



RELATIONSHIPS AND PARENTING

For adult survivors of child sexual abuse

Relationships and parenting

As an adult survivor of child sexual abuse (CSA), you may be experiencing a wide range of effects that have a significant impact on your life. The degree to which a survivor's mental health is impacted can vary significantly, as sexual abuse is an acute form of trauma, which affects people in different ways, at different times, and can be influenced by different triggers.

No experience of child sexual abuse is the same. It can be both physical and emotional; regardless of when it happened, the trauma and suffering is real. Child abuse is always wrong and can affect people for the rest of their lives. How you are feeling is valid and the purpose of this workbook is to empower you through knowledge to take control.

This workbook contains lots of information, so please take it at your own pace. If you would prefer to view this information online, or view interactive information, visit My Support Space (mysupportspace.org.uk). If you need to speak to someone for support, you can call our free confidential service, Supportline, any time on **08 08 16 89 111**.



42% of CSA survivors report past abuse having a damaging effect on relationships

Forty-two percent of CSA survivors report that the abuse they experienced as a child has had a damaging impact on their ability to maintain loving relationships (IICSA, 2020). These relationships can include those with family members, friends and intimate partners, as these relationships can act as constant reminders of the past. In addition to this, the emotional disassociation experienced by survivors of abuse can make it harder for them to trust other people and open up.





A therapist, counsellor, or any other person who you feel safe with can play a key part in this process. Therapists should never try to convince you that they know what's best for you or disempower you in any way. Their role is to show you what a healthy relationship with another person feels and looks like.

Feelings of shame also have a significant part to play in establishing relationships with others. These can affect survivors' concerns about how they are perceived by others and make them hide parts of themselves that they feel most ashamed of. Some survivors do not want to talk about the abuse they experienced. Therefore, the need to conceal and the inability to communicate makes it difficult to connect and establish close relationships with others.

It is important to recognise that there are everyday triggers that can affect how a survivor of CSA is able to cope, and there are lifestyle changes which, while seeming normal to many people, can leave partners confused as to why a person's behaviour has changed so dramatically. These can be instances such as changing jobs, moving home or having a child.

How partners are affected

Partners of CSA survivors may experience frustration in many different ways, may often feel confusion and may be unsure of how to act or interpret the behaviour of their survivor partner. They may experience all or some of the following:

- Feelings of failure for being unable to give sexual pleasure
- Frustration at not being able to express their feelings towards their partner
- Rejection and confusion over shifting emotional responses
- Uncertainty about how to act or what to say
- Shock or anger during times of rejection or when their survivor partner expresses their feelings
- Unmet needs of their own.

IDEAS TIME

If there are things you are finding difficult to say, why not write them down in a letter to your partner? Explain how you are feeling and why you find it hard to express these feelings out loud. Tell them how you want to be supported, and that they are important to you.





Tips for building and maintaining relationships

- Be honest with each other about how you feel. If you feel that you are unable to say your feelings out loud, write a letter or start a communication journal.
- Seek professional help from a counsellor or therapist to support you and your partner, enabling you to discuss important issues in a positive and safe environment.
- It is important to acknowledge that you have responsibilities towards your partner but not for them. You are both responsible for your own selves.
- Respect each other's limitations.
- Give each other time to process feelings.
- Recognise that no matter how long ago the abuse occurred, there is a very real degree of trauma and suffering still being experienced. As a partner, you will never know how it feels to have experienced CSA.

Parenting

Everyone finds parenting difficult and no one feels completely ready for this. Many survivors of CSA go on to become wonderful, loving, and nurturing parents. However, it is important to acknowledge that the impact of the abuse and trauma does create difficulties in parenting practice, which include maintaining appropriate boundaries, being too permissive, and too punitive with discipline. Academic studies that have explored the experiences of survivors of child sexual abuse have revealed that the abuse impacts their parenting practice in a multitude of ways, through their thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

As a survivor, understanding how your experience of abuse affects your thoughts and behaviour towards others, especially your children, and what triggers initiate these feelings and behaviour, is vitally important. It provides you with empowerment over the trauma that you have experienced.

Pregnancy, birth, and early motherhood

As a survivor of child sexual abuse, the thoughts, fears and experiences of pregnancy and childbirth are likely to be different to those who have not experienced sexual abuse as a child. Whether or not a pregnancy is planned, there are many feelings you may experience, such as:



- Feelings of unhappiness
- Feelings of excitement
- Worry that your experience of abuse will have an impact on your ability to be a good parent
- Happiness at having an opportunity to create a happy childhood experience
- Feeling unsafe
- Difficulty in 'sharing' your body
- Fear that you cannot have children
- Fear of being pregnant
- Pressure to be a perfect parent
- A sense that you lack control
- Fear of examinations
- Fear of the birth itself
- Guilt
- Heightened emotions.



Pregnancy can be a worrying and lonely time, but there are many things you can do to make this better. It is important to understand that no parent is perfect, and the quest to achieve this can cause more harmful stress, as well as taking away moments in which you enjoy becoming a parent.

THINKING TIME

How many of these feelings have you felt or are feeling?



Do you feel like this is something you are effectively managing or would you like additional support?

Appointments and examinations

Midwife appointments and clinical examinations can be an exhausting ordeal, as the emotions and physical responses you undergo during an appointment can include involuntary reactions such as:

- Feeling unsafe
- Feeling spaced out
- Being hyper-alert
- Feeling angry
- Being strangely disinterested
- Experiencing an 'out of body' sensation during physical examinations
- Feeling emotional: upset, confused, angry and exhausted.

At the same time, it can also be a wonderful experience in which you get the opportunity to hear your baby's heartbeat and see your baby on ultrasound scans, which can bring you closer to your child and ease some of your fears.

IDEAS TIME

Write a list of all the things worrying you in order of importance. Then share them with someone you trust. Write a list of all the ways in which you will be a great parent. Ask a partner or someone you trust to do the same.



THINKING TIME

Think about how many of the above feelings you are experiencing or have had about appointments and examinations. What would help you to feel more relaxed?



IDEAS TIME

Prepare yourself by becoming more knowledgeable and taking away the element of the unknown. Go online and look up further information on the NCT website www.nct.org.uk.



Another option is to find support groups.

Physical examinations involve being touched by strangers, and it can involve areas in which you may have experienced abuse. This is particularly the case during labour if you choose to have a vaginal birth. It is important to remember that you have choices relating to how and where you give birth. Discussing these options with your midwife may help to relieve some of these concerns, as well as making hospital visits to the labour wards, birthing suites, and consultation rooms. All these measures can help you to alleviate your concerns about what to expect.

Becoming a new mum

While all expectant mothers are fearful of the birth and are nervous about becoming a mother for the first time, survivors of child sexual abuse can feel this more acutely. You might be worried about how your history of abuse will impact on the relationship that you have with your new baby and, even though you might want to breastfeed, the thought might seem incredibly daunting and challenging.

As a survivor of child sexual abuse, it is normal to feel these things and there are many things you can do to help yourself prepare for the examination, the interactions with the midwife, clinical appointments, the birth and life with your child.

Top tips for expectant mothers

- **Take a friend:** if taking someone you trust to an appointment is going to help you feel less anxious, just do it.
- **Make a list:** prior to any appointments, write down all the questions you can think of that will help alleviate any of your concerns. No question is a silly question.
- **Write a birthing plan:** start creating your own birthing plan, which includes all the things that you would like to happen and be included, as well as all the things that you would not like to be included. These may relate to the setting: either the labour ward, a midwife-led birthing suite, or a home delivery. You might want lots of drugs or none at all. You might want to opt for an elective



C-section. You can also state that you want to keep examinations to a minimum, the number of staff present to a minimum, and who else you would like to be present in the room to support you. It is important to remember that labours rarely go as expected, but by having a birthing plan you can feel more prepared, and those caring for you can see how best to support you.

- **Disclosing information to your midwife:** only if you are comfortable doing so, sharing with them that you are a survivor of CSA can enable your midwife and medical teams to support you more effectively and listen to your needs more attentively. You do not need to share any information that you are not comfortable disclosing.
- **Birthing partner:** regardless of whether you have a relationship partner attending the birth, you can take another person you trust and value for support.
- **Supportive friends:** if you decide that you do want to breastfeed, reach out to a friend who is already a mum and has breastfed to ask them about their experience. This person can support you through any challenges you face with breastfeeding. In addition, local health visitors can provide advice post birth.
- **Doulas:** doulas are professional birthing partners who are not medically or clinically trained. Their focus is to support you and your needs relating to the birth and afterwards. They are non-judgemental and supportive in their guidance. They can help you build your birth plan, making sure your needs are met during the birth, listening to your concerns, helping you to feed and care for your baby, and to liaise with any support services should you need them.



IDEAS TIME

If you have not already started, why not begin drafting a birthing plan and researching local support groups that may be useful to you before and after the birth?



IDEAS TIME

Start keeping a pregnancy journal. Writing down your feelings will not only be therapeutic but will also highlight issues you might want to raise with your Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA), therapist, partner, or midwife.



THINKING TIME

Spend some time reminding yourself of all your great qualities and why you will be a great parent.



Becoming a new dad

As a male survivor of abuse, becoming a father may be a daunting experience. It is a time where memories may come to the surface and have an impact on your ability to enjoy the lead-up to fatherhood and the years that follow it. Fatherhood is a special time in which you will make incredible new memories associated with childhood, therefore it is essential that you acknowledge the feelings and thoughts you are experiencing to work towards healing. Your concerns might include:

You might be worried about becoming a perpetrator of CSA

– research indicates that the vast majority of male survivors of CSA **DO NOT** go on to abuse children (Glasser et al., 2001; Salter et al., 2004). It is often false information produced by the media that creates the paradigm of victim-to-offender, not fact and evidence. Such fears can negatively influence the relationship with your children (Denov, 2004). Flashbacks and nightmares can compound survivors' feelings of being damaged and fear of becoming their abusers.

Problems with physical contact and affection – it is not uncommon for survivors to feel afraid or uncomfortable about touching their children or displaying affection for fear of this behaviour being construed as sexual (Price-Robinson, 2012). This is not only experienced by male survivors of CSA. Society's awareness of CSA has ultimately made men more fearful of being accused of CSA than they were 20 years ago (Furedi, 2006).

A catalyst for the re-surfacing of trauma – fears of trauma and blocked emotions coming to the surface are also often mentioned by male survivors.

Becoming a parent may trigger reactions relating to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a reoccurrence, but it can also occur for the first time since being abused. Gradual feelings of depression, anxiety, the experience of flashbacks and moments of disassociation can slowly creep up on a survivor, and the links between these experiences are often not recognised as signs of PTSD. Rather than understanding that the cause of these feelings is PTSD relating to their abuse, the parent may instead internalise their feelings of failure, shame, and guilt, causing them to doubt their ability to be a good parent.



A healing process

Studies with male survivors of CSA have revealed that fatherhood can be an important healing factor from the trauma of abuse (Nelson, 2009; Department of Human Services, 2009). Male survivors have recognised that having children may be an opportunity to see who they are without the trauma, allowing their children to teach them about trust and to see their own worth in their children's eyes.

Parent survivors of CSA sometimes also display behaviour that is incredibly overprotective of their children or grandchildren, experiencing an overwhelming fear of the children in their care being put at any form of risk. This is in addition to the need to ensure that their children feel loved and are not exposed to the negative impact of abuse.


The important thing is to be aware of the triggers that affect you. While something may happen unexpectedly, such as a song being played on the radio, which triggers a flashback from when you were abused, the important thing is to understand how to manage emotions and cope while a child is in your care. Learning these coping mechanisms through therapy and counselling can give you the tools you need to tackle flashbacks and your fears of being a parent.



Top tips for parent survivors of CSA

- Seek professional support if you feel like you are struggling to cope mentally.
- Keep a record if you start having more frequent flashbacks or panic attacks.
- When you feel overwhelmed, get grounded. Follow the steps to ground yourself in that moment.
- Reach out to other close friends and share your worries with them. Ask for their advice and about their experiences of becoming parents.
- Find a support group of fellow survivors.
- Keep a journal to make sure you are communicating your feelings somewhere and not keeping them bottled up.
- Make sure you remind yourself of why you are going to make a great parent and write the reasons down so you can re-read them.
- Self-care – make sure you are taking time for yourself and for your child.





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For information and support, contact us by:

- calling: Supportline **08 08 16 89 111**
- using Next Generation Text (add **18001** before any of our phone numbers)
- Online: **victimsupport.org.uk**
- Live chat: **victimsupport.org.uk/live-chat**

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