

## Guidance for Partners of Survivors of Childhood Abuse

### (Also supporting friends & family)

You are probably reading this because something that happened a long time ago to your partner is having an impact on your relationship now. Perhaps your partner gave this to you to help you understand more about what they are going through and hopefully to ease the pain and confusion that both of you may be feeling.

You may be baffled by some of your partner's reactions to things that seem unimportant to you. Intimacy may have become a problem area in your relationship. Your partner may have started to behave very differently; to cry a lot, to drink a lot, to be terrified or consumed with rage. You may ask, 'Why now? How come something that happened so long ago is now such a big deal?'

The answer to these questions is not always easy to understand, but in many cases, it follows an event which has been stressful or life changing. Things like having a baby, the menopause, moving home, a job change, promotion or redundancy may be the trigger. The death of a close one or children leaving home is often a prompt, as can be starting a new relationship or ending one. Oddly it can be when all is running smoothly that the ogre of abuse intrudes in the form of symptoms that can be destructive.

For many couples struggling with difficulties in their relationship, the here and now conflicts monopolise their attention. It is not always obvious that at the core of the problems is abuse and that it may have occurred decades earlier. Usually it is not until every other option has been exhausted, that couples consider the possibility that abuse in childhood is the cause. It may seem paradoxical, but one of the most recurring dynamics is the fact that victims are often attracted to those that continue the abuse, despite their conscious desire to have a good partner; and if they do find an emotionally healthy loving partner, they nearly always set about destroying that relationship. Often at the heart of this dynamic is a victim's sense of being unworthy of love; coupled with the fact that betrayal has significantly damaged trust.

If the relationship has become unbearable for each or either of you, there may be some challenging choices to make. Be aware you are both victims of the abuse that your partner suffered.

If you are at the end of your tether, you owe it to yourself and to your partner to be honest about how you feel. This can take courage, you may not want to hurt your partner or you may be afraid being honest about your thoughts and feelings will end the relationship. It could also be the case that **you** have problems around trust, being vulnerable and/or communicating honestly and clearly. You may need to consider getting some counselling or other support for yourself. This can be an unsettling time but neither of you are to blame; the situation you find yourselves in is a result of the abuser's crime.

Even if the partner of a survivor is a counsellor, they cannot be expected to counsel their own. Attempting to help in this way should be avoided. Where one can assist, is if there is a need to encourage your partner to get specialist help, and to understand that perhaps you could benefit from some too.

It is also essential that you know where responsibility to support and care is concerned, it is not one way. As the partner not directly abused, you may feel that you must bear all things. Not true! It is likely that you are the stronger one now, but if you don't protect and care for yourself what good are

you going to be to your partner? It is important for you to respond honestly and as normally as possible to your partner; being too accepting of unreasonable behaviour is not good. Protect your own boundaries. **You have responsibilities towards your partner but not for them.** It is helpful for you both to know that ultimately your partner is responsible for their self.

Each of you will need to respect your own and your partner's limitations as you both learn to communicate, trust and support each other in your roles as a couple; not as counsellor / client. Each will need to give the other space and time to process the feelings that will undoubtedly arise. It will be about encouraging one another to take the next step. The good news is that if you do choose to go through healing together, it can be a deeply rewarding and enriching experience for you both.

Healing from childhood abuse requires honesty, courage and commitment from survivors and from those supporting them. Your partner did not choose to be abused and probably did not expect to suffer its long-term effects. Your partner, like most victims, usually escape from the abusive environment during their teens and for a long time the freedom, distractions and momentum of life carry them forward. They seldom realise that the growing emotional and behavioural problems they experience are linked to their history and that one day they will have to choose to deal with it or continue to suffer. On average, it is between 25 to 30 years after the last incidents of abuse that victims disclose.

### **Understanding the Healing Journey**

Every survivor is unique with a unique experience of their abuse history, so all we can do here is cover some of the most common steps.

You may have already found that more emotional chaos and less control is experienced as work commences. It may seem that your partner is coping less well yet these are the ways that most survivors respond in the early stages. The buried trauma and related feelings are rising to the surface and instead of engaging his or her defences; your partner is allowing this distress to live and the pain suffered by their inner child to at last be heard. It is important to accept this. As your partner continues with their work, they will learn where these feelings come from, to whom they are truly directed at and where they belong.

The more you understand about abuse and your partner's own story the more you may be able to help. You may be able to offer comfort to the abused child within your partner who is still in great pain or terrified. Just to hold or hug gently for a few minutes might be all that is needed. There may also be times when you can give your partner a mild reminder that, "that was then, the pain is still here and now ~ but this is a very different time".

You may find that the unpleasant feelings, including hatred and anger are projected onto you. This can be distressing until your partner understands what they are doing. At some point, when calm returns and NOT before you can LIGHTLY ask where the projected feeling really came from and who actually deserves it. Show that you love and care for your partner and that what happened to him or her in the past will never change that.

When children are abused, they lose their sense of worth and sometimes even their sense of self is lost as they disconnect from feelings that are painful. In many cases the abuse had remained a dreadful secret. The secrecy and sense of shame further isolated the child from family and friends. If the child did disclose, the abuser and usually other people, will have blamed the child or insisted that the child was a liar or foolish. Whether or not these things are said out loud, the child's reality

and sense of the world are badly distorted. As adults, most survivors feel and believe the abuse was their fault, even if common sense tells them otherwise. Deep inside most survivors feel there is something bad, wrong and/or dirty at their very core which made the abuse happen. It therefore follows, that survivors do not trust themselves or anyone else. Despite this damage, your partner trusts you enough for the two of you to have got this far. Your honest support can help to reverse the damage and restore their trust in life and their self.

As you learn more about childhood abuse and its long-term effects, many aspects of life with your partner may start to make sense. When children are abused they are humiliated and their real needs and feelings are ignored or belittled. An adult survivor who still represses their feelings may suffer from depression, nightmares, panic attacks or dissociation. They may turn to substance abuse to help suppress the feelings and fill the void left by the absence of self-worth.

Much of the trauma of childhood abuse is stored in the person's body and many survivors suffer from chronic pain and other health problems. Children who are being abused cannot afford to feel the full range of feelings in their bodies. Feelings which may include pain, outrage, confusion and hatred can be blocked. Even pleasant feelings, such as joy, peace and love together with physically pleasurable sensations and sexual arousal can be obstructed. In many cases the child and now the adult will go numb or dissociate from their body. This learnt defence mechanism may become more noticeable during healing. When upset, threatened, or sexually aroused, even in minor ways, survivors may 'click out'. When with your partner you may feel alone or you may notice nothing unusual at the time but later wonder why your partner does not recall conversations and experiences.

Remember that for your partner, even pleasant feelings such as contentment, joy and pleasure may be linked to the abuse and this will be frightening. This can be especially true during healing when fear and pain is close to the surface and not fully understood.

Child sexual and physical abuse is a profound violation of power. It may involve acts of extreme violence and cruelty, or there may be no physical contact at all. It involves a betrayal of trust, a breaking of boundaries and destruction of the survivor's sense of self. At one extreme, it may be hard for you to see what was so awful about your partner's experience. More likely, you find it so shocking that it is hard to believe or take in. A lot of people do not want to know or believe some of the horrible crimes perpetrated against children and you also may find it difficult. It may take time for you to understand or fully accept your partner's experience but it is crucial that you believe them.

For your partner to tell you of the abuse and find that your love for them is not diminished can be deeply valued. It challenges their belief that the abuse made them unlovable and opens the way for a new level of intimacy. It is not necessary for you to know everything; you may feel overburdened. Find a balance that works. Most modern therapy no longer requires survivors to recall detail; doing so can re-traumatise the victim and hinder progress. The sense of shame and the fear of losing your love may be too great in the early stages; however, once the feelings of shame, blame and guilt have been resolved it is common for survivors to be able to disclose what is necessary when and if appropriate. It can be a measure of work well done!

If your partner was abused within their group of family and friends, you may find that relations with these people need to be very different now. Your partner may not want to see them or may want to confront individuals with what they did or didn't do. Many survivors feel even more anger towards those they feel failed to protect them than they do towards the abuser/s. Your role is to respect your

partner's feelings and help in ways you can. Your partner may want you there during a face to face confrontation; if so help to plan and prepare for it with professional help if you can.

Make sure you know beforehand how much they want you to say or do, or whether you are there just to provide silent support. You may have strong reactions yourself to hearing the denials, putdowns and lies, but it is very important that you do not act in any way without their permission. An aspect of abuse is powerlessness and if you make decisions and take control it may amplify this dynamic. Confrontations can be a difficult but rewarding for your partner, if you struggle here it is more likely that it is to do with your material and the wise option is to seek counselling and support for yourself.

Living with someone who is going through such profound explorations and changes may prompt you to look again at your own past. This can be a valuable experience for you. The temptation can be to see all problems as part of the survivor's issues, but that is unlikely. Everyone comes to relationships with some baggage from their past and although yours may not be to do with childhood abuse, it will be there nonetheless. Be as gentle with yourself as you are with your partner and view this time in your lives as a mutual journey. You too can learn to look deep, speak about your feelings, motives, hopes and fears.

Many survivors find ways to laugh as well as cry; you and your partner can too. Encourage your partner to laugh and to take breaks from it all. If that is not possible, find small pockets of pleasure for yourself. This can be a long process and you each need to raise your spirits whenever and however you can.

You will need compassion and patience, resourcefulness and humour.

See Books for Partners & Families in the DABS Directory Book List section