

Information for partners of people sexually abused in childhood

The sexual abuse of children is far more common than most people realise. At least 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are abused in childhood. In most cases the abuser is someone known and trusted by the child. The abuse could range from sexual suggestions through to violent rape. It may only happen once, but it is more likely to be a frequent occurrence over an extended period of time.

The most significant and damaging characteristics of child sexual abuse are:

- The misuse of adult power
- The betrayal of a child's trust and affection
- The denial of a child's right to feel safe and valued
- The violation of a child's personal boundaries and sense of self

Sexual abuse is a crime. It is NEVER the child's fault

The abuser knows that what he is doing is wrong, so attempts to avoid detection. This often includes making the child feel responsible for what's happening, or making threats about what will happen if he/she tells anyone. The child is kept silent through fear and shame, and the thought that no one would believe them. Unfortunately, when children do tell they are often not believed or not supported. Even as adults, it is very difficult for survivors of childhood sexual abuse to talk about what happened. They still fear being blamed or disbelieved and it takes great courage to finally break the silence.

Anyone who has experienced childhood sexual abuse has lived through a traumatic experience which can have severe and lasting effects. They are also strong, resourceful and courageous people who have survived and coped in whatever ways have been available.

Survivors of sexual abuse deserve support in their attempts to resolve the effects of abuse in their lives, and to develop more positive coping strategies.

Below is a list of Do's and Don't's to guide you in supporting your partner.

DO

- Believe the survivor
- Listen
- Recognise the harm that was done to them
- Validate his/her feelings – pain, fear and anger are natural reactions
- Respect the time and space it takes to heal
- Ask what he/she needs from you
- Help out in practical ways
- Respect their strength as a survivor
- Encourage him/her to get support
- Seek support for yourself (with permission)
- Seek help if he/she is suicidal

DON'T

- Ignore it
- Take charge
- Blame him/her
- Sympathise with the abuser
- Press for details of the abuse
- Offer support you can't provide
- Expect him/her to support you if you have trouble coping

Intimacy

When a child is sexually abused, the abuser is usually someone the child trusts and loves. The abuse betrays that trust, and denies the child the opportunity of being loved and valued unconditionally.

Survivors may feel disgraced or dirtied by what was done to them, and may think that it was something about him/her that caused the abuse (The abuser will often blame the child in order to avoid taking responsibility for his own criminal behaviour). The child learns to believe that he/she doesn't deserve to be treated with care and respect. Because the abuse produces such a confusing range of emotions, the child may learn to block out emotions, or learn that they are not to be trusted.

As an adult he/she may....

- Find it difficult to trust or be close to anyone
- Cling to people, seeking the love and approval denied to them as a child
- Put other people's needs first because they feel they do not deserve to have their own needs considered
- Have difficulty identifying or expressing their own feelings

You can support by

- Demonstrating that you can be trusted – making offers or commitments that you are sure you can keep
- Asking what his/her needs are and how you can help to meet them – supporting them to put themselves first
- Respecting their privacy

Sexuality

When a child is sexually abused by an adult, sexual acts are used in a way that makes them feel powerless, humiliated, frightened and betrayed. They have no control over what is happening, no choice in what is done to their bodies. Survivors may have learned to 'switch off' and go numb during the abuse.

As an adult he/she may

- Seek sex to get needs for affection and tenderness met
- Avoid sex
- Appear to function sexually, while actually being numb during the experience
- Experience flashbacks of the abuse during sex – feeling like it's happening all over again

You can support her by

- Letting survivors control sexual interactions – only doing what he/she feels safe and comfortable with
- Letting him/her know that it's ok to say no to you – that their value to you is more than sexual
- Offering non-sexual forms of intimacy – talking, shared activities, holding hands, hugs, backrubs etc.

Control

Control is the central feature of the sexual abuse of children. Adults can use their position of power to act out their own inadequacies by abusing someone over whom it is very easy to have control. The child experiences having no control over their own body and life, as well as feeling guilty and responsible for abuse that they are powerless to stop. Regaining a sense of control and personal power in his/her life is essential in healing from childhood sexual abuse. Because you care about your partner, and are aware that the effects of the abuse are painful, you may be tempted to make decisions on their behalf – like telling him/her to just forget about it, or pushing them into counselling because you are worried. However, all this does is reinforce the existing feelings of lack of control in their life. No matter how much you care, your partner is the only one who knows what his/her needs are.

The most important thing you can give your partner is support in making his/her own choices. You can help by letting him/her know what you are able to offer, what other resources (such as counselling services) are available, and being open to discussing options with you. (The only exception to this is if your partners life is at risk).