
Disclosing Childhood Sexual Abuse as an Adult

Content warning: This information may be distressing for some people.

Many people who were sexually abused as children do not tell anyone about their abuse until they are adults. Some people never tell anyone. Many people who do disclose, share their experiences gradually over time rather than all at once.

What do we mean by disclosure?

Disclosure means telling someone that you experienced sexual abuse as a child. This might involve sharing what happened or talking about how those experiences affected you.

Disclosure is different for each person. You might:

- Tell one person, or several
- Share once, or more often over a period of time
- Disclose gradually, adding more detail when you feel ready to do

There is no right or wrong way to disclose. It is always your choice whether to tell, who to tell, and how much to share. What matters is going at your own pace and doing what feels safest for you.

Why can it take a long time to tell?

It is common for it to take a long time to be ready to disclose, if at all. This is because many survivors blame themselves (a child is never to blame) for what happened or fear that they won't be believed. Some people worry about how sharing might affect their family and their relationships or are concerned about their privacy, and whether it will be respected.

What can lead someone to disclose as an adult?

People often spend a long time thinking about who to tell and when to tell. Sometimes life events or changes prompt a person to disclose such as:

- Wanting to protect other children
- Contact with the person who caused the harm
- Hearing other people's stories, including in the media
- Recognising that what happened was abuse
- Having children reach the age they were when abused
- A key person dying who they were protecting by staying silent
- Major life events such as becoming a parent, separating, losing a loved one or becoming ill

Sometimes there is no apparent reason as to why a person chooses to disclose at a certain time; it may happen in a conversation in which the person feels safe enough to start sharing. There is no one reason or right time to disclose. What matters is that deciding to do so feels right for you.

How can disclosure be as safe as possible?

1 Choose the safest choices where you can

Think about:

- **Who feels the safest person for you?**
(A friend, partner, family member, GP, counsellor)
- **What response do you need?**
(To be believed, listened to, not judged or pressured)
- **How much do you want to share right now?**
(It is your choice how much you want to share – you don't have to tell everything)
- **What support will you have after you share?**
(Will there be a check-in? Can you call a helpline? Talk to a counsellor?)

Many survivors observe how the person they are thinking about sharing with responds to conversations about harm, consent, or victim-blaming before deciding to share with them.

2 Consider what you need in order to feel safe when sharing your story

Being abused takes away any control and leaves you with no choice. Telling your story in your own way can help you reclaim control. This is because you decide:

- Who you tell
- When you tell
- How much you share
- Whether it stays private
- Whether you report the abuse or not

You can set the boundaries and ask the person to keep your information confidential. It is also important to ask for what you need – such as having someone know this happened, being listened to and not being given advice.

And remember – you don't need to share any details if you're not ready to do so.

3 Go at your own pace

There is no right time to disclose. Many people share their experience in sections, checking whether the response feels safe before sharing more.

You can pause, stop, or take breaks at any time. If you are asked why you didn't tell sooner or didn't report, you don't ever need to justify yourself. You did what you needed to do to survive and that shows your strengths.

4 Share what is important to you and your experience

You don't need to share any graphic or detailed information when you disclose. Some people find it helpful to connect with a professional to share further details, ensuring that you get the support you deserve in that moment. What matters is how the abuse has affected you.

You might talk about:

- how you're feeling now
- how the abuse has affected your feelings of safety, ability to trust, to have healthy relationships, or your how your body feels and responds
- the support you need now and going forward

5 If the response you receive is not supportive or what you hoped for

This is about the other person and not you... so if a person is dismissive, blaming, judgemental, or focuses on the details of what happened to you, this can be very distressing. Always remember that the person's response does not reflect the truth of what happened to you.

You deserve to be treated with empathy, respect, compassion and understanding. If this doesn't happen it's your choice as to what happens next. You might stop the conversation there and then and decide not to share any further with that person. Instead you might decide to reach out to someone else who is more supportive and with whom you feel safe, including a professional.

6 You are more than what happened to you

While being abused needs to be acknowledged and working through it can feel overwhelming at times, many survivors don't want to be defined solely by their abuse. Being abused is part of a person's experience and not all of who they are.

This does not mean the abuse is dismissed or minimised or not acknowledging that it takes time to heal as well. It is about respect, connection and ongoing support which responds to changing needs over time, with each person saying what they need and when.

7 Naming and meaning

Some survivors find healing in naming the abuse and finding words to describe its impact. This can happen in talking it through, writing about it and expressing it in other creative ways. Through connection and relationships of healing.

Support Services

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

For an extensive list of resources click [HERE](#)

