

Partners

Supporting Survivors





FAQs

Answers to frequently asked questions

Why survivor and not victim?

Those who have been sexually abused are indeed victims; they can also be survivors. They can move forward, facing issues and working through them, and moving towards their authentic selves — this is surviving, thriving and living a fuller life.

How does childhood abuse affect survivors in adulthood?

Some research suggests that survivors are more likely to have:

- PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder)
- Amnesia about the abuse
- Dissociative Identity Disorder (multiple identities)
- Depression
- Addictions
- Intimacy and trust issues
- Sexual dysfunction

Everyone is different though, and the effects of the abuse depend on a lot of other influences.

How does abuse or rape affect survivors' relationships?

Some of the areas that are tough in a relationship with a survivor include: trouble with intimacy, control and trust; behavior boundaries, and anxiety. These issues, and the effects of things like depression and addiction, can take a toll on survivors' relationships and on the partners who love them.

What does a survivor's recovery process look like and how long does it take?

The recovery process is a very individual thing, but it will be measured more in years than in months. If your partner is in therapy or counselling then things may appear to get worse before they get better. Often a lot of anger and sadness surfaces and this can strain relationships. Therapy for survivors often excludes partners; you may enter some couples therapy along the way but for the most part you will be more of a spectator than a participant in your partner's recovery process.

My partner swore me to secrecy - what should I do?

It's important for you to be able to talk about the situation and how it affects your life; it's critical to *your* mental health and wellbeing. Of course, this is a very serious and sensitive issue for survivors and it's natural for them to want some protection. You might mutually select some trusted friends or family to talk to, or you might decide to talk only to a professional counsellor. Whichever route you choose, it is important that you discuss it, and that you both have access to appropriate relief and support.

Shouldn't we tell someone?

If your partner has recently disclosed their abuse experience to you, you may have concerns around child protection, feel your partner's family should know, or want the abuse to be reported to the police. These are all natural responses upon discovering your loved one's pain. Right now though, your partner will need you to listen, to be accepting, and to take no action. Your partner has been living with this knowledge for months, maybe years. The fear of being coerced into taking action is perhaps why he/she has coped alone until now. Breaking the silence is a huge and courageous step in your partner's recovery and an investment of trust in you. When a person has had all control taken from them in an act of abuse there becomes a great personal need for regaining control — it is a matter of survival. At this time, your loved one's primary concern is healing and finding personal autonomy at their pace. Your partner may reach a point of wanting to explore options of disclosure to family or the authorities, or they may choose not to. Either scenario is the survivor's right and they will need you to accept and support that decision. You may need to make use of your personal support network to process your feelings separately, without further impacting on your survivor-partner.

If your partner does wish to report the abuse then support is available to you both. Revival – Wiltshire RASAC staff will support your partner to decide what to do with the information, when and how. The investigation into the alleged abuse or assault and the impending legal proceedings may take a significant emotional and behavioural toll on the survivor. Revival – Wiltshire RASAC offers Pre-Trial sessions to help the survivor cope with thoughts and feelings in relation to the disclosure, court proceedings, and all that the legal process entails, working to alleviate some of the distress. Support can be extended to partners of survivors if you both feel that this would be beneficial.

How do I find a therapist or counsellor to talk to?

You can search online for local therapists and counsellors, ask your GP, or look in the phone book. It's critical that your counsellor is well qualified, and that you feel comfortable with them. If you don't feel comfortable then evaluate someone else — this is too important to settle for something that doesn't fit. Revival – Wiltshire RASAC also offers support to partners where there is a specific need — contact details are on the back cover of this booklet.



Starting the Journey

How to provide support when your partner has told you they've been sexually abused or raped

Your partner has chosen to speak to you about their abuse because they trust you and feel safe with you. Be yourself; you don't need to try to be an expert.

Every person reacts to rape or sexual abuse differently. Here are some suggestions that may enable your partner to talk more comfortably about their experience and how they are feeling.

Listen

Thank your partner for telling you about the abuse — they are likely to be feeling very exposed and vulnerable right now. It is probably best to do a lot of listening rather than asking questions at this stage.

When an individual initially talks of rape or abuse they may speak in a casual manner and provide very little detail. They are exploring how it feels to talk about their experience and how others will react.

- Allow them to talk at their pace and feel in control
- Allow them to express their feelings openly
- Avoid pushing for details and asking direct questions

Acceptance of the story

Your partner might experience disbelief or shock at what has happened to them no matter how long ago the abuse or rape took place. They may fear that you won't believe them. As a supporter, you may hear a disjointed story — as memories of events resurface they may not always come back in sequence. This can be confusing, and you may find yourself questioning what is true. You can convey your acceptance of your partner's story by:

- Accepting what has happened and the way they feel
- Not disputing what your partner has told you
- Giving the person your full attention

It is not the listener's place to know the why's, when's and where's. Your role is to provide a safe place in which the story can unfold as it needs to.

Recognising the harm done

Rape or sexual abuse is one of life's most degrading experiences. As a partner, you can provide love and understanding by recognising and accepting that the abuse has impacted on all areas of your loved one's life. Recognition can be shown by:

- Showing empathy — identifying with their feelings
- Showing understanding
- Being attentive

Recognising strength and courage

As a supporter you will need to acknowledge and appreciate the courage that your partner has shown in talking about the rape or abuse and the courage that it has taken to survive and cope since the experience.

Acknowledge that coping strategies, even though they may appear harmful, have helped your partner to survive.

Be non-judgemental

A survivor may judge him/herself negatively or be subject to negative judgements from others. It is important not to reinforce these judgements and to show support by:

- Avoiding viewing the survivor's character and actions negatively
- Avoiding judging the perpetrator negatively — the survivor may hold a positive view of them and this will contradict the survivor's judgement
- Recognising that your partner has coped in whatever ways were available to them

Let your partner take the lead

Your partner was deprived of personal control when they were raped or abused. They now need to feel in charge of what happens to them. You can support this process by:

- Letting your partner talk at their own pace
- Allowing your partner to make their own decisions
- Offering choices and not advice

Discuss and agree boundaries

Your partner needs to know and understand what they can expect from you. You're not expected to be an expert — don't offer support that you are not qualified to provide. Trust is crucial so stand by any support that you do offer.

Awareness of different perspectives

Everyone experiences things differently and your perception of the situation may vary greatly from your partner's perception. Be mindful of this and be careful not to overwhelm them with your views.

Afterwards

Check that your partner is OK but also allow them time and space to heal and reflect.

Sensitively raise the issue if you think that you have some new and useful information that may be of benefit to them.

Be clear about the support that you can offer and, most importantly, get support for yourself.

Some simple, reassuring words can go a long way to making your partner feel at ease and supported:

- *I'm here if and when you want to talk.*
- *This doesn't change, in any way, my love for you or how I feel about you.*
- *Is there anything I can do to help you deal with this?*
- *What do you need from me?*
- *I'm here if you need me.*



Recovery

Supporting the process and taking care of yourself

Being the partner of someone who is in counselling or therapy can be challenging. By understanding the process, exploring how you can provide support, and identifying positive ways to take care of yourself your relationship can ride the waves of recovery and potentially grow with it.

What might your partner need?

With safe and supportive love and by being there for your partner, you can help them to feel able to ask for help, which is something they may have avoided doing up until now. If your partner has only relied on himself or herself before, the effect of that can be to suppress or block feelings that were too painful to face alone.

Learn about sexual abuse and the healing process

Listening to what your partner says about their experience and becoming aware of what they are going through helps them to feel heard. You may not understand everything – do you need to? Or is accepting that your partner feels the way they do, enough? If you were to hear every detail of your partner's abuse you may feel that you need to prove to your partner that you are strong,

capable and able to carry on with life, unaffected. But, could you? What impact might this have on both of you if you found you couldn't? So, although it is important to listen to what your partner tells you, it is equally important that it is what your partner *chooses* to tell you, not what you may feel you need to know. Imagine how it might feel if your partner asked you to talk in graphic detail about an experience that left you deeply humiliated; something beyond your control that happened in childhood; something that as an adult you would be judged by. It is probably important for your partner to feel in control of their recovery and so they may need to be private at times. If you can be present with your partner and listen as much as possible, not pressing for information, this can greatly aid their recovery process.

Believe what your partner tells you

Many survivors were not believed when they tried to get help as children and many are still not believed by their families. Your partner needs to know that the people closest to them believe them. It will probably be very hard to hear your partner's pain, as hard as it may have been for them to tell you — be gentle both with yourself and your partner.

Allow your partner space to feel their pain

Your partner is likely to need plenty of time to cry all the tears they have never felt able to shed, to feel the pain of betrayal and the intrusion of sexual abuse. They need to mourn the loss of innocence and childhood, of trust and self-esteem. Your partner can gain strength through tears. Crying is not displaying weakness and your partner will not cry forever — just long enough to heal their wounds. The recovery process is long and slow. Try to be patient. Your partner may already feel that there is something terribly wrong with them because they can't 'get over it' and move on with life. Their self-esteem is likely to be very low. You can help by not compounding the need to recover within any specific timeframe. It can be hard to remain patient if you can't see any significant improvements in your partner. Remember though, like any open wound, healing starts from the inside — the signs of recovery might not be outwardly visible but this does not mean that your partner is not recovering.

Allow your partner space to release their anger

It is appropriate and necessary for your partner to feel angry about the abuse. If your partner doesn't have a safe, effective place to express their anger then it can pervade everything, and you may find anger directed at you. Healthy expression of anger and using it as a means of control or abuse are very different things — constant anger can be a means of distancing you. Clear boundaries are extremely important where anger is concerned.

Allow your partner to place the blame where it belongs

It is very likely that your partner will blame himself or herself for the abuse, no matter how often they are told it was not their fault. As much as you may feel that by telling them they were not to blame will help them, unfortunately, this is rarely the case. They may just feel that you are contradicting them, leaving them feeling not heard or understood; they may understand it intellectually, but they don't believe it emotionally. If your partner is in counselling, they will be encouraged to place the blame where it belongs — on the perpetrator. *It is not necessary for a survivor to forgive the perpetrator in order to recover or to go on with their life.*

Earn your partner's trust

When your first sexual experience is abuse, you learn some terrible things about people and about life. You learn that people will do almost anything in order to satisfy their selfish needs. You learn that someone can tell you they love you one minute and hurt you deeply the next. Your partner may have difficulty believing you when you tell them that you love them — this may not feel good to you to have to prove yourself with someone. We assume that others should know that we are trustworthy. We all have our weaknesses and faults, and you would be doing your partner a great disservice if you told them that they could trust you completely at all times. The most truly loving approach would be to tell them the truth about yourself, let your partner know the ways in which they can and cannot rely on you. Be realistic; we can't promise perfection. Being honest with your partner about who you are and what they can expect from you is one of the best things you can do for them.

8 key support tips:

- Offer a break from the conversation if things get too heated. Safety in the relationship is critical
- Pay attention to what you're feeling and put it to words
- If you aren't sure what to say then say so; don't remain silent
- Face problems and work on solutions with sensitivity; sometimes it's best to defer things a while
- Don't respond in kind and try not to take it personally (the anger is most likely for the abuser)
- There will be some very stressful times — develop positive coping strategies
- Accept your partner for who they are
- Take care of yourself - get some counselling of your own, find understanding & supportive friends, keep doing things that refresh and renew your spirit

“My partner often asks me how I’m feeling, or how my day has been since I told him about the abuse. I can tell him, and I don’t feel judged. He doesn’t try to fix it; he’s there, alongside me and available if I want to talk. “

“One of my friends has insisted that we all have fun together. This is great! It reminds me to lighten up and to enjoy life as best I can, in the moment. We play board games or enjoy cycling. I’m so grateful, they’ve helped me put fun and enjoyment into my life. “

Introduce fun and play

You can support your partner by helping them to learn, or relearn, how to play. This might sound basic, but it may be that if their childhood was unsafe then playing might not have been a big part of it. Children can help here as they invariably offer you a free-spirited response to things, so opening up rather than closing fun opportunities. Things like playing on the beach, going to an amusement park, giggling about silly things and colouring in pictures. Be creative; when you allow yourself to be childlike it is surprising how healing it can be.

You may not be able to predict what your partner needs until you are in the moment, but being present, responding as best you can and being yourself can be the most healing intervention possible.

Don’t try to rescue your partner

See your partner not as a weak victim, but a strong, courageous survivor. If you feel uncomfortable with the subject of sexual abuse or find it hard to hear someone else’s pain you may find yourself ‘cheering up’ your partner rather than really listening. It may feel like you are helping but it is more about making you feel better. While your partner needs your support and understanding, they do not need you to ‘fix’ them, to take away their bad feelings, or tell them what to do. It is not your role to problem-solve for your partner. They have probably had enough people who have tried to control them already. Your partner now needs to become more independent and to trust their ability to take care of themselves. While they may at times try to get you to take care of them, try not to get hooked into it. They’ll need time to make the change from being a dependent, insecure person who doesn’t trust their judgment and abilities to being the independent, self-assured person they can become. You can help this process by being honest. You will both find it better to acknowledge your limitations and needs rather than trying to divert the emotions as they surface. Feelings are easier to let go of when they can be expressed openly. The more space your partner has for free, safe expression, the more likely the emotions will feel less scary.

Consider how you interact

A survivor of rape or abuse will almost certainly need to explore how their experience affects the ways in which they interact with others, their partner particularly. However, we all have our unique behaviours that affect those around us. Take the opportunity to consider and discuss aspects of your behaviour with your partner and to identify if there are ways in which you can contribute to creating a healthier relationship for you both.

Learn how to ride the waves

There will be times when your partner appears to have moved forward considerably in their recovery and then suddenly they will appear more vulnerable, angry or sad. The frequency of their flashbacks and nightmares might increase when you thought things were improving for them. This is a normal and necessary aspect of recovery but it can be confusing and frightening for you and your partner. Patience and tolerance of these ‘ups and downs’ is critical, as is recognising them, reminding your partner that it is ok to be feeling these things, and encouraging them to continue with therapy or counselling.

How can you look after yourself?

The recovery process is a long and very personal process for your partner. It is normal for you to feel emotions such as anger, fear, frustration, anxiety, and hope when your partner talks to you about their experience. Sometimes you are likely to feel as though the pain is directed at you. There are steps you can take to look after yourself and to keep the relationship healthy while supporting your partner.

Ask your partner for direction

It is important for you to identify someone to talk to in confidence about how your partner's experience and recovery process is affecting you. Your partner might feel insecure about this. Talk with your partner about what and with whom you can communicate so that you are both clear about each other's needs and expectations.

Be honest about your feelings

Whilst it is of great importance to spend time listening to your partner during the recovery process, you are still in a relationship where your feelings need to be voiced too. There can be a tendency for partners of survivors to humour their loved one and to mask how they really feel if their thoughts or feelings contradict those of the survivor. This can be a very well intentioned approach to 'protecting' your partner. This isn't necessary though and it can be damaging to your relationship. Survivors in the counselling process become used to questioning their beliefs and behaviours and looking at other perspectives. Your partner is likely to want to know how you honestly feel and think — it gives them something real to work with. It is important for your partner to feel like an equal in your relationship and that means developing a healthy approach to giving and taking; to compromise. You too, should feel able to be open. You should not feel compelled to make unreasonable exceptions to 'support' your partner.

Recognise unacceptable behaviour

Survivors can sometimes display unhealthy coping strategies when dealing with the trauma of the past. These behaviours might be directed at you and this is not acceptable. Your partner needs to become aware of this.

Here are some examples of behaviours that are unacceptable and which need to be discussed with your partner or with a professional:

- Shouting, name-calling, insults, verbal intimidation
- Throwing things, hitting, physical intimidation
- Avoiding and isolating
- Silent treatment
- Abuse of your time or resources

Be responsive and not reactive

When you do feel emotions such as anger and hurt in response to something that your partner has said or done it can be easy to be *reactive* — responding emotionally, from the gut, and without regard for the consequences. This can be damaging for both of you. Remember that your partner's behaviour is probably not intended to be personal; it is the product of pain and turmoil.

- Challenge the behaviour and not the person.
- *Respond*, don't react — think before giving your response and consider the emotional impact and consequences of *how* you deliver what you are feeling.

Modeling this positive behaviour will help you to feel confident that you are behaving appropriately and providing support. It is also likely to encourage your partner to be considered in their behaviours and responses towards you.

Positive coping techniques and self-care

You too need time to yourself — to relax, to reflect, to just be you.

Here are some practices that you could build into your routine to support a healthy, balanced life:

- Take a walk in a peaceful place.
- Regular exercise.
- Get a professional massage.
- Enjoy a sport or hobby.
- Counselling sessions.
- Meditation.
- Take a long bath.
- Spend time with friends or family.
- Write, listen to music or read a good book.
- Leave work on time or book a day off.



Further information

Sources of support and information for partners



Some of the titles below are available to borrow from Revival – Wiltshire RASAC's library.

Family Fallout: A Handbook for Families of Adult Sexual Abuse — Dorothy Beaulieu Landry

Allies in Healing – Laura Davis

Living with the Legacy of Abuse — Beverly Engel

Adults Molested as Children — Euan Bear/Peter Dimmock

Survivors and Partners: Healing the Relationships of Sexual Abuse Survivors - Paul A. Hansen

10 Lessons to Transform Your Marriage - John & Julie Gottman

Ghosts in the Bedroom - Ken Graber

How Can I Forgive You? - Janis A. Springs

Outgrowing the Pain Together - Eliana Gil

What About Me? A Guide for Men Helping Female Partners Deal with Childhood Sexual Abuse - Grant Cameron

Outside, Looking In: When Someone You Love is in Therapy — Patrice Moulton, Ph.D & Lin Harper Ph.D

Why Is It Always About You? - Sandy Hotchkiss



http://www.supportline.org.uk/problems/child_abuse_survivors.php

<http://napac.org.uk/know-a-survivor/>

<http://www.rapecrisis.org.uk/Howtohelp2.php>

<http://www.pods-online.org.uk>

<http://www.thesurvivorstrust.org>

Credits:

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