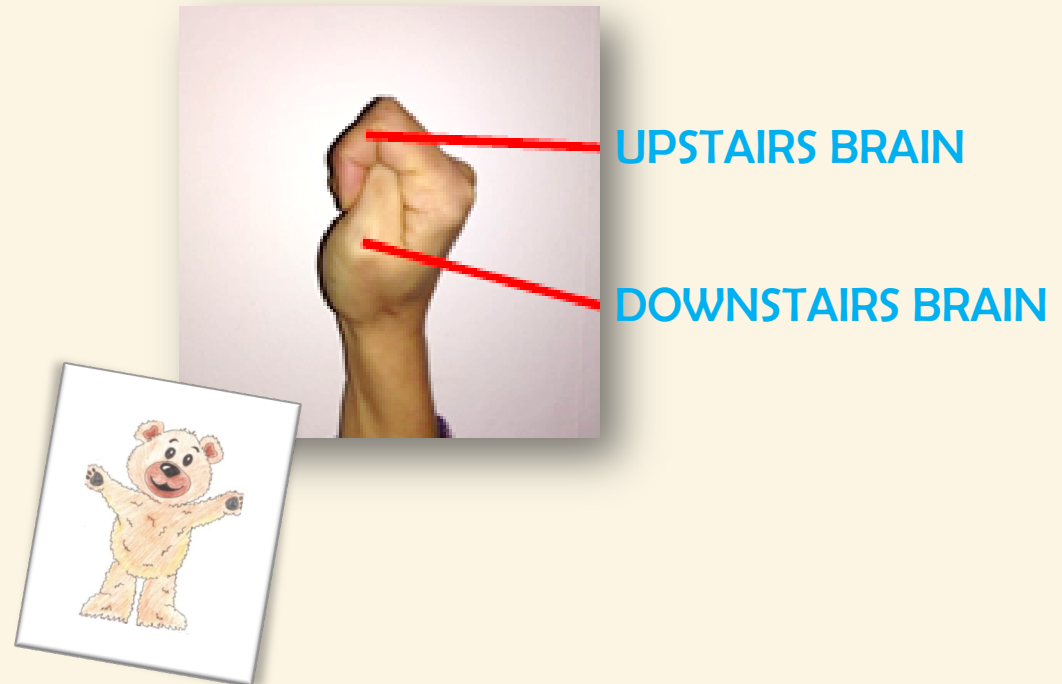
DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN

The Upstairs Brain helps you

1. Organise information from your eyes, nose, ears, taste buds and your touch - your 5 senses.
2. Think.
3. Speak.
4. Learn.
5. Draw.
6. Design.
7. Plan.
8. Problem solve and make decisions.

The Downstairs Brain helps you

1. Control your heart and lungs
2. Senses danger and protects you from it
3. Stores your memories
4. Link memories to your emotions
5. Controls your balance
6. Controls how your muscles work
7. Controls your body temperature
8. Controls how hungry you are
9. Controls how easily you get to sleep

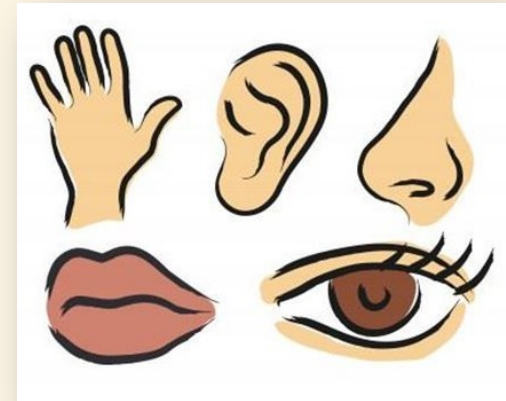


The Amygdala (pronounced: A-mig-d-la)

Part of the downstairs brain, the amygdala's main job is to help you sense danger and protect you from it. It does this by controlling the way you react to certain information such as some sights, sounds, smells or events.

The posh name for these is stimuli.

The amygdala also controls your emotions, especially fear.



The amygdala is like a **guard** at a gate. Information needs to get past the **guard** (the amygdala) to get to the other parts of your brain.

If the **guard** – the amygdala – thinks the information is safe the guard doesn't do anything, it just keeps watching. This is when you feel okay and calm.

If the **guard** – the amygdala – thinks the information is dangerous, the amygdala will start working to protect you and keep you safe. When it protects you, it changes how you feel, think and behave – you go into what is called Fight, Flight, Freeze, Flop or Friend mode.

Fight, Flight, Flop, Freeze or Friend

Fight

This may look like you: shouting, kicking, hitting, punching, lying, blaming someone else, being unable to concentrate, getting hot and bothered, not being able to follow rules, arguing, being loud and noisy, slamming doors or demanding things.



You may feel: sick, faint or dizzy, tense and stiff, very scared, your heart beating fast, that you are breathing quicker, like you want to laugh or cry, that you are alone or can't cope, like you want to talk but you can't or that you want to be in control.

Flight

This may look like you: wanting to run away / leave the room, making yourself small, hiding under or behind things, wanting to be by yourself, not wanting to talk, not being able to look at someone, are keeping very busy, avoiding doing what you have been asked to do, talking in a silly or babyish voice or needing to get somewhere first.



You may feel: sick, jumpy, numb, tense and stiff, silly and giddy, lonely, worried, fidgety, on edge or panicky, you are breathing quicker, your heart is beating faster, that your joints are painful, you are sweating more, that noises are really loud or that things are just getting too much.

Flop

This may look like: your body has become all loose and floppy like a rag doll or cooked spaghetti (in animals this is when they pretend to be dead), your heart beat and breathing getting slower and you may wee or poo yourself. You may also have no memory of going into flop.



Freeze

This may look like you are: standing or sitting very still, stuck, confused or forgetful, clumsy, not listening, finding it hard to think and concentrate, daydreaming or staring into space, bored or not interested or you have wide big eyes.



You may feel: you are breathing quicker and your heart is beating faster but your brain is going slowly, your muscles tensing, you can hear what is going around you but it seems far away, you cannot really hear what someone is saying to you but you can tell how they are feeling or that you just cannot do what someone has asked you to do, even if you wanted to do it. You may also feel terrified and very worried.

Friend

This may look like you: being nice to someone who is upsetting or scaring you, trying hard not to make angry the person who is scaring or worrying you, never asking questions or drawing attention to yourself, giving only a yes or no answer if you are asked a question, are being very quiet, being really helpful and pleasing people or doing exactly as you are told. You may even laugh when being told off.



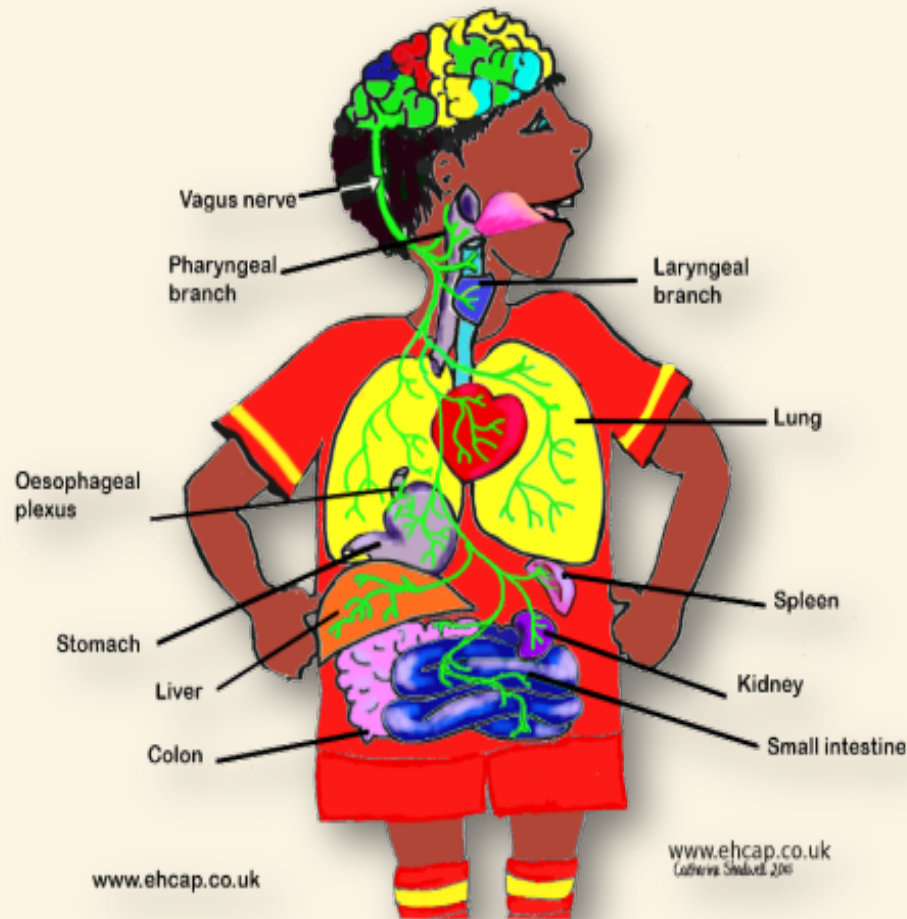
You may feel: sad, lonely, scared, really tired but struggle to sleep, like crying, unable to relax, numb inside or that you have to put a brave face on things.

You DO NOT have a choice over which of the above your downstairs brain (amygdala) will choose. It will choose the one that it thinks is the best to keep you safe and cause the least harm to you.

- Have a think about which one you might have gone to when you were being hurt.

The Vagus Nerve

Another really important part of your body is the VAGUS NERVE. This is a very big nerve which starts at the bottom of your brain. It travels through your face and then connects your brain to all your major organs like your voice box (this is what lets you speak), heart, lungs, liver, stomach, large and small intestines and kidneys.



The vagus nerve can be seen as the green line in the coloured diagram.

It allows messages from your brain to travel to your organs telling them how to work.

This nerve also helps calm your body by telling it to slow down and relax. It also allows your body to focus, pay attention and concentrate.

When the vagus nerve is working properly it also helps to stop you getting poorly, e.g. getting colds or coughs.

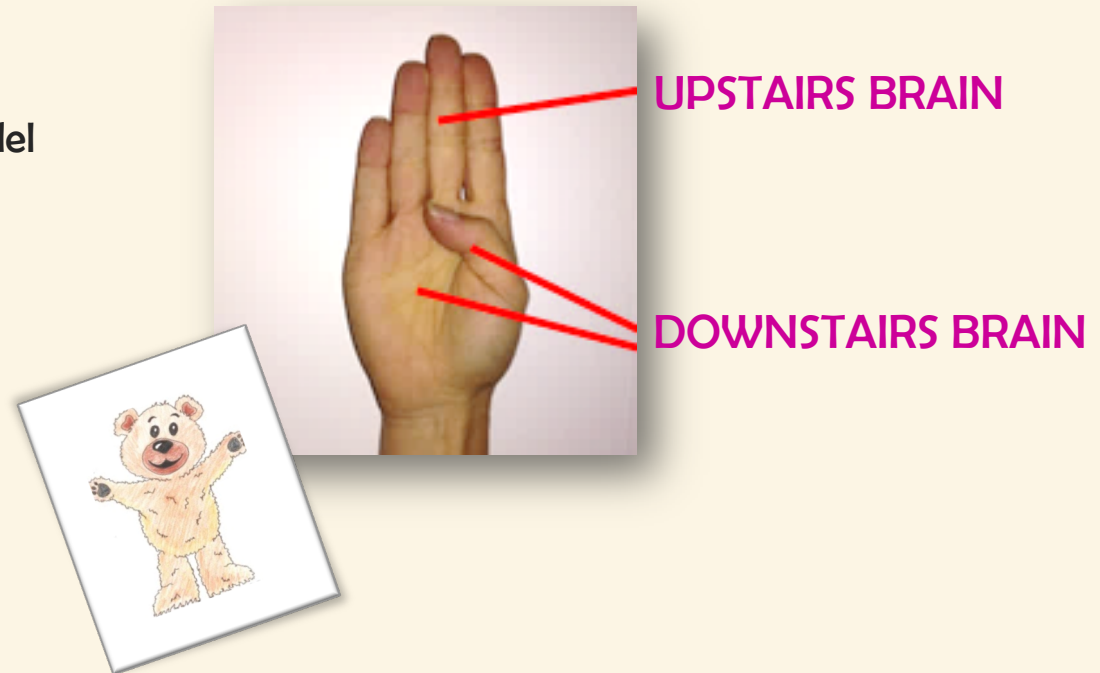
Wow, what a lot this nerve does for you!

What happens when the amygdala thinks you are in danger?

When the amygdala thinks you are in danger it will organise your brain and body so that you can go into fight, flight, freeze, flop or friend mode to try to protect you. To do this it makes some parts of the brain stop working so well, it is like they go 'offline.' When they go 'offline' it can affect what your body does.

This is how Dan Siegel uses the hand model to show your brain going offline.

He calls this 'flipping our lid.'

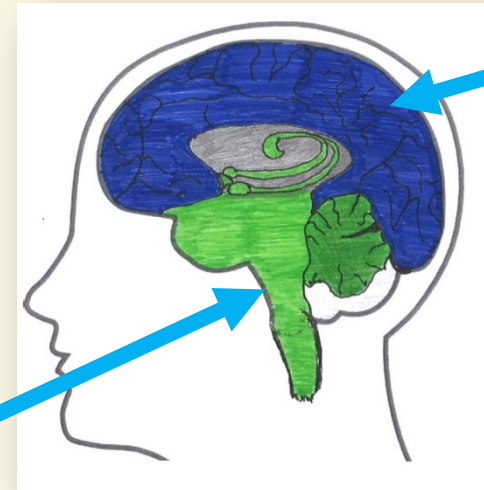


Going Offline

When the **Upstairs Brain** (the cerebrum and pre-frontal cortex) goes offline this means it can be really hard to:

- think
- speak
- plan
- problem solve or
- make decisions.

**DOWNSTAIRS
BRAIN**

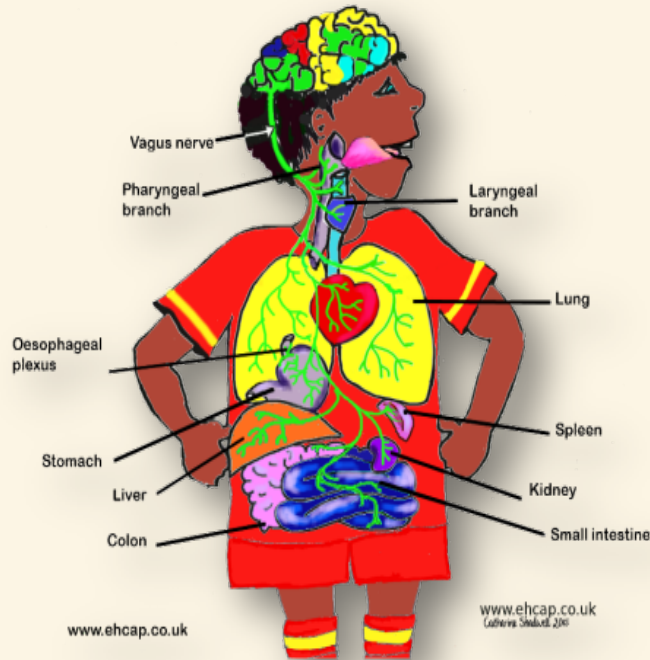


**UPSTAIRS
BRAIN**

When the **Downstairs Brain** (the brainstem, cerebellum, hypothalamus and hippocampus) goes off line;

- it helps allow your muscles to go all floppy or get your muscles ready to freeze, fight or flight
- you may get very hot or very cold
- you may lose your appetite and not want to eat or you may get very hungry
- your blood pressure may go up and you may get a headache
- you may struggle to get to sleep
- some of your memories may not be saved or they can be a bit muddled and confused
- other memories can be 'hardwired' into your brain (see memories page).

As well as the brain going off line, your **Vagus Nerve** also stops working properly and so other parts of your body are affected;



- you may try to speak but nothing comes out or it may come out sounding strange,
- your heart may beat faster,
- you may get a headache,
- your breathing may become harder and faster,
- your stomach and intestines may have slowed down so you may get tummy aches,
- wet yourself, poo your pants (diarrhoea) or get constipated (not be able to do a poo).

These things might be happening either a lot, sometimes or never.

Some of the above may also have happened during the time when the abuse happened because your amygdala was trying really hard to protect you.

When you were being abused you are likely to have gone into freeze, flop or friend mode as the amygdala may have decided that flight or fight would have put you in more danger.



Why you might be feeling and behaving the way you are now

During the period of time when you were being abused your amygdala was probably working almost all the time and was on a constant state of high alert – like a guard never relaxing and always looking out for danger coming.



You are safe now, but because your amygdala was working so hard almost all the time it will find it **very difficult** to relax and stop being on high alert.

It also gets confused about what is and is not safe stimuli. It is probably still working very hard a lot of the time to try to keep you safe even though it doesn't really have to anymore. This means that:

- it can find it tricky to tell the difference between when you are in real danger and when you are not
- it will send you into fight (angry), flight (crying / upset), flop (body goes all floppy) or freeze (can't move) or friend (being nice) mode when it doesn't really need to
- parts of your brain may still be offline and not working so well
- your vagus nerve may not be working too well

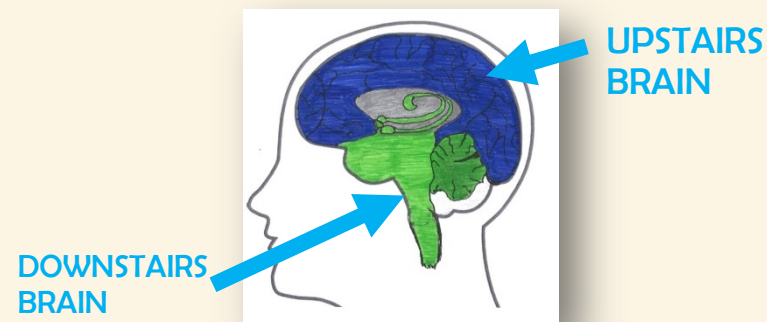
This is why you may be feeling and behaving the way you are – your amygdala – your guard – is still on high alert and trying to keep you safe. It may stay on high alert for some time but, with the right help, it can learn to relax.

Following the abuse your downstairs brain and the guard (amygdala) gets confused.

It can sometimes muddle the information that it used to think was safe and now think it is unsafe! This starts your downstairs brain reacting and putting your 'upstairs' brain offline, it 'flips its lid'.

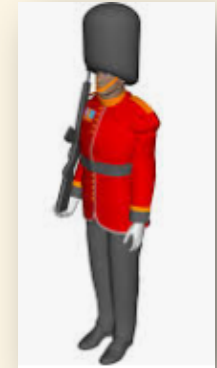
You may also start to behave in ways you never would have done before you were abused. For example; before you were abused if you smelt something like a nice aftershave or perfume it would have stored this memory as something nice. If the person who abused you wore this aftershave or perfume when they abused you, this information was sent to and stored in your brain.

If you smell this aftershave or perfume now, your amygdala will react by sending messages that danger is coming so you may flip your lid. This can happen even if the person who is now wearing it is someone you trust and you know would not hurt you. This can then make you behave by doing one or more of the things on [pages 10 and 11](#).



However, the 'downstairs' brain may choose to do something different this time because the person wearing the aftershave or perfume is behaving differently to your abuser.

So if your brain made you feel floppy before, this time it might make you try and hit and kick the person because it knows you might be safer this way.



Memories

Memories are funny things. Sometimes we can remember things really clearly, sometimes it can be hard to remember something well and sometimes we cannot remember at all. It all depends upon the event being remembered, how important the event was to us, how we felt about the event and whether our brain was online or offline at the time of the event.



Normal everyday events, like what someone did at school or what they ate, are often soon forgotten because they are not important enough to be saved as a memory. But important events like a really wonderful birthday or holiday can be special enough to be saved as a memory and that memory can stay for a long time. When an event causes us to feel strong emotions; like being very happy, sad or angry; it is also likely to be stored as a memory. When we recall, or remember, these memories, they normally come to us as stories with a beginning, middle and end and are usually quite easy to tell to someone.

There is no right or wrong way for how your brain stored memories of your abuse, they may be really clear but, because your brain was 'offline', they may not be. If they are not, this is because the memories have not have been saved correctly or in the same place as other memories because your guard (the amygdala) was trying really hard to keep you safe. This means your memories of this time may;

- Be confused because bits are missing – parts of the story may have gone like a jigsaw puzzle with pieces missing
- Be there but you find it really hard to describe it in words – you cannot tell the story



- Be there but you find it really hard to remember things like where it happened or when it happened
- Be muddled because the memory is in the wrong order – for example: the end of the story is remembered before the middle
- Be 'hardwired' into your brain – this means that they stay there for a long time and can be suddenly remembered at any moment, even when we do not want to remember. It may feel like reliving the time all over again. This can be very scary. These memories are called 'flashbacks' and can come when we see, hear, smell, taste or touch something that reminds our brain of the time when the abuse happened.
- Be being remembered now in the form of a dream or nightmare
- Be remembered as sounds, smells, feelings in your body, or like a photo

Or

- not have been saved at all.

If you have had to give evidence to the police it may have been really hard to tell your story anyway but you may have found it even harder to tell it with a clear beginning, middle and end. If it was, this is not your fault! It is just that your brain may not have saved the memory(ies) in the same way as other ones.



What you can do

You now need people around you to help your guard (amygdala) stop getting confused. To do this you need to do things that you find lots of fun and be around people who you care about and trust to look after you properly.

You will need them to listen to you lots and help you understand your thoughts and feelings.

It may help you to draw or paint your feelings.

You may need more time at home and in school to play with what you enjoy playing with or doing – play is one of the best ways of helping our guard (amygdala) calm down.



**You need lots of kindness and understanding.
You are not trying to misbehave on purpose!**



Confusing Feelings

You may also be finding that:

- you are feeling okay one moment and the next you might suddenly be feeling sad, angry, nervous or scared or
- something happens which before wouldn't have upset or worried you but it does now

and so you might find yourself:



or Saying things you don't really mean, things like:

'I hate you!' or 'I don't love you!'

Feeling like this and doing these things may scare or confuse you, particularly if they seem to come from nowhere or because it is not how you used to be. This is happening because your amygdala – your guard – has decided you are in danger when you aren't. So it's okay and normal to be like this but it is not okay to hurt someone else or yourself when you are feeling this way. Later on, there will be some ideas about what you could try instead.

Guilty Feelings

Feeling guilty is when a person gets an unpleasant feeling (worry / unhappiness) because they know or think they have done something bad or wrong.



You may be feeling guilty because:

- You didn't try to stop the person from abusing you
- You didn't tell anyone about being abused sooner
- The family you live with doesn't see other members of your family any more
- Your immediate family have been separated, e.g. your Dad or Mum may not live with you anymore, a brother or sister has to live with someone else
- You have had to move home
- Someone you live with is getting upset / angry more often
- You think being abused was your fault
- You may have enjoyed the feelings that happened when your body was touched ★

★ **BODY FACT:** Our bodies, especially our genitals, are made to respond to touch even if we do not want them to. Sometimes we have **NO** control over how our bodies feel and respond when they are touched. If your body did feel nice when you were being touched it **DOES NOT** mean you wanted the abuse to happen to you.

Confusing and guilty feelings are normal. It would really help you to talk to someone you trust so they can support you with your feelings and thoughts.

REMEMBER being abused WAS NOT YOUR FAULT!



The person who abused you

The person who abused you may have been someone you knew or someone in your family like:

A brother or sister

Someone who looked after you like a child minder or baby sitter

A Granny or Grandpa

An Aunt or Uncle

An older sister or brother's boyfriend or girlfriend

A friend of the family

Your Mum or Dad, Step mum or Stepdad

A cousin

This means they may have been someone you really liked or loved but because they abused you this can be very confusing and upsetting for you. You may find that you:

- Never want to see them again
- Want to see them again
- Miss them
- Still love them
- Feel confused, 'I love them but they abused me.'

These feelings are natural and even though they abused you, which is not okay, it is okay to still love them, miss them or still want to see them because they may have been an important person in your life. You may be allowed to see them but only if someone else is there too or you may not be allowed to see them at all. This might be hard for you and you may feel sad, this is okay too. It is also okay to feel that you do not want to see them again. If someone tries to persuade you to see them again but you don't want to it is okay to say no and tell a safe adult.

Things that might help you

You may be experiencing lots of different emotions, maybe more than before you were abused. In the bubbles are the big feelings that lots of children experience.

There are more ideas on how to help with other feelings on our website www.somersetphoenixproject.org.uk

Your grown up can help you look these up.

Dealing with hot/explosive feelings

1. Throwing bean bags
2. Punching cushions
3. Creating playdoh creations of your angry feelings and then squashing and squeezing them
4. Drawing pictures that represent your anger and then screwing it up
5. Kicking a ball hard against a wall



Dealing with cold/inward feelings

1. Putting a blanket around you to feel cosy
2. Cuddling a soft toy
3. Having a cuddle from someone you love or your pet
4. Creating a happy memory jar and looking in it when you feel sad
5. Listening to some happy music
6. Having someone to say that feeling sad is ok and not trying to cheer you up too quickly

People who can help you - Helping Hand People



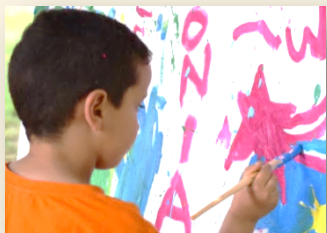
Your helping hand people are the people you feel safe with and can trust. When you want to talk to someone about something or show how you are feeling these are the people you can go to.

It is helpful to have a helping hand grownup who lives with you and another helping hand grownup who you see outside of your home, maybe someone in your school who you can see when you need to. The grownup who cares for you can help you set this up with someone at school.

Your helping hand grownup at home, will be able to spend time playing with you and helping you feel safe again, play is great for helping your 'downstairs' brain relax. Any activity you do together is good.

Your trusted grownup, can also spend time listening to you, you may be able to talk about how you feel, you might want to talk about what happened to you or you might not have the words to do this. If this is the case you could draw or paint what you want your grownup know.

Talking to someone about what happened to you might be hard but it will help, your helping hand people can listen to you and help you with how you are feeling. If you don't feel like talking you can also write down or draw your feelings.



Your grownup needs to be super patient and kind as you might be behaving in ways that you don't usually and this is not your fault. Your brain is stuck reacting to the danger it thinks you are in, when you are not anymore.



Your Helping Hand People

Who are your 5 safe, trusted Helping Hand people? Get the adult reading this booklet with you to help you choose them? Draw them and write their names inside the Helping Hand outline below. Don't worry if you can't think of 5! Over time you might be able to add more people to your helping hand drawing you might even have more than 5 people and that is wonderful, add them around your hand picture.



FINALLY!

- What has helped you?
 - What have you learnt?
 - What ideas you might try?
 - How do you feel now?
- Have you got any questions?



My Helping
Hand People

The End

You have come to the end of your book; we hope the information and ideas in here have helped you understand a bit more of what has happened to you. Don't forget to read this again anytime you need to.

What is important to remember is that what happened to you **WAS NOT** your fault, despite what you have gone through you are still **lovely**.

You are still a child who wants to be loved, play, have friends and have lots of fun. Just because this has happened to you it doesn't mean you have to stop being you and enjoying life.



You are strong!
You are wonderful!

Acknowledgments: With very many thanks to Jo Merrifield for drawing the bear character and to Roy Cookson for drawing the Phoenix on the front cover.

Somerset Phoenix Project

This is the boring grownup stuff for the adult reading this booklet with you!

Phoenix Contact Details

You can phone or text the Somerset Phoenix Team to request support

Telephone: **07590 627693**

Line is open Monday to Wednesday 10am - 4pm

email: somersetphoenixproject@barnardos.org.uk

Website: www.somersetphoenixproject.org.uk

Please share the age appropriate phone number with your child/young person as they may want to talk to someone outside of you and their family. Children who have experienced sexual abuse worry greatly about people's feelings close to them and worry they will upset you.

SARSAS (Somerset & Avon Rape and Sexual Abuse Support)

SARSAS offer a Helpline service:

Women and Girls **0808 801 0456** 13yrs +

Men and boys **0808 801 0464** 13yrs +

SARSAS have also developed a number of self-help guides on sexual abuse for 13+ year olds.

Website: www.sarsas.org.uk

Childline

This is a private and confidential service for children and young people up to the age of 19.

They are able to contact a counsellor to talk about any issues.

www.childline.org.uk

Telephone: **0800 1111** Under 19yrs



Barnardo's Registered Charity Nos:
216250 and SC037605

