

NHS Fife Department of Psychology

What should I do?

A guide for partners
supporting someone who has
experienced childhood sexual
abuse

Help Yourself @ moodcafe.co.uk



This booklet has been written for partners of people who were sexually abused as children. It is designed to be brief and easy to read and to provide answers to questions that partners commonly have. It does not cover every aspect of surviving childhood sexual abuse (CSA), but hopefully it will help you to understand the long term effects of CSA and provide some guidance on how you can support your partner now.

Help! My partner has just told me that they were sexually abused as a child. What do I do?

Realising that your partner has experienced such a trauma as a child can be very upsetting and confusing and seem overwhelming. But it can also help to make sense of things you may have noticed in your relationship. If you are the first person that your partner has told, it is a compliment that they trust you enough to tell you.

- **Listen.** Your partner may well be afraid of how you will react; they may think that you will not believe them or think that you will blame them for the abuse. It can be difficult to know what to say, but let your partner know that you care about them and believe them. You can ask them what they need or what you can do to help.
- **Keep calm.** When your partner discloses that they were sexually abused as a child, you may feel overwhelmed by emotions. You may be shocked, confused or angry with the abuser or with your partner for keeping this a secret. Try to keep calm – it is incredibly difficult for someone to disclose that they have been abused – your partner needs your support now. If you need some time to take in and make sense of what they are saying, tell them this – don't stay silent.
- **Be patient.** Recovering from childhood sexual abuse can be a long and complicated process. Be patient with your partner – they will make progress and have setbacks. Developing and maintaining trusting relationships can be very difficult for someone who has survived CSA, as they can quickly be overcome by painful emotions. If your partner starts to get angry or suddenly wants to end the conversation, try not to take this personally. If the conversation gets heated, agree to take a break.

- **Encourage your partner to seek support.** You can be a great support to your partner, however they may also benefit from speaking to other survivors or professionals working in this area. Encourage them to seek support from their GP or other specialist services in the local area (see the last page for some suggestions).
- **Take care of yourself.** Supporting your partner through their recovery process is likely to be stressful at times and you will have other demands to manage as well. Take care of yourself by eating well, exercising and making sure you have time for relaxing and enjoyable activities. If you feel alone or uncertain in how you are supporting your partner, you may benefit from seeking advice from specialist services in the local area as well (see the last page for suggestions). If you feel that your physical or mental health is suffering, make an appointment to see your GP.

What is meant by CSA and how common is it?

The World Health Organisation describes CSA as the involvement of a child in sexual activity which they don't understand, cannot agree to and for which they are not developmentally prepared. It is illegal and not tolerated by society. It may or may not involve physical contact. Children can be abused by an adult or another child. The abuser typically has responsibility, trust or power over the child. CSA is sexually, physically and emotionally abusive.

Estimates of how common CSA is vary and survivors may not wish to report the abuse that they experienced. The World Health Organisation estimates that 20% of women and 5% of men have experienced CSA.

How does CSA affect survivors when they are adults?

Some research suggests survivors are more likely to experience post-traumatic stress disorder. Survivors are also more likely to experience depression, anxiety, addictions, and sexual difficulties and to have difficulties with intimacy and trust. It is also possible that survivors may not remember the abuse. There are lots of different factors that

influence how an adult survivor is affected by the abuse that they experienced. Every survivor's difficulties and coping strategies will be unique to them.

Why would someone not remember what has happened to them?

CSA violates a child's personal boundaries. This is often so traumatic, that a child learns to separate themselves from their body, almost to pretend that they aren't there. It can be as though the abuse is happening to someone else. This may then continue into adult life as a loss of memory. This may be the only way a person has of protecting themselves.

Why has my partner remembered what happened in their childhood now? It was a long time ago.

Remembering the abuse is different for each survivor. Sometimes there may be a clear trigger, e.g. an attempted or actual sexual assault, seeing a film or hearing someone else speak which reminds them of their own experience. There may be a look or a touch which reminds them of similar things from the past. Or they may have a vague feeling which causes them to think back over their past.

It was only one time. Why has it been so devastating?

Sexual abuse is a total invasion of someone's personal boundaries, their body and their privacy. Often, the perpetrator was known and trusted by the child. This can make the child feel betrayed, as the perpetrator should have been protecting them. Survivors of CSA often live in fear that the abuse will happen again, which makes it difficult for them to trust others.

The abuser only touched their genitals.

There is no such thing as "only touched". Your partner may not have been physically touched at all; however this does not stop the abuse from being emotionally devastating.

My partner must have done something to encourage the abuser.

Most children who are sexually abused are not provocative or sexual. Some children may seek non-sexual physical contact such as a cuddle. Whatever the case, the abuser is solely responsible for their abusive actions.

I think my partner probably enjoyed the attention.

If this was the only attention that they received at all, then they may have enjoyed that aspect. But it is likely that they will also have experienced a lot of negative emotions, such as disgust, fear and pain. Adult survivors of CSA often describe feeling ashamed or responsible for the abuse, particularly if there was a part of them that needed attention. However, this does not make them responsible for the abuse.

Why didn't they scream or stop it somehow?

Your partner may have been too terrified to make a sound. Typically, an abuser is larger and more powerful than the child, making it too hard to fight back. Very often, an abuser will threaten the child or their loved ones, or bribe them, so keeping quiet seems like the only safe option.

Why didn't they tell someone at the time?

Your partner may have tried to tell someone and they didn't listen or did not believe them. In their family, there may have been no-one that they could trust to tell. The abuser may have threatened to hurt the child or their family if they told anyone. Or, if the abuser was within their family, the child may not have wanted to see a family member sent to jail, or the child may have feared being taken away themselves.

I think my partner probably enjoyed the sex.

This is a possibility. If our bodies are touched in certain ways then our body may respond physically whether we want it to or not. This does not excuse the abuse. If your partner did feel physical pleasure, it probably only adds to their pain and confusion now.

How long is it going to take for them to get over this?

There is no timescale for this but it may take years rather than months. Experiencing childhood sexual abuse can lead to lots of different issues, and it takes time for someone to work through these. Often, what a child learns from being abused is not to trust others, not to talk to others and not to feel things. These are big issues to overcome and this takes time.

I wish my partner would talk to me about this stuff. I don't like to think that they're talking to other people but not me.

As their partner, you are too close to be their therapist. However, your support to help them cope with having survived CSA is very important. Your partner doesn't need you to be a hero – they will benefit from you being caring, consistent and trustworthy.

When my partner mentions the abuser I want to find them and teach them a lesson.

It's understandable that you feel this way, but it's not helpful to keep saying this to your partner. They will have their own anger and emotions to deal with and they may feel that they cannot talk to you about these issues if they have to continually calm you down. It might be helpful for you to find a friend or counsellor that you can talk to about your feelings.

When I hear what my partner's been through, I just break down in tears.

Again, it's understandable that you feel this way, but this is one reason why it might be better for them to discuss their experiences with professionals or other survivors, who are more used to having these sorts of conversations. Seeing you cry may show your

partner how much you care for them, but they may feel that they can't talk to you about these issues if they have to protect you from feeling upset.

Why has my partner been promiscuous as an adult if the abuse was so devastating?

Abuse can cause a lot of confusion between affection and sex. Your partner may have had a lot of sex but not necessarily because they enjoy sex itself. Some survivors are repeating what they learned in childhood; that the only way to get attention or affection is through being sexual. Sometimes, sex can be a way of avoiding difficult feelings, in the same way that some survivors may use alcohol or drugs.

My partner won't let me touch them at all.

This is another common reaction after abuse. Even though the abuse may have stopped a long time ago, the child inside your partner may still be scared and their defences automatically switch on in case they are hurt. If there is something that your partner particularly doesn't like, such as an unexpected touch, listen to them and do not do this.

My partner always has to be in control.

This is very understandable – as a child they had no control over what happened to them, so as an adult your partner needs to feel in control in order to feel safe.

I've always been gentle with my partner – why can't they see that I'm different?

They're lucky to have a concerned and considerate partner. But there may be times that your partner switches back into the past and thinks that they are with someone else, rather than you. In this case, you may need to stop what you are doing so that they can bring themselves back to the present time.

Sometimes it seems like my partner's not really there when we have sex.

This may well be true – often the only way a child can survive sexual abuse is to switch off, go numb and almost to pretend that they aren't there. It can be very hard to switch off a response which helped them to feel safe for so many years. As your partner is able to develop their trust in others more, this may reduce.

My partner was abused by someone of the same sex – does this make them homosexual?

No. Your partner's sexual orientation is not determined by the sex of the abuser.

However, sometimes survivors do prefer the company of people of their own sex if they were abused by someone of the opposite sex. Sexual confusion or lack of interest in sex is a common experience for survivors of childhood sexual abuse, irrespective of the sex of the abuser.

What about me? I have needs too.

You do, but if you can focus on your partner's needs at present, this is likely to strengthen your relationship. There will be times, perhaps days or weeks, when your partner feels so raw and vulnerable that the thought of being sexually intimate with you is intolerable. This may occur after they have been to a therapy session or a survivors' group. This isn't a sign that they need to stop going, it's a sign that they are dealing with very painful issues and need all the support and understanding that you can give them.

How can I help?

- Be patient with your partner. Try to be as understanding as you can and do not push them.
- Don't give advice unless your partner requests it.
- Speaking about how they feel or think is likely to be helpful for your partner – don't jump in with solutions until they have finished saying what they need to say.

- Offer them a break in a conversation if your partner needs one – it's really important that they feel safe.
- If your partner is expressing difficult or negative emotions, try not to respond in the same way and try not to take it personally. These emotions are most likely to be directed at the abuser.
- Don't judge how your partner is dealing with the abuse – it will take as long as it takes.
- There will be stressful times in your relationship, so learn different ways of managing stress. It's important that you take time out to take care of yourself, so that you are in a fit state to support your partner. Seek professional help yourself if you think you may need it.

Books

How can I help her? A handbook for partners of women sexually abused as children.

Joan Spear. (1991) Hazelden Publishing.

The courage to heal. Ellen Bass & Laura Davis. (2002) Vermillion. This book has a useful section written for supporters of survivors of childhood sexual abuse and is available through the Book Prescription Scheme in NHS Fife (see the 'Books that can help' section on the Moodcafe website below)

Internet resources

www.survivorscotland.org.uk

www.supportforpartners.org

www.asca.org.au

www.moodcafe.co.uk

Services in Fife

Step on Stress – This is a 3 session course for adults that runs in Dunfermline & West Fife and Kirkcaldy & Levenmouth, which teaches you how to manage stress. Call 01383 565442 or email fife-UHB.SteponStress@nhs.net for further information on your nearest course.

Safe Space – Safe Space is a charity based in Dunfermline, which offers a free confidential service to adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. www.safe-space.co.uk

Kingdom Abuse Survivors Project (KASP) – KASP is a charity based in Kirkcaldy, which offers specialist support to adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. www.kasp.org.uk

If you require this information in other community languages or alternative formats please contact the Equality and Diversity Lead by email angelaheyes@nhs.net or by telephoning 01592 226783.

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