



For Families & Friends of Survivors

Finding out that someone you love has been sexually abused can be devastating. Friends and family members often experience intense and painful emotions that can be hard to deal with. The person who was abused may be getting help, but family and friends feel alone with their anger, pain and frustration. There is no right way to react, however there are things you can do to help you feel less overwhelmed.

How you may be feeling

It's important to know that there is no normal way to react when you find out someone you love has been sexually abused.

How you might be feeling:

- **Shock and disbelief** - You may struggle with confusion and disbelief, especially if the abuser is someone you know. Denial is a coping mechanism, and it's not uncommon for those around the survivor to try to minimize or deny that the abuse occurred.
- **Anger** - You might feel angry towards the abuser, and even towards yourself for not being able to protect the survivor. It's ok to acknowledge how you're feeling, and try to find an outlet to express those feelings safely.
- **Sadness** - It's normal to feel sad, and sometimes even hopeless. You might feel sad for the survivor. You might mourn the loss of innocence if it's a child, and worry about how this will change their life. Self-care and coping skills will help you deal with these feelings.
- **Powerless** - It's common for friends and family members to feel powerless to know how to support the survivor, in addition to dealing with their own feelings of grief, anger and loss. Practicing good self-care and getting support for yourself is critical, so that you can be there for your loved one.
- **Guilt** - You may feel very guilty for not preventing the abuse, or for not knowing what was going on. Sometimes people can get consumed by guilt, and lose all perspective. Other times they make excuses for a survivor's disruptive or disrespectful behaviour, because they feel like they "owe" them for not protecting them or not being aware of what was going on. It helps to talk to another friend or family member who has gone through this, so you have the support you need to work through your feelings.
- **Anxiety** - You might also feel pressure or anxiety to respond in the "right" way. Or, you could be worried about how the abuse will impact your relationship with the survivor. You might not always say the right thing, however it is important to reassure the person

that you believe him or her, and assure them that the abuse was not their fault. Abuse is never the fault of the victim.

- **Fear** - You may be afraid of your own feelings and wonder whether you can stay involved in the relationship if it feels too painful or disorienting. Your sense of self will be impacted by your family member, friend or partner's experience of abuse, especially if they are remembering a childhood experience for the first time. Strong, confused or even competing feelings are to be expected for everyone involved. The world does tip away from the familiar axis of the day-to-day routines. Remember that life is always about change. None of us stays the same. Allow yourself to be changed. You are stronger than you think you are. Acknowledge your own feelings and find support for yourself too.
- **Responsibility to make things better** - You can let go of the idea that you have to 'fix' the situation. It is not yours to fix, there is no resolution for you to find. Instead, you can learn to be a strong support by listening and respecting the experience of others, without trying to do anything to change them. This is really hard for most people who want to 'do' something to make things better. Know that your love and support are powerful forces that do make a difference.
- **Impatience** - There are many pressures in our society for people to 'get over' trauma and 'move on'. You may have times where you feel that way. You want your life back, you want the other person's life back and you feel guilty about feeling that way. You may be hard on yourself because these are 'unacceptable' feelings. Be gentle with yourself. Be honest about your feelings and acknowledge them for what they are. If you do not acknowledge them as your feelings, you may blame the other person - which will never give you the relief you are seeking. There is nothing wrong with wanting life to be easier. You are not a bad person for being impatient from time to time. Know that it will pass.

Self Care

One of the best ways to be able to support and care for a survivor is to take care of yourself first. You can do this by:

- Acknowledging the impact on you, and giving yourself permission to have your needs met without feeling selfish or guilty;
- Maintaining a healthy lifestyle by getting enough sleep, eating nutritious food, exercising, spending time with friends or family, and doing activities that will give you energy and peace and will help sustain you;
- Keep your routines by continuing to do the things that nourish you like cooking, exercising, volunteering, spending time with friends, or in nature. These are an important part of self-care. This can also provide daily touchstones that ground you in a regular routine;
- Talk to someone who understands. It can help to talk to another friend or family member who has been there. It's easier to share some of our deepest and most hurtful, or shameful, feelings with another person who has experienced the same emotions and experiences. Or, call a crisis line, or speak with a mental health professional. It's ok to admit that you're having trouble coping and dealing with the abuse of your loved one. You may need help to process your feelings, and it's ok to acknowledge that;

- **Make time to relax.** This could be through meditation or relaxation exercises, alternative therapies like Reiki or healing touch, spending time in nature, or mindfulness. Do whatever helps you feel energized and grounded.

What might be happening for the Survivor

Friends and family members are sometimes unprepared for how to respond to the fallout from sexual violence, and how to best support their loved one. Survivors may:

- Experience intense emotions, including anger or profound sadness that may be overwhelming. Survivors can also seem very calm and composed. No two people respond the same way to abuse;
- Have difficulty sleeping and/or experience ongoing physical issues like headaches, stomachaches, digestive, bowel or gynecological issues;
- Have trouble developing and/or maintaining close friendships. A survivor may also isolate him or herself in order to feel safe;
- Use drugs, alcohol, cutting, eating disorders or other self-harm behaviours to cope with what happened to them. This can be alarming for friends and family, especially if it's excessive and escalating;
- Act out and push boundaries, including behaving in disrespectful or aggressive ways that are unlike them;
- Engage in risky and reckless behaviour like fast driving, promiscuous behaviour, shoplifting, vandalism, or violence against another person;
- Want to tell everyone about the abuse, or no one at all. Many survivors have to learn, or re-learn, how to set healthy boundaries;
- Have panic attacks or flashbacks, and may be easily triggered with a certain smell, time of day or year, music, or by someone who looks like their abuser. Reminding the survivor where they are, that they are safe, and that you are there for them can help calm the person, and enable them to move through the difficult moment. Afterwards, encourage the survivor to talk if they want to, but don't pressure them if they are not ready to talk.
- Feel really guilty about the abuse or assault. They may also carry deep shame. Saying that the abuse was not their fault is really important. However, letting go of guilt and shame is a process that may take a long time for the survivor. Try to be patient, and not pressure them to move along the path faster than they are able;
- Need counselling at different points of their healing journey;
- Compensate for their feelings of shame by becoming over-achievers;
- Remember many details of their abuse or none at all. Having few or no memories of the abuse can be just as devastating as remembering every detail.

Here is what's helpful

Many family members and friends don't know how to respond, or what to say to a victim of sexual abuse/violence. It can also be really hard to hear details, and see the person in pain. It's ok not to have all the answers or to say the right things all the time. However, responding in a compassionate and non-judgmental way can be very powerful for the survivor. This includes:

- Educating yourself about sexual abuse and violence, and being honest about your own assumptions and stereotypes;
- Asking the person what they need to help them feel safe;
- Letting them know that you believe them, and that the abuse or assault was not their fault;
- Being patient with the survivor, and yourself, as healing is a process and it takes time;
- Not forcing the survivor to talk if they don't want to, or aren't ready. Let him or her know that you're always there for them, and that they can tell you as much or as little as they are comfortable doing;
- Not minimizing the abuse or assault, or pressuring them to "get over it";
- Not trying to fix things, or solve the problems for him or her;
- Not pretending that everything is ok. Bearing witness to someone else's suffering, even through caring silence, can be very powerful;
- Not putting pressure on the survivor to forgive their abuser. This can be especially painful if the abuser is a family member. Every survivor is different, and forgiveness is not a requirement for healing;
- Recognizing that the process of healing can take a lifetime;
- Supporting the survivor's decisions.

Supporting Children

Having a child tell you that they have been sexually abused can be devastating. Parents and caregivers may feel tremendous guilt that they didn't, or weren't able to, protect their child, or foresee the abuse.

You can support a child by:

- Actively listening;
- Telling him or her that you believe them;
- Letting them know they did the right thing by telling you what happened;
- Accepting that you won't be able to "fix it", but you can support your child on their journey;
- Trying to control your own emotions and focusing on the needs of your child. Only share your feelings when it's appropriate to do so;
- Not downplaying or minimizing the abuse;
- Not second guessing, or continuing to pursue the "what "if" scenarios. And do not involve the child in this, as it can re-traumatize him or her;
- Creating a safe space and trying to keep perspective about safety. Try not to heighten fears for your child;
- Not forcing your child to talk about the abuse if they don't want to;
- Not blaming your child or making them feel responsible for the abuse. It is never a child's fault;
- Not judging your child no matter what they tell you;
- Not trying to hurry the healing process. Don't tell them to "get over it". Trauma and grief have their own timetable;

- Trying to minimize the disruption in your child's life, as familiar routines can help children feel safe;
- Asking permission before you touch him or her;
- Knowing your limits, and when to seek outside help for the child, and for yourself;
- Taking care of yourself;
- Being patient and positive;
- Keeping anything to yourself that might be upsetting to the child, and may impede their healing.

Next Steps

Following a disclosure of sexual abuse, family members may find themselves reeling from the disclosure and struggling to find help for themselves and their family member. In most cases both the survivor and family members may need professional and other kinds of support as they walk the path to healing. Getting information and support will allow you to make informed decisions about your options and those of your family member. This can help with your emotional healing and empowerment.

