

Why Can't She Forget

*Information for Partners of Women who were
Sexually Abused in Childhood*

Intimacy

When a child is sexually abused, the abuser is usually someone the child loves and trusts. The abuse betrays that trust and denies the child the opportunity of being loved and valued unconditionally. She may feel disgraced or dirtied by what was done to her, and may think that it was something about her that caused her to be abused. (The abuser will often blame the child in order to avoid taking responsibility for his own criminal behaviour.) The child learns to believe that she doesn't deserve to be treated with care and respect. Because the abuse produces such a confusing range of emotions, the child may learn to block out her emotions, or learn that they are not to be trusted.

As an adult she may:

- find it difficult to trust or be close to anyone
- cling to people, seeking the love and approval she was denied as a child
- put other people's needs first because she feels that she does not deserve to have her needs considered
- have difficulty identifying or expressing feelings

You can support her by:

- demonstrating that you can be trusted – making offers or commitments that you are sure you can keep
- asking her what her needs are and how you can help to meet them – supporting her in putting herself first
- respecting her privacy

Sexuality

When a child is sexually abused by an adult, sexual acts are used in a way that makes her feel powerless, humiliated, frightened and betrayed. She has no control over what is happening, no choice in what is done to her body. An adult's sexual agenda has been imposed upon her and as a result, she is denied the opportunity to develop and explore her own sexuality at a natural pace. She may learn to "switch off" and go numb during the abuse. Being abused may be the only time when she receives any attention. She may learn to believe that her only value is sexual.

As an adult she may:

- seek sex to get needs for affection and tenderness met
- avoid sex
- appear to function sexually, while actually being numb during the experience
- experience flashbacks of the abuse during sex – feeling like it's happening all over again

You can support her by:

- letting her control sexual interactions – only doing what she feels safe and comfortable with
- letting her know that it's OK to say "no" to you – that her value to you is more than sexual
- offering her non-sexual forms of intimacy – talking, shared activities, holding hands, hugs, backrubs etc.

Control

Control is the central feature of the sexual abuse of children. Children are extremely vulnerable and powerless people who are highly reliant on adults – they are taught to trust and obey the adults in their lives. Adults can use their position of power to act out their own inadequacies by abusing someone over whom it is very easy to have control. The child experiences having no control over her body and her life, as well as feeling guilty and responsible for abuse which she was powerless to stop.

Regaining a sense of control and personal power in her life is essential in healing from childhood sexual abuse.

Men in western society are taught to expect that they are in control, that they should take the lead in relationships. Because you care about your partner, and are aware that the effects of the abuse are painful for her, you may be tempted to make decisions for her – like telling her to just forget about it, or taking her to a psychiatrist because you are worried about her. However, all this does is reinforce her feelings of lack of control in her life. No matter how much you care, she is the only one who knows what her needs are.

The most important thing that you can give your partner is support in making her own choices. You can help her by letting her know what you are able to offer her, what other resources (such as counselling services) are available, and being open to her discussing her options with you.

(The only exception to this is if she is putting her life at risk.)

What is Child Sexual Abuse?

The sexual abuse of children is far more common than most people realise. At least 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 9 boys are abused in childhood. In most cases the abuser is someone known and trusted by the child, and is usually male. Fathers, stepfathers, grandfathers, uncles and brothers are the most common. Abusers are apparently ordinary men who are found across the full range of cultural, socio-economic and geographic groups. The abuse could range from sexual suggestions through to violent rape. It may only happen once, but it is more likely to be a frequent occurrence over an extended period of time.

The most significant and damaging characteristics of child sexual abuse are:

- the misuse of power
- the betrayal of a child's trust and affection
- the denial of a child's right to feel safe and valued
- the violation of a child's personal boundaries and sense of self

Sexual Abuse is a Crime – the Victim is Not to Blame

The abuser knows that what he is doing is wrong, so he attempts to avoid detection. This often includes making the child feel responsible for what he is doing to her, or making threats about what will happen if she tells anyone. The child is kept silent through fear and shame, and the thought that no one would believe her if she told. Unfortunately, when children do tell they are often not believed or supported.

Even as adults, it can be very difficult for survivors to talk about what happened. They often fear being blamed or disbelieved, and it can take great courage to break the silence.

An adult who has experienced childhood sexual abuse has lived through a traumatic experience which can have severe and lasting effects.

She is also a strong, resourceful and courageous person who has survived and coped in whatever ways have been available to her. She deserves support in her attempts to resolve the effects of abuse in her life and develop more positive coping strategies.

Do

- Believe the survivor
- Listen to her
- Recognise the harm that was done to her
- Validate her feelings – pain, fear and anger are natural reactions
- Respect the time and space it takes to heal
- Ask her what she needs from you
- Help out in practical ways
- Respect her strength as a survivor
- Encourage her to get support
- Seek support for yourself (with her permission)
- Seek help if she is suicidal

Don't

- Ignore it
- Take charge
- Blame her
- Sympathise with the abuser
- Press for details of the abuse
- Offer support you can't provide
- Expect her to support you if you have trouble coping with her pain

Further Information

If you would like more information, please contact Victim Support Service on (08) 8231 5626 or view our website at www.victimsa.org