

## Info for partners (Disclosure)

*When he told me, lots of things made sense. I now understand him better.”*

This page is specifically written for partners of men who have been sexually abused in childhood or sexually assaulted as adults. At living well, we regularly receive contact from partners seeking information and support to help them better understand how to respond to their partner's disclosure of sexual abuse, what is happening and how they might best assist their partner, their relationship and themselves.



### Initial Response

Hearing that someone close to you has been sexually abused is never easy. It can come as quite a shock. Even though he may only have recently told you about the abuse, he typically would have been running over in his mind whether to say anything for quite some time. There are some considerable barriers to men's disclosure of sexual abuse or sexual assault, therefore, sharing this information with you shows a significant belief and trust in you (See [Men and disclosure: Deciding to tell](#) and [Men and disclosure: How you can help](#)).

*I didn't know what I was supposed to say or do. The whole thing was so foreign to me and all I could think of was that I didn't sign up for this stuff when I married him, how dare he bring this into our lives. I felt angry with him and guilty all at the same time.”*

People have a variety of responses to hearing that someone close to them has been sexually abused. It is understandable that you may need time to work through your feelings, thoughts, physical reactions and questions relating to where to from here. People report experiencing deep sadness, compassion, surprise, shock, disbelief, as well as intense anger at the person who did this. All of these are understandable, common responses.

One of the most useful things you can do for yourself is to accept that you will have a variety of reactions, even ones that aren't welcome. It can be reassuring to know that some of the most common thoughts and feelings for partners when hearing about sexual assault are:

- **Horror.** Often what you have heard about is horrible so why wouldn't you react in this way particularly if this is something you have little experience of in your life.
- **Disbelief.** We don't want to believe these things happen in the world in which we, our partners, children, family and friends live in and sometimes it takes awhile to overcome the hope that this is not real.

- **Anger.** We don't like hearing about people hurting those that we care about and often this brings out a protective urge, especially if we know who the people are who committed the acts. This is natural, but we also know that we can't fight people's battles for them. For women, not used to dealing with such intense feelings of anger, anger can feel especially difficult to manage
- **Frustration and resentment.** When a man tells his partner he has experienced sexual abuse and or assault then it introduces a new piece of information into the relationship. You might resent that and then later find yourself frustrated that he is not "getting over it" or moving forward as quickly as you'd like. You might feel frustrated that he didn't tell you earlier and possibly resentful that your issues and concerns now seem to be taking second place. This can be especially the case when counseling begins as the partner who has experienced the abuse can seem to be pre-occupied by the events of the past and you may feel "locked out" or left behind.
- **Shame.** This is a particularly hard reaction to deal with and is often not acknowledged. You may feel ashamed of your own thoughts and reactions- maybe you didn't completely believe him at first, maybe you wished he hadn't told you; maybe you had some thoughts that he should have told somebody earlier or done something to stop it. You know these thoughts and ideas are not particularly useful for him, but you have had them anyway. You can be sure that your partner has also felt shame at times. This is a feeling you probably share, but for different reasons.
- **Sadness.** When deep hurt and pain are experienced something is always lost. This sense of loss brings sadness and grief. A concept some people find useful is the idea of ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief. This refers to a loss that is not publicly recognised or validated as is the case with a death, a miscarriage or a relationship breakdown for example. Instead it is deeply personal and private, and unlike other losses it may not be permanent and therefore can contain hope. It can lead to the griever wondering whether they are even entitled to feel grief and sadness.
- **Loneliness.** When a man is working on the effects of sexual assault he is often on a solo journey through this process, and even though he may look for and appreciate your support and presence, he may at times seem to be distant from you. This can be very lonely for you.

Sometimes you can experience a number of reactions at the same time, even though they might seem to contradict each other.

*It was a real rollercoaster of emotions after he told me about it – I was angry, sad, hopeful that at last it was out in the open and funnily enough even happy that he trusted me enough to tell me about it. What was hardest was that I just wanted to fix it all up and make it go away and I knew that I just couldn't wave a wand and make it all better."*

All of these feelings and reactions are absolutely understandable. Judging yourself harshly or trying NOT to have difficult or distressing feelings about a disturbing or distressing event is not particularly useful. It can be helpful to reassure yourself that most partners experience sometimes overwhelming emotional responses that usually lessen in intensity over time. Sometimes it can be useful to have somebody (and it may not be your partner) with whom you can safely put these feelings and thoughts into words.

## Some ways of responding

Upon hearing of the sexual abuse, many people experience a desire to help and take care of their partner, to help make things better. We all benefit from care and support at difficult times in our lives. Ideally, you will both be able to access the assistance you need: assistance that provides each of you individually and as a couple to experience greater sense of control, choice and well being in your lives and relationships. In seeking and offering assistance, it can be a challenge to strike the right balance, not leaving someone completely on their own to find their own way and not taking over, rescuing or trying wrap up in cotton wool.

We are beginning to develop a picture of what worries men and what responses are helpful for both men who have been sexually abused and for their partners.

*I don't want people to look at me as if I was some sort of freak – I am still the same guy they knew before; it's just that they now have some new information about me."*

## You may have already done some really useful things:

- **Reading up on the issue**, making yourself familiar with common difficulties, as well as stories of hope and resilience. Much of the material both in print, on the net, and on television are popular media stories which often contain “doom and gloom” and are sensationalized. Try to access information that affirms peoples’ capacity to grow beyond their experience of abuse.
- **Accessing support** from somebody who is able to help you to understand the issue your partner has been dealing with and who can also support you in your role.
- **Attending to your own health**, and to your emotional, physical and spiritual needs as in doing so you will be able to assist your partner to do the same also.

## Helpful ways of responding

- **Believe in him and let him know this**. Telling him that you believe in him might be the single most valuable thing that you can say to him.
- **Express how you feel about what he has told you**. He has probably been taking in your facial expressions, your body language and all of the other ways that you can tell him how you are feeling as well as the words that you say.
- **Let him know that you will respect his confidentiality**. It is very common that your partner may have some sense of shame or guilt and may not want others to know about his experiences. It is very important that you respect that this is his story and belongs to him, and that he should tell whom ever and when ever he chooses to tell and that others are told by you only with his expressed permission. Having this sense of control and trust will help him move forward after years of “holding” this alone.
- **Seek support for yourself**. If he asks you to keep this information to yourself you may be feeling unsupported. It is best to talk with him about identifying a safe and trusted person or a counselor perhaps, that you can seek support from and who will respect his confidentiality. If you have discussed this with him and he knows who you are seeking support from then he will know that you want to be there for him and he may worry about you less as well.
- **Continue your usual activities**. This shows your partner that even this new element in your lives does not have to change things.

Sometimes, out of initial shock or misinformation people can react in what are perceived as negative or unhelpful ways. If you find that you have stumbled, made a mistake, done or said something that was not considered helpful, don't be too hard on yourself. It is always useful to take time to reflect on what you have heard and your own initial responses and to gather more information before returning to the topic with your partner.

## Some common mistakes

- **Not believing him**. Denying or minimizing the impact of the experience for him as not as bad as it seemed, or so long ago that it should be forgotten or put away somewhere is a common reaction. It can help us to deal with things that we don't want to acknowledge as happening in the world that we live in.

- **Reacting with horror and outrage.** It is understandable that you might wish to take action to redress what has occurred. This is a common protective instinct. It is important that you don't try to take control but rather support your partner in his decisions around this issue.
- **Telling others without your partners' knowledge.** It can be difficult to hold this new information and it is understandable that you might want to share it with others that are close to you. If you have done this you could go back to those persons and tell them about your new understanding about the need to respect your partner's confidentiality, and ask them to do respect it also.

## Perhaps you are dealing with your own experience of sexual abuse and or assault

If you have your own experience of sexual abuse or sexual assault, then hearing about your partner's experience can be particularly distressing, especially if you haven't spoken about it to him or anybody else.

*Suddenly thoughts and feelings about my own abuse came flooding back. I didn't want to remember it and I was angry with him for dragging it all up... but I couldn't tell him about it... not now. I was useless. He needed my support and I felt like I was drowning."*

## Things you can do

- **Get support if necessary.** It might be useful for you to consider speaking to a trusted friend, relative or even a counsellor, either individually or as a couple, or both. If you have also experienced sexual abuse or sexual assault, this might be a time to find a counsellor to make sure you are properly supported and have the opportunity to discuss the mix of issues raised for you by your partner's disclosure to you.
- **Talk to your partner.** This may mean talking to your partner about your reactions, your feelings and thoughts. You may have questions you need to ask him or things you want to reassure him about. If you decide you want to talk to him about your experience of sexual abuse, be clear about what you are looking for from him. All partners benefit from support and information on how best they can assist at that particular time. What works for one person, may not be exactly what another person is looking for at that time.
- **Find out more.** This website is a good start. There are both similarities and difference in men's and women's experiences of sexual abuse, feel free to look at the other pages and sections of this website to educate yourself about sexual abuse and helpful ways of managing. Dispelling some of the myths and rumours around sexual assault has been very helpful for many partners.
- **Remain hopeful.** The effects of trauma and abuse do not have to be a life sentence for your partner and yourself. There are numerous stories of resilience, hope and recovery, and there are many examples of men who experience sexual assault and are able to lead healthy, successful and emotionally stable, rewarding and fulfilling lives. They are not the "walking wounded" and this part of their lives does not have to define them.
- **Make sure you have a life and keep it going.** It is easy to put your own interests, friendships and relationships on hold, believing that his issues are more important than your own. While this is understandable, it is not very useful for you and actually not useful for him.

## Every day practical steps to take care of yourself

You are probably already doing many useful things to take care of yourself. You may be of little use to anybody, including yourself, if you don't prioritise self-care. The [well being](#) section of this web site are useful for both men and women, whether you have been sexually abused or not. Some particularly useful strategies could be:

- **Sleep.** Make sure you do it and do it well. There are some extremely useful sleep hygiene protocols available. If your sleep is bad then it will have a negative effect on your health and your ability to cope.

- **Exercise.** Make sure you have some exercise in your day. The secret is to find something that you actually enjoy. Most of us, even with the strongest of will find it hard to stick at something we don't like.
- **Nurture your other relationships.** The healthiest partnerships are relationships between people who have strong relationships with other people such as friends, co-workers and family. These relationships require time and energy and you need to give yourself permission to do this
- **Monitor your physical health.** Make sure you have a good relationship with a GP and have regular health checks. Prioritising your health also means making sure you have a good, healthy diet, and one in which you can enjoy your food as one of life's great pleasures.
- **Explore avenues to practise mindfulness and relaxation.** This could be through yoga, tai-chi, and meditation, spending time in nature, attending to your spiritual needs, and finding meaningful ways to connect deeply with others.

## **Access further support if you need it**

You may well have already been using your own resources and networks for support. This can be very useful. You may also have been able to access some useful reading and information. If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed or if you would just like a little more support and assistance you could consider booking in to see a counsellor or therapist who understands trauma and the impact of sexual assault on relationships.