
Supporting an Adult Who Discloses Childhood Sexual Abuse

Content warning: This material contains information that may be distressing.

Many people first hear about childhood sexual abuse when a person is an adult, rather than a child. When this happens, it's common to feel shocked, sad, angry, helpless, or worried about saying the wrong thing.

You don't need to be a professional to respond well. What matters most is being calm, patient and respectful, and showing care and understanding. Above all, it is important for the person to know that you believe them.

Understanding disclosure

Disclosure is usually a process, rather than a single conversation. Adults may share a little at first and more over time, especially if they feel safe and supported.

Many people delay disclosure for years and sometimes for decades. There are lots of reasons for this and they include shame, fear, self-blame, concern about being believed, or worry about how sharing about their abuse might affect others. Disclosing is not easy for anyone.

Adults often take time to decide who seems to be a safe person for them to share their experience with. They may take time to observe how different people they know talk about abuse, consent, or blame before speaking up. A calm, respectful and non-judgemental response helps survivors know they are not alone and that it is safe for them to share.

What should I do when someone starts to disclose to me?

1 Stay calm and listen – this is often easier said than done but is very important:

- Let the person speak without interrupting them
- Don't try and fill the silences
- Make sure your body language and facial expressions are warm and supportive
- Be patient as disclosing about sexual abuse experienced as a child takes a lot of courage and is far from easy.

It is not your job to try and fix anything. What is important is that you are empathic and supportive, and create as safe a space as possible

Your role is to be safe.

2 Show the person that you believe them, that you understand and that you are there by saying things such as:

- *"I believe you."*
- *"Thank you for telling me."*
- *"It wasn't your fault."*
- *"I'm so sorry this happened to you."*
- *"I'm here."*

Being believed matters a lot and that doesn't change because the abuse happened a long time ago.

3 Enable the person to feel and be in control

When a person is sexually abused as a child they lost all say and control. Feeling in control now helps people feel safer:

- Enable the person to decide what to share and when
- Don't push the person for any details they are not choosing to share
- Don't take over or try and rush the person

It can be helpful to say: *"You can share as much or as little as you want. We can go at your pace."*

4 Always respect the person's privacy

- Ask the person what confidentiality means to them
- Be clear that you won't share anything the person is telling you unless they provide their permission (other than legal requirements)
- Don't tell anyone else unless the person agrees (or someone is in immediate danger)

Consider saying something such as: *"If I am concerned for your safety or the safety of someone else I may need to seek further support for you."*

5 Ask the person what they need right now

This might include:

- Listening
- Offering to check in with them later
- Suggesting support options



What not to do

Don't ask for graphic details.

This is intrusive and can be retraumatizing and distressing. Focus instead on how the person is feeling right now and what they need to help them feel safe.

Don't minimise or explain the abuse away.

Avoid comments like *"At least..."*, *"It was a long time ago"*, or *"They probably didn't mean it."* Despite these comments being well intentioned they can be dismissive and very hurtful.

Don't question the decisions the person made

Avoid asking why the person didn't report, fight back, or tell someone sooner. These questions can cause the person to feel more shame than they already feel. Instead, acknowledge their strength in surviving what happened to them.

Don't use pity.

Be respectful, empathic and compassionate. See the person as someone with a lot to offer rather than solely as someone who was harmed.

Don't share your own or someone else's trauma story during a first disclosure.

This can feel overwhelming or dismissive. Only share such stories later and only if you are invited to, or if it is clearly helpful for them.

Don't let your own emotions take over.

Having strong reactions (anger, distress, shock) is to be expected but strong feelings can feel frightening and create quite a load. Try to stay level-headed and if you need support, look for it after the conversation.

After the disclosure: how to support a person over time

Bringing the issue up safely

Some people find it hurtful when they've trusted you enough to share their abuse and you never mention it again. A gentle check-in can help.

You might ask the person things like:

- *"How are you going today?"*
- *"Is there anything you'd like from me this week?"*

When you check in:

- Always make sure you're in a private space which is as safe for the person as possible
- Keep your conversation as natural, calm and gentle as possible
- Ask permission first: *"Is now a good time to take about what happened to you?"*

Support the person to find professional help without putting pressure on them

Offer the person a choice:

- *"Would it help to call a helpline together?"*
- *"Would you like help finding a trauma-informed counsellor?"*
- *"I can sit with you while you make the call, if you want."*

Let the person decide what feels right.

Reporting: support the person's choice and timing

Reporting is an option, but it is not an obligation. Many survivors worry about not being believed, having to retell their story, or being re-traumatised.

If the person wants to explore their options:

- Help them find clear, reliable information
- Offer to go with them or support an online report
- Respect their decision if they choose not to report or if they decide they are not ready now

N.B. It is important to not report historical childhood sexual abuse on behalf of an adult survivor without their knowledge and consent, unless specific legal obligations apply.

If the abuse happened in an institution, you might direct the person to the National Redress Scheme, a Redress Support Service and/or other options. Again this is always at the person's pace and their choice.

Take care of yourself too

Supporting someone who was sexually abused as a child can be emotionally demanding. You may need:

- Your own counselling or debriefing
- Plenty of rest and clear boundaries
- A trusted person to talk to (without sharing identifying details)

Looking after yourself helps you stay calm, steady and supportive.

Support services

If you or the person you are supporting are in immediate danger, call 000.

For a comprehensive list of support services click [HERE](#)

