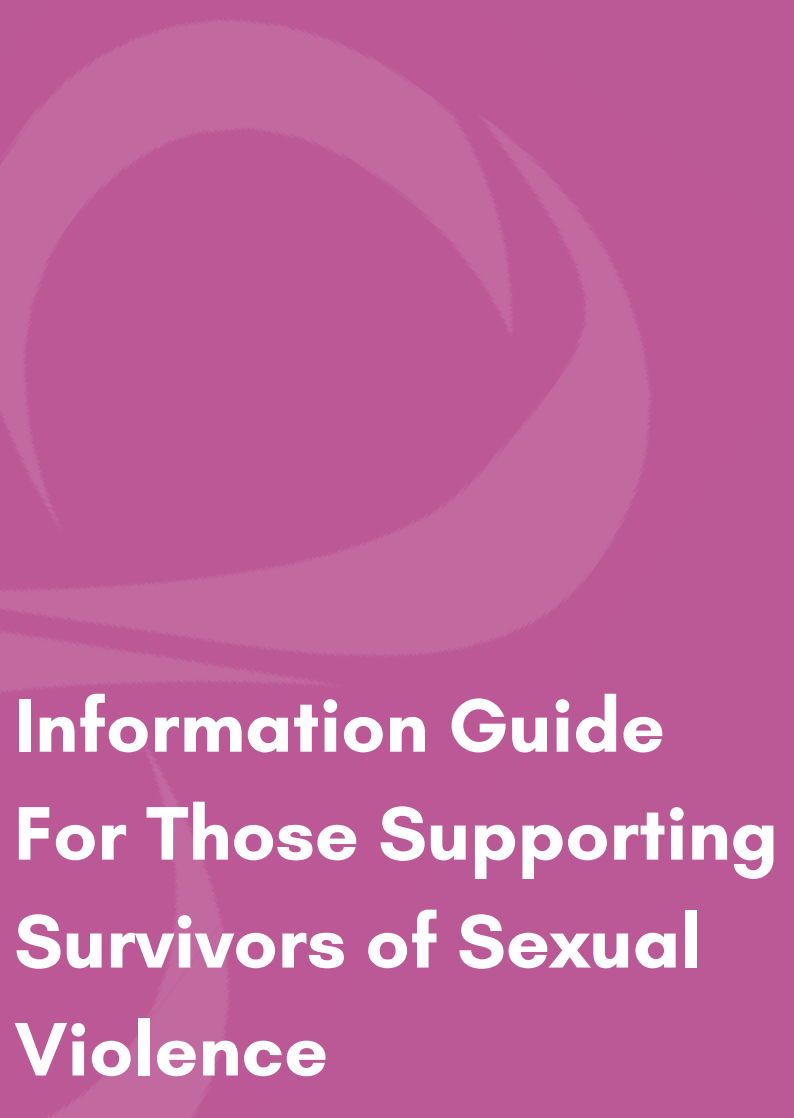




Information Guide For Those Supporting Survivors of Sexual Violence

This booklet contains some general information which you may find helpful when supporting someone you know who has experienced sexual violence. There are sections in this booklet that specifically address family, friends and partners of the survivor to give information on how they can best provide support. If there is something further you feel you may need that is not included within this booklet, our helpline service can also be accessed should you wish to talk to one of our workers. You can contact our helpline by phone (0300 303 4787), live chat (www.rasac.co.uk) or via email (helpline@rasac.co.uk).

Throughout this booklet we will refer to the person who has experienced sexual violence or abuse as a 'survivor' and the person who has carried out the abuse will be referred to as the 'perpetrator'.

Sexual violence and abuse

Sexual violence/abuse refers to any unwanted actions (including being made to witness) that are of a sexual nature. This is a form of control, meaning the survivor had no control, choice or power at the time of the abuse.

Types of sexual violence: (this is not an exhaustive list)

- Parts of the body being touched sexually without consent
- Being made to touch your own body/someone else's in a sexual way
- Being made to watch someone masturbate
- Being coerced to act/model for pornography
- Being watched whilst changing/showering
- Rape – penetration of the anus, mouth or vagina with a penis
- Sexual assault by penetration – objects (including fingers) in the anus, mouth or vagina
- Sexual harassment – any sexual comments or physical advances
- Image Based Sexual Abuse – any images/videos of explicit sexual activity
- Making threats, offering gifts in exchange for sexual acts
- Forced marriage
- So called Honour Based Violence

What prevents a survivor telling people what happened to them?

The majority of sexual violence and abuse is perpetrated by someone known to the survivor. This could be a friend, father, brother, cousin, uncle, aunt, family friend, neighbour, stepfather, stepmother, grandad, etc. This is a known relationship where the trust is betrayed and where there may be an emotional attachment to the perpetrator; this can understandably create confusion and internal conflict for the survivor. The survivor may blame themselves as they may believe that they did something that led to the abuse happening. Please note, this does not mean that sexual violence perpetrated by strangers does not happen, it is just less common.

Sexual abuse is seen as a taboo subject and denial of sexual abuse (by the survivor and their family members, partners and friends) is more prevalent than denial of physical abuse. Perpetrators of sexual abuse use manipulation and tactics to keep the sexual abuse hidden.

This may include:

- Convincing the survivor that the abuse was their fault
- Treating the survivor in a nice way at all other times to confuse them
- Making threats to the survivor if they speak out
- Make the survivor believe this is what love is
- Becoming friends with their family and friends
- The perpetrator may say things like; "you deserved it", "no one will believe you", "if you tell I will hurt someone you care about"

The survivor may therefore believe:

- They will be judged
- They will not be believed
- No one will care or do anything to help
- The abuse was their fault
- The sexual abuse didn't really happen
- They will be punished or sent away
- They will be responsible for hurting the perpetrator if they speak out about the abuse
- No one will love them as they are "damaged"
- The abuse is "normal"
- They may be separated from their family; or that the family will break up
- A family member or pet will be hurt

Not telling anyone about the sexual abuse does not mean that the survivor wanted the abuse, was weak or that they could have stopped it. Not speaking up was the safest option at the time and was the only way that they could cope with the understanding and knowledge that they had at the time.

Remember! – Perpetrators of abuse often choose vulnerable individuals who are less likely to speak out and therefore increase the likelihood that they can get away with abusing.

Trauma responses of sexual violence

After experiencing sexual violence or abuse, a survivor may be impacted by this trauma in different ways. It is important to note that the trauma responses of sexual abuse and violence can vary from person to person and can last a lifetime.

The different trauma responses a survivor may display can be broken down into: Emotional Impacts, Relationship Impacts, Behavioural Impacts and Physical Impacts. On the next page there are some examples of each of these categories, however, this is not an exhaustive list.

Some survivors may seem to have no trauma responses, this is normal.

Emotional

Confused, unfocused or blanking out
Low self-value/worth
Lack of confidence
Feelings of guilt/shame/self-blame
Thinking – critical, overthinking or unable to stop thinking
Dissociation – e.g. losing time
A range of mental health issues (depression, anxiety)
A range of emotions (sadness, anger)

Relationships

Unable to trust people
Unable to feel safe in relationships or avoiding them
Struggles with sexual intimacy
Wanting to live in isolation
Putting other's needs before their own
Feeling sensitive to comments or defensive/attacked

Behaviour

Changes in eating
Changes in sleeping patterns
Withdrawn or isolating self
Self-harm
Flashbacks
Nightmares
Self-destructive behaviours
Over sexualised behaviour
Lack of personal hygiene
Risk taking behaviour
Change of appearance

Physical

Unexplained aches/pains
Repeated illnesses
Numb
Stress related illnesses
Unwanted pregnancy
Sexually transmitted diseases
Miscarriage
Infertility issues
Hair loss
Skin disorders
Gynaecological problems

Supporting your friend

This can help if you are supporting a friend who has experienced any form of sexual violence.

How sexual violence can affect survivors and friendships

Everyone's experience of sexual violence is different as such the impact on survivors' relationships with their friends/friendship groups may differ too. Below are some examples of how sexual violence can impact the friendship:

- Your friend may or may not realise the effect that their abuse has had on themselves, you or your friendship.
- You may have mutual friends or belong to the same group(s) as the perpetrator. If the abuse is known about, other friends/people may take sides. This can be difficult for your friend and your wider friendships.

What can you do?

- Listen to your friends needs, don't tell them what you think they should or shouldn't do.
- Try to 'cut them some slack' and not have too many expectations of them. They may not be able to be much of a friend to you, for now.
- Reassure your friend that you support, respect and believe them. It will help your friend, and you, if the people around you are people you can trust.

Supporting your child

This may help those who are supporting their child/young person who has experienced any form of sexual violence.

Signs of sexual violence and abuse

You may notice that the survivor's behaviour has changed. Younger children and teenagers may exhibit these signs differently. These changes may occur right after the abuse has happened or they may be noticed later.

Possible changes shown by children:

- Fear of certain places or people
- Anxiety – stomach ache or feeling sick
- Changes in eating behaviours
- Sleep problems – nightmares, wetting the bed
- Sexualised behaviour
- Changes in behaviour e.g. low mood, sudden bursts of anger
- Problems at school – not wanting to go or trouble concentrating
- Scared of being touched by people
- Becoming more introverted and withdrawn
- Fearing being left on their own
- Self-harm
- Physical signs of abuse e.g. bruising, sexually transmitted infections

Possible changes shown by older children/teenagers:

- Feeling overwhelmed
- Low mood
- Anxiety, panic attacks
- School problems – absent from school, absconding, trouble concentrating in school
- Self-harm
- Developing eating problems or disorders
- Using alcohol or drugs to cope with emotions
- Becoming more withdrawn e.g. less contact with friends and family
- Becoming secretive – around their phone, where they are going or who they are meeting
- Sleep problems – nightmares, waking up during the night, difficulty falling asleep
- Unexplained healthcare appointments
- Changes in relationships

Talk to your child

Let them know that you are there for them. Don't rush them if they are not ready to talk just yet. Sometimes children don't want to talk to their parents, but might find it helpful to talk to another family member, friend or teacher. Let your child know there is other support out there for them and let them choose what would work best for them.

Supporting your partner

This section is for people who are supporting their partner who has experienced any form of sexual violence.

If your partner has experienced sexual violence, it may affect your relationship, even though you were not the one that hurt them. As a partner, this can be difficult to manage and therefore support the survivor, but it is important to remember that in time things will get easier for both of you.

How might your relationship be affected?

The survivor may struggle to be physical in their relationship. For example, they may not want to touch, kiss, hug or be intimate. The survivor may also not want to talk about what happened to them with you. They may have mood swings which can be difficult to know how to respond. They may be triggered by things that before didn't bother them.

How can you help?

You can help by being there for the survivor. Let them know that there is no pressure to be physically intimate in any way if they are not comfortable and to take this at their own pace.

How you can help with the trauma responses of sexual violence

Believe them.

Even if what the survivor tells you may be hard to hear, believe what they tell you. Survivors of sexual violence and abuse very rarely lie about what has happened to them.

Listen.

It is hard for survivors to talk about what they have experienced, so just listen. Let them talk when they are ready and at their own pace and try not to make any assumptions or ask about any details.

Manage your emotions/response.

If the survivor feels able to talk to you, it can help if you manage how you respond to what they are saying effectively. It may be very upsetting, distressing and shocking listening to, but try to be conscious of the emotions you are showing as the survivor may think that you feel this way towards them e.g. angry. Instead, remain calm and listen.

Provide them with a safe space.

Ensure that the survivor has a space in which they feel they can talk and/or allow their emotions to come out.

Reassure them.

Whenever you can, reassure the survivor that you believe them, and that what happened was not their fault. Let them know you are there for them.

Ask what they need.

Talk to the survivor, ask them what they need or want from you to help them. They may not know right away, that's okay, be patient with them. It is essential that you enable the person to be in control of the way they cope and the support that they receive.

Explore their options.

It is also very important that the survivor feels in control of what happens next. Discuss their options with them, but allow them to make their own choices.

Understanding their emotions, feelings and behaviour will vary.

It is likely that they will experience various different things as they begin the healing process. Although you may find this difficult to cope with at the time, be patient with them. Let them express their emotions how and when they feel comfortable. You can also confirm that all their reactions are okay and normal.

Help them practice self care.

Discuss with them things that they enjoy that may help them when they are feeling down. This may be suggesting things like going for a walk, calling a friend, reading a book, listening to some music – whatever they enjoy doing. Remind them that it is okay to do this and looking after themselves in this way is not selfish but something they deserve to do.

Be informed.

Research trauma responses, coping strategies and how to empower survivors of sexual violence and abuse.

How supporting someone affected by sexual violence or abuse can impact you

Supporting someone you care about can be really tough and it is okay that you are impacted by this. Below are some common reactions to supporting survivors of sexual violence and abuse.

Emotions

- Shocked
- Overwhelmed
- Numb
- Disbelief
- Angry
- Self-blame/guilty
- Helpless
- Alone
- Guilty/confused

Thoughts

- How could I let this happen?
- I feel a mix of emotions
- I feel numb
- It's my fault
- I don't know how to feel
- We will get through this
- Why am I affected by this when it didn't happen to me?

Behaviour

- Isolating self or avoiding people
- Eating problems
- Mood swings
- Sleep changes
- OCD
- Alcohol and drug use
- Difficulty concentrating

Physical

- Feeling unwell
- Chronic pain syndrome
- Weight loss/gain
- Headaches
- Feeling sick
- IBS
- Fatigue

Look after yourself

It is important to take your needs seriously as well as the survivors needs. See below for some examples of how you can do this.

Write things down

It can help to write down your thoughts and feelings.

Go for a walk or do any other physical exercise

Exercise can really help as it releases endorphins in your brain which help to improve your overall mood.

Seek support

This could be from family or friends, (if the survivor is okay with you sharing what has happened) or through agencies.

Grounding exercises

Practising grounding techniques can be really helpful for yourself.

Keep up your hobbies/interests

Continuing to do the things you enjoy, whether it is going for a walk, reading a book, meeting friends; these are all positive things to do.

Further help and support

RASAC provides further information via our website and helpline service which can be contacted via calling, email and webchat | 0300 303 4787 | www.rasac.co.uk | helpline@rasac.co.uk

Rape Crisis England and Wales | 0808 500 2222 | 24/7 Support line | www.rapecrisis.org.uk | Live chat via their website

Young Minds provides support for adults to help them support young people's mental health | 0808 802 5544 | (9.30am - 4pm, Monday - Friday) | www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/

Mosac is a voluntary organisation supporting non-abusing parents | www.mosac.org.uk | 0800 980 1958 (10am - 2pm Monday, Thursday and Friday and 10am-6pm Tuesday and Wednesday)

Thinkuknow provides information for parents and carers who discover that their child has been abused | www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents/

NSPCC is a charity that helps protect and prevent cruelty and abuse to children | 800 800 5000 (Monday to Friday 8am-10pm or 9am-6pm at the weekends) | www.nspcc.org.uk

Family Lives is an organisation to support parents/carers | 0808 800 2222 (9am-9pm Monday to Friday and 10am-3pm weekends) | www.familylives.org.uk/

MIND is a mental health helpline | 0300 123 3393 (9am - 6pm, Monday - Friday (except for bank holidays) | www.mind.org.uk/information-support/helping-someone-else/

Respond is a dedicated support service for abused children with learning disabilities | 020 7383 0700 | www.respond.org.uk/

Parents Protect helps parents/carers to protect children from sexual abuse | 0808 1000 900 | www.parentsprotect.co.uk/

Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre Kirklees, Calderdale and Wakefield

PO Box 230
Huddersfield
HD1 5UY

Helpline: 0300 303 4787

Websites: www.rasac.co.uk

Email: helpline@rasac.co.uk

