



Adult survivors of child sexual abuse

Supporting someone you know



[victimsupport.org.uk](https://www.victimsupport.org.uk)

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If someone you know tells you that they experienced sexual abuse as a child it can be shocking to hear and difficult to know what to say. The fact that they have told you what happened to them means they trust you, so how you react is really important. It's difficult enough to comprehend the ways in which children are sexually abused, and it is much more difficult for survivors to find the words to describe what happened to them. This leaflet will give you some guidance as to how you can help if someone discloses that they experienced child sexual abuse (CSA).

What is childhood sexual abuse?

CSA is involving a child in any kind of sexual activity, which can happen in person or online. It includes contact abuse, which is when the abuser makes physical contact with a child or non-contact abuse, which includes things like indecent exposure, making a child perform or watch sexual activity or involving a child in making pornographic images.

We know that around one in four adults, both male and female, has experienced abuse as a child. Some find that with the support of their family and friends they are able to move on from their childhood abuse.

Often, people abuse others because they want power and control over them. It's important to remember that it is never the child's fault. Abusers may try to make the child responsible, or make the child feel like they allowed the abuse to happen, and this can lead to survivors feeling shame or guilt in adulthood. Abusive behaviour towards children is always wrong and the child is never to blame.

The impact of childhood abuse – Understanding the feelings an adult survivor may be experiencing

Not everybody who has experienced childhood abuse will experience emotional or mental health difficulties later in life. However, it's estimated that over 50% of people may have the following symptoms that last into adulthood:

- anxiety
- depression
- post-traumatic stress
- sleep disorders
- self-harm and/or suicidal thoughts
- flashbacks and panic attacks.

Some people find it very difficult to deal with the intimate aspects of childhood abuse, especially when they have to talk to other people about what happened. They may have kept their experiences

secret for years and are worried about the effect that 'going public' will have on their family and other people around them.

If they were abused by someone they know or love, the effects may be even greater. As well as the experience itself, they've had their trust broken at an early point in their life and this can have lasting negative effects on their relationships with other people and be a barrier to developing a positive sexual identity.

Survivors may also feel guilty because they have engaged in risk taking or unhealthy behaviours as a result of the abuse. These may include alcohol or substance abuse, criminal activity or avoiding medical help. These are common responses to childhood abuse, and support services can help survivors develop more positive coping strategies.

How should you respond to a disclosure?

Everyone is different and everyone responds to trauma in their own way. The most important thing you can do for anyone telling you they are a survivor is to believe them, take them seriously, don't make any judgements or assumptions and be there for them. It may be difficult to hear, but allowing the survivor the space to talk at their own pace can really help them.

You may find that the survivor can't remember all of the details so they may not be able to recollect everything that happened to them. You may also have questions but it's important to remember that the survivor may not want to tell you everything. Give them space, time to talk, and don't push them to tell you any more than they feel comfortable with.

You may have some conflicting feelings, especially if you know the abuser. You may feel that the survivor should take certain actions such as reporting it to the police, but this is not a decision for you to make. Empowering survivors to make their own decisions is one way to help them recover, so support them in whatever decision they make.

Some tips on dealing with a disclosure

We know it is hard to hear disclosures of CSA and your initial thoughts may be:

- I don't know what to say
- I don't want to say the wrong thing
- I'm out of my depth
- I don't want to make it worse
- I might get upset.

These are all valid feelings. You should:

- Let the survivor speak at their own pace
- Don't make any assumptions or judgements
- Remember that the survivor's feelings are also valid
- Don't try to force them to take a certain path; what they do next is up to them
- Remember that the fact they have made this disclosure to you means they trust you.

Talk to them about the support options available to them. They may not be ready to access support yet, but by being aware of what help is available you can be there when they are ready.

Partners of survivors

If your partner is a survivor, you may be unsure of how to act, what to say or how to interpret your partner's behaviour. Sometimes partners can experience frustration and confusion because of this and that's normal.

You 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 your feelings towards your partner, or frustration at them not having the words to express their feelings to you
- 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 your partner expresses their feelings
- Unmet needs of your own.

Things you can do

- Be honest with each other about how you feel. If you feel that you are unable to say your feelings out loud, think about writing a letter or starting a communication journal
- Talk to your partner about seeking professional relationship advice from a therapist who can help you 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.

How can Victim Support help survivors?

Our interactive resource, [My Support Space](#), has a number of guides designed for adult survivors of child sexual abuse. It's a free, safe, secure and confidential space where people can choose how they want to be supported after crime. Guides specific to surviving child sexual abuse include:

- Coping with trauma
- Male survivors
- Relationships and parenting
- Seeking justice
- Understanding shame and guilt.

We also have Independent Sexual Violence Advocates (an ISVA) that will support survivors. You can contact us for advice, or pass our information on to the person you are supporting. Our Supportline is always open, and we have a live chat facility if you aren't quite ready to pick up the phone or if you want to stay anonymous.

For many people, talking to someone from an organisation like Victim Support is an essential step. We are professional, caring and independent and we can support survivors regardless of whether or not they have reported the abuse to the police. We can help survivors to develop the coping strategies they may need to manage the overwhelming feelings that the impact of childhood abuse can have in adulthood.

Contact us

**Free, confidential, 24/7 Supportline:
08 08 16 89 111**

www.victimsupport.org.uk

www.victimsupport.org.uk/live-chat

www.mysupportspace.org.uk/moj

We are an independent charity offering free, confidential support to people affected by crime and traumatic incidents. 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**

To find out how you can help us, visit **victimsupport.org.uk/get-involved**

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