

When Your Partner Was Sexually Abused as a Child

A Guide for Partners



Your partner
can recover from
sexual abuse.
Understanding how
this happens
and getting support
for yourself
are important too.

Sexual Abuse Information Series 2008

This is one of ten booklets in the Sexual Abuse Information Series:

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VISAC (Vancouver Incest and Sexual Abuse Centre) is a program of Family Services of Greater Vancouver. VISAC offers a wide range of services including specialized victim support services, individual and group therapy for children, youth, families, and adults who have experienced childhood sexual abuse and/or trauma.

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This booklet answers these questions:

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Why this booklet?

If you are in an intimate relationship with a person who was sexually abused as a child or teen, this booklet is for you. The information can help you whether you're male or female and whether you're in a gay, lesbian, or heterosexual relationship. For the purposes of this booklet we will be using the female pronoun.

You and your partner are not alone. At least one in four women and one in six men were sexually abused as children. As adults talk more openly about abuse and how it has affected them, their partners will come to understand how the abuse impacts the relationship.

Because sexual abuse affects emotional development, the following aspects of a relationship can be particularly difficult for both of you:

Trust. A child experiences abuse as a betrayal of trust, especially if the abuser was a person she cared about. As a result, your partner might have difficulty in allowing herself to trust or in knowing who to trust.

Power. A child who is sexually abused feels powerless. As an adult, your partner might feel powerless at times and unable to assert herself. At other times she might try to control even the smallest detail to feel safe and more powerful.

Intimacy. An abused child may be afraid to let anyone know her secret and too ashamed to let anyone get close. She learns how to behave as though everything is fine, while keeping her true thoughts and feelings hidden, even from herself. As an adult, that can make intimacy difficult.

Sexuality. Sexual abuse interferes with normal sexual development. Instead of growing up to experience the body as a source of pleasure, your partner may have experienced it as a source of pain. She may think of sex as a form of control rather than an expression of love. As a result, she might withdraw from sex or use sex as a way to get power or affection.

Although we offer a brief discussion, this booklet is not meant to explain child sexual abuse. Instead it focuses on the **effects of abuse** on your partner and on your relationship. We strongly encourage you to learn as much as you can about how people recover from sexual abuse.

In this booklet we also talk about how **you** might react during your partner's recovery. Sometimes it's hard not to get caught up in your partner's issues. Try to find support for yourself outside the relationship through a friend, counsellor, or support group. This will give you a chance to focus on your own feelings and thoughts.

Try to find some support for yourself outside the relationship through a friend, counsellor or partner's support group – or all three.

What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse is the deliberate misuse of power over a child by an adult or an adolescent to gain sexual gratification. The abuser's power may come from being older, bigger or more sophisticated, or from being in a position of trust or authority over the child. The abuse may be in the form of inappropriate sexual remarks, fondling, and/or more violent assaults. Whether your partner's experience involved belittling remarks, uncomfortable sexualized interaction, one-time sexual touching, or long-term abuse, it is important to consider the way in which your partner experienced and reacted to the abuse.

As a person who experienced sexual abuse, your partner may have grown up assuming these things:

- **You can't trust people who are supposed to love and protect you.**
- **Attention and affection are almost always followed by sexual demands.**
- **You don't have control over your body.**
- **Other people's needs come ahead of your own.**
- **You're in danger if you're not in complete control.**

These are the basic legacies of incest or sexual abuse experiences and they can profoundly affect your partner's adult relationships.

You may be unaware at the beginning of the relationship that your partner has experienced sexual abuse. Your partner might not have told you because she was afraid you would reject or not believe her. She might have felt too guilty and ashamed to talk about the abuse. She might have been telling herself the abuse hasn't affected her. Whatever the reason, it's something that happened in her life that she wasn't responsible for, but now profoundly affects both of you.

Can my partner recover from sexual abuse?

YES! Your partner can recover from sexual abuse. Recovery depends on the kind of abuse she experienced, as well as the kind of support she has. There's no "right" length of time or "right" way to recover, but most people go through the following three stages:

The Crisis Stage

"The beginning of this whole thing was really hard. Annie didn't sleep well any more and she was having nightmares. After a while she seemed to resist going to bed so I went to bed alone. She'd stay up and read. Sometimes I'd wake up in the middle of the night alone

and she'd be in the living room with all the lights on, wrapped up in a blanket."

Your partner might be thrown into a crisis as she starts to look at what happened to her. Memories of the events might come in bits and pieces that may not make sense to her. As she struggles with these memories she might doubt the abuse happened and worry that she's going crazy. But she isn't. Her mind is letting information in little by little so she won't be overwhelmed.

If your partner has always known about the abuse but has had little or no feeling about it, she could experience a crisis when she starts to feel the emotional pain connected to the abuse. These feelings may seem overwhelming at first. She might find herself crying without knowing why. She might suddenly be afraid to be alone or withdraw from people. A counsellor can be helpful at this stage to help her learn skills to manage these thoughts and feelings.

The crisis stage is easier to go through if you understand what's happening.

The crisis stage is easier to go through if you understand what's happening. One way to find out is to call a sexual assault centre and talk to a counsellor. They can explain more about what your partner is going through and will give you some ideas on how to handle it.

The Middle Stage

"She kept digging into her past. I thought it would never stop. It was as if she had to go back to all the important times and people in her life and look at them again and again. She had to see what her childhood was really like; what her family was really like."

When your partner decides to deal with the abuse, she'll enter a stage of hard emotional work. She will struggle with details of the abuse, struggle to express her feelings about it, and to integrate the memories. This means she has to acknowledge how deeply she has been affected by the abuse. She'll experience emotional upheaval which may include grief and anger. However, she'll probably be relieved, too, when some of her feelings and behaviours start to make sense to her.

Although you might wish your partner would hurry and get on with recovery, she can do it only when she's ready. If she's worried about whether she can do it, encourage her to talk to a counsellor, or do some reading. If your partner is anxious about how it will affect your relationship, you could talk to a counsellor together about concerns and about what you might do to help.

Don't pressure your partner. The decisions along the way aren't easy and your partner must make them for her own reasons, not to please you. If you feel impatient or frustrated, talk to a counsellor or find a support group for yourself.



Resolution

"We've had quite a time, but it's easier now. The abuse still comes up but it's not the centre of her life or mine. And what a relief that is!"

Through her efforts, your partner can recover. This doesn't mean she'll never think about the abuse again, nor does it mean everything is sorted out. However, it does mean she'll be free to concentrate on what's happening in her life now. When problems related to the abuse do come up, she'll feel more confident about handling them.

As a partner you'll be involved and affected by every stage of the recovery process. Knowing how recovery works can help you support your partner without feeling overwhelmed.

Do other partners react the way I am reacting?

"I just can't believe her big brother did all those things to her. I've played football with him. I've drunk beer with him, and we've swapped jokes. To me he just seems like a regular guy. Maybe somebody else did it, and she just imagines it was her brother."

Disbelief is a common reaction to a sexual abuse disclosure. It's hard to accept that the abuser might be someone you know or even like. Recent studies show that one out of four women and one out of six men experienced child sexual abuse. You may feel repelled by the thought that your partner has been sexually abused, and you may want to deny it. Your belief will support her first step towards healing. Your denial, on the other hand, could increase her sense of shame and further lower her feelings of self-worth.

"Okay, I believe it, but enough's enough. If she would just put it aside, and get on with her life, we'd both be better off. You can't undo the past, and crying over spilled milk only makes things worse. We can both go ahead from here and have a wonderful life together."

Minimizing the abuse and its impact is tempting, but it doesn't help. Remembering the abuse and telling you about it is only the first step towards recovery for your partner. Now she needs to experience and

make sense of her conflicting thoughts and feelings. To do this she'll probably need help from a trained trauma counsellor. She'll need patience, understanding and love from you.

"Patience and understanding are one thing, but let's get at the source of the problem and do something. Her father has wrecked her life, and now he's wrecking mine. I want to kill him."

Your **anger at the abuser** is understandable, but violence won't help your partner. She needs to decide her own course of action. While she was being abused she was powerless, and if you try to control the situation now, her power is being taken away again. With the help of a counsellor you can find constructive ways for you to channel your anger.

"Everything was going fine until she watched that TV show. She wasn't even thinking about sexual abuse until she saw all those other women talking about it. Now she won't leave the subject alone."

You might feel **angry at your partner** for talking about the abuse, and then guilty for feeling angry.

"I knew something was wrong in our relationship, but I just couldn't figure it out. Sometimes she didn't want sex, and sometimes she did. She was always upset and it seemed like we couldn't just relax and enjoy ourselves. Then she started accusing me of having affairs if I even talked to another woman. And then she kept telling me I'd probably walk out on her. It was driving me crazy. Thank god she started to deal with the abuse. All that behaviour is starting to make sense to me now."

You might feel **relief** after your partner starts talking about the sexual abuse. It helps you understand behaviours that may have baffled you for years. Problems with sexuality, intimacy, and trust can be the result of childhood sexual abuse.

Knowing how recovery works can help you support your partner without feeling overwhelmed.

"The abuse is no longer the centre of our life. And what a relief that is!"

"I'm glad she's talking about it, and I'm glad I understand her behaviour a little better, but where does that leave me now? I don't have a degree in psychology, and I'm afraid something I do or say could make things worse for her. And what if I touch her or do something in bed that really upsets her?"

You might feel **inadequate** coping with some of the changes in your partner when she is on the road to recovery. Remind yourself that you are not the cause of these changes, and you shouldn't take it personally when she is angry or doesn't want to be touched.

"Why am I in so much pain? She looks like the same person, and I'm still in love with her, but she seems so different. It's like living with a stranger, and I really miss the old person. I know she's getting better, but where does that leave me?"

You might experience **grief** as you see your partner change. Remind yourself that she is the same person. Experiencing personal changes can be as exciting and stressful for you as it is for her. You have to trust and be patient with her healing process.

As the partner, what can I do to help?

Any loving relationship needs the ongoing support and understanding of both partners. However, to be the partner of someone who is dealing with child sexual abuse takes extra understanding and patience.

Here's what you can do to help:

- **Believe** your partner and resist the temptation to minimize the abuse.
- **Listen** to your partner. If the abuser was a close relative, she may have positive feelings for her as well as angry feelings. She needs to be able to form her own opinions without your attempts to influence them.
- **Support** your partner's plans to deal with the abuse, but don't try to control what she does. Your partner has to decide such things as whether to go into counselling, whether to join a

support group, and whether to take some kind of action against the abuser. Your task is to support these important decisions whatever they might be. If you try to interfere, she'll feel that once again someone is trying to control her life. If her family tries to influence what she does, you can help by supporting her decisions.

- **Maintain a separate identity.** You'll help your partner if you focus on your own needs as well as hers. In any healthy relationship both partners make sure that their own needs are met. Whether one or both partners experienced sexual abuse, this basic principle still applies.
- **Be a trusted friend.** This means being there for your partner when she wants to talk, providing company when she wants it, and respecting her privacy when she wants it. It means being patient, especially when she wants to talk about the abuse or retell the story of her abuse.
- **Cooperate with your partner's requests around sexual activity.** She may want to avoid sexual activity or even ask for temporary sexual abstinence. If she makes this request, it's probably because sexual activity is triggering painful memories of sexual abuse. Temporary abstinence may seem difficult, but you can treat it as an opportunity to express your loving feelings with affectionate touching and non-sexual intimacy.

To be the partner of someone who is dealing with childhood sexual abuse takes extra understanding and patience.

What about me? How can I look after my own needs?

Being the partner of someone who experienced sexual abuse can be both an ordeal and a rewarding experience. Greg's story illustrates some of the things that can happen to you as your partner recovers:

Greg's story

When Greg met his wife, Linda, she was in counselling because of sexual abuse by her grandfather. When they began a sexual relationship, Greg noticed that she resisted intimacy. She would always wear pyjamas to bed and never let him see her naked. Greg thought this meant that she was modest. Linda owned a successful computer software business and Greg worked as a journeyman welder. He was flattered that a "professional" woman was interested in a "working-class" man like himself, and was even more flattered when she agreed to marry him.

Linda told Greg about her grandfather after they were married. Greg supported her counselling and made a lot of aggressive comments about her grandfather. He saw himself as a "white knight" who had rescued her from an evil family.

As Linda's counselling progressed, the relationship deteriorated. Instead of becoming more comfortable with her body, she still wore pyjamas to bed, and frequently resisted Greg's sexual overtures. When he persisted, she told him that he was "a sex fiend".

Then Linda accused Greg of attempting to control her, of being a chauvinist, and of flirting with other women. Eventually Greg lost patience. He told her to get on with her counselling so they could have a normal sex life. She accused him of emotional violence. In desperation Greg made an appointment to see a counsellor himself.

The counsellor asked Greg to look at some of the assumptions he had made about Linda. Greg found that Linda's "modesty" was, in fact, a reaction to being sexually abused by her grandfather. The counsellor also helped Greg separate what was true about Linda's accusations, from her perceptions of him that were distorted by the abuse. He had to acknowledge, for example, that his aggressive

Respect your own boundaries and set limits if your partner's behaviour becomes abusive.

"white knight" approach was chauvinistic and controlling, and that Linda's perception of him as a "sex fiend" wasn't valid.

The counsellor also helped Greg see that he had idealized Linda as a middle-class achiever who had done him a favour by marrying him, and that this was quite unrealistic. This in turn led Greg to see how his self-esteem had been impacted by his own upbringing. In the end, he was able to be more supportive of Linda because he had a better sense of his own self-worth.

He learned not to assume that he was automatically wrong when Linda attacked him. As Greg became more realistic about her, he gave up playing the "white knight". When Linda felt more in control of her recovery, she stopped her verbal attacks. Greg also learned how to build greater non-sexual intimacy into their relationship. They both benefited in many ways from counselling.

Greg's story contains several important principles for a healthy relationship. They are:

- **Recognize and assert your own needs.** Respect your own boundaries and set limits if your partner's behaviour becomes abusive. If you frequently place your partner's needs ahead of your own, it is not healthy and may stand in the way of her recovery and your own emotional well-being.
- **Look at the role you played in your own family.** If you were the one who "took care of everything" in your family, you run the risk of carrying that role into your relationship. It may feel good but it isn't healthy.
- **Make sure that you have support outside your intimate partner relationship.** This support may be a counsellor, a friend, a support group, or all three.
- **Enjoy your relationship for what it really is,** and try not to make it conform to some idealized model. Your own family may have created a false picture of what family life is, and the media often contributes to unrealistic expectations of what family life looks like.

What if I was sexually abused as a child myself?

Jill's story

Both my parents drank a lot. As the oldest kid, I took care of everyone in my family. I did what I was supposed to and never asked for anything. I felt invisible. After I finished school, I fell madly in love with Jack. No one had ever wanted me like he did. After a wonderful year together Jack began to remember being sexually abused as a child. I tried to help but I was angry. It seemed unfair that I'd finally found someone who loved me and now we had to deal with this big issue.

His family tried to be supportive but I was the only one he talked to about the abuse. Listening to him exhausted me and after six months, I was completely drained. Then my own sexual abuse experiences started to surface.

I was frightened, knowing how much support Jack had needed. I wondered who was going to take care of me the way I was taking care of him. Certainly not my family! I felt like Humpty Dumpty, about to fall apart with no one to put me together again. I couldn't tell anyone. I kept it all inside. I was sick all the time. Finally I had to tell my doctor and she was great. She helped me get the support and counselling I needed, and I started to feel better.

I began to see how hard the last year had been. I had managed without asking for help, because that's what I had to do as a kid. No one ever cared about how I was doing and I thought that's how it always had to be. Now I know it isn't. I've had help from my doctor, my counsellor, my friends and my partner. It was a relief to tell Jack about it and he was shocked to realize I had the same needs he had. I guess we'd been going along almost like a parent and child. Now I've learned how to ask for support and he's learned he has something to give me.

If your partner's recovery process has reminded you of your own sexual abuse, you might have these reactions: *anger* that coping with your partner's recovery has triggered your own abuse experiences; *fear* that you can't continue to support your partner in the same way; and *panic* at the thought of going through what your partner has gone through.

If you tell yourself your abuse was less serious and your needs can wait, you'll create a major problem in your relationship. Your partner's recovery could take time and you'll become angry and resentful if you put your own needs on hold. Remember, your first responsibility is to yourself. If you don't take care of yourself, you can't support your partner or the relationship.

In recovering from the trauma of sexual abuse, you'll both have to take turns giving and receiving support. Also you'll both need support outside of the relationship, from friends, a counsellor, or a support group.

What is a partners' support group and how can it help me?

A support group is made up of partners of adults who experienced sexual abuse as a child. Most groups meet once a week and the purpose is to help each other through difficult times.

People will probably talk about what has happened during the week and about their problems, frustrations and successes. You don't have to talk if you don't want to, and everything that is said in the group should be confidential.

You'll have a chance to express your feelings and frustrations and to learn from what other people have to say. You will be encouraged when you hear from group members who are further along in the process. In a partners' support group you don't have to worry about your partner's reactions to what you say and you will be with people who understand what you're talking about.

To find out whether there are partners' groups in your community, contact a sexual assault centre or counselling centre.

What if my partner and I are a same-sex couple?

If you and your partner are the same sex, the issues are similar: the recovery process is similar and the principles for supporting your partner are the same. If your family and friends are not supportive of your relationship, this can be an added stress.

To find out if there are partners' support groups in your community, contact a sexual assault or counselling centre.

How will recovery affect our family?

Parenting

Your children might suffer at first from your partner's recovery. They will probably sense the stress, and wonder whether they are causing it. You can help your children by explaining to them that their mom and/or dad is upset by childhood memories that make them sad or angry, and that those feelings sometimes make them impatient and cranky. Keep the explanation short and simple, and reassure them that they're not responsible for their parents' feelings.

Your partner could be under additional stress if, when she was abused, she was the same age as one of your children. Be aware of this possible connection, but don't share this with your children as it may be very confusing to them.

If your partner is putting a lot of effort into recovery, and is feeling exhausted, you can help by taking on extra responsibility for the children. Plan to have fun with them while you give your partner time to rest.

Extended Family

Your partner's recovery will affect the way you relate to her family, especially if the abuser was a family member. If the family failed to protect her in the past, or disbelieves her now, they'll probably want her to keep quiet about it. Your task is to support her, especially if they pressure her to retract the story.

If your partner was abused by a family member, other family members may have been abused as well. When your partner discloses her sexual abuse to one family member, there could be a "snow-ball" effect with several family members disclosing their abuse as well. If your partner's grandfather

was an abuser, for example, and the family secret is that he had abused several of his own children, your partner's disclosure could set the stage for disclosures by several family members, including her own parent.

Whether your partner tells her family about the abuse or not should be entirely her choice. It depends on a number of circumstances, but both of you should be aware of how her family might react. Your role is

to support your partner, whatever her choices may be, not to rescue her or avenge the abuse.

You'll also have to decide whether or not to tell your own family about your partner's abuse. To make that choice, you'll have to ask your partner whether she wants you to talk about it. Then you'll have to think about the impact this will have on your family. If you think they'll support both you and your partner, tell them. If you think they'll respond in a negative way, don't.

All relationships have rocky periods. What makes the difference is whether you work on the problems together.

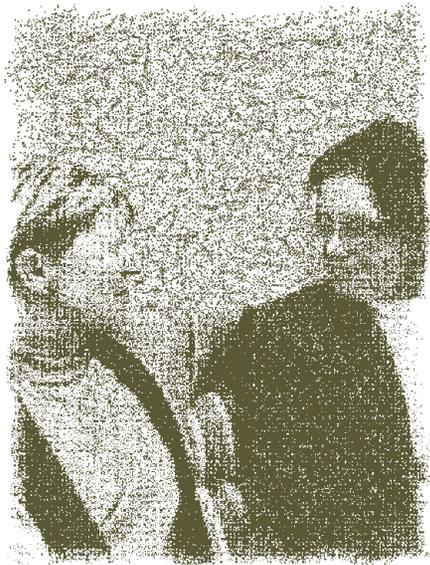
Is there life after recovery?

YES! All relationships have periods when one or both partners have problems. What makes a difference is whether you talk about and work on the problems together. The abuse might affect a relationship right from the start, even when you know nothing about it. When you find out about the abuse, then you know what you're dealing with and have a better chance of solving the problems as they come up.

The communication and support you develop while you do this will establish a sense of trust so that you'll be able to talk safely about even the most sensitive, vulnerable issues. That's a sound foundation for any relationship.

For life after recovery, remind yourself of these guidelines:

- **Continue to communicate your love.**
- **Be caring in your actions.**
- **Be aware of your own needs and limits.**
- **Communicate your needs and limits to your partner.**
- **Spend time with each other that is not focussed on the sexual abuse.**
- **Enjoy each other's company and remember why you chose to be together in the first place.**



*Additional resources are available at your community resource centre,
your local library or the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence.*

For life after recovery, remind yourself to spend time together that's not related to sexual abuse. Have fun and remember why you chose to be together in the first place.