

How To Be A Supportive Partner/Family Member/Friend If The Man You Care About Was Sexually Abused

(Note: For simplicity of writing style, each of these guidelines are written with the language of a partner relationship; however, each of these guidelines are equally applicable if you are a friend or family member of a male who has been the victim of sexual abuse.)

Respect your partner's privacy. Allow your partner to exercise his judgment about what, if any, details of his sexual abuse he is comfortable disclosing to you and what information he prefers to address only in his therapy.

Respect your partner's right to confidentiality. If your partner is comfortable sharing details of his sexual abuse with you, be sure to establish proactive ground rules for what, when, or if any aspects of your partner's healing and recovery is acceptable disclosure to others – and, if so, to whom, by which of you, and in what circumstances.

Avoid the role of becoming your partner's therapist.

Learn & practice mindfulness. Use these skills to ground and center yourself during stressful times.

Be a good listener; talk less.

Learn the healing power of silence shared.

Don't confront your partner's the abuser(s) yourself. Your most loving response is to allow your partner to decide whether and when any kind of confrontation is appropriate to his healing and recovery. Allowing him full ownership of this decision communicates your trust in his journey towards healing and recovery.

Sexual abuse is a violation of physical contact so it is normal that survivors are sometimes very moody in their feelings of safety concerning physical touch, even from those with whom they are closest. It is best that you adopt a stance of asking permission *each time* you are inclined to touch him.

When faced with reactions from your partner that seem extreme in their content and/or intensity, use your mindfulness skills to ground and center yourself – this may contribute moderating energy to help move your partner back towards his middle ground.

It is important that you share your genuine feelings with your partner. It is a sign that you care and that he matters to you. It is not helpful to withhold your emotions. It is O.K. to cry if you feel sad when he tells you about what happened to him. But challenge your partner if he abandons his own feelings in order to respond to your emotions.

It is important that you find a safe place to express and process *your* emotions.

It is important to request emotional support from your partner concerning feelings/issues other than his healing and recovery; this can help him to feel valued and will facilitate him finding a healthy balance between your relationship and his recovery.

Although the details of your partner's abuse may be very compelling, do not allow this to become the sole focus of your attention. It is more important that you pay attention to the emotional aspects of his abuse and everything that surrounded his efforts to survive his personal trauma.

It doesn't help to tell him what to do or how to feel.

Allow him to progress through his healing at his own pace. Try not to minimize or orchestrate his feelings.

Be patient.

Consider ways that you can stretch to accommodate reasonable requests for special attention or safeguards. For example, if he is afraid to answer the phone for fear that it will be the person who abused him, then accept more responsibility for answering the phone or help by securing a voice mail function or caller ID.

Find a balance between supporting your partner and maintaining healthy activities that extend beyond supporting his healing and recovery.

If both of you are survivors, differentiate between issues that are yours, that are his, and that are ours.

Reassure your partner that you support his healing and recovery activities and that you intend to stay around.

Learn to view intimacy as a continuum, with sexual contact being just one place along that continuum. Explore those areas of intimacy along the continuum that may be safe and available for you and your partner. Sexual contact also exists on a continuum and is not an all or nothing proposition: consider whether there are some kinds of sexual contact that may be less vulnerable as triggering responses to your partner.

Remind your partner that you care about him.

Treat partner as a worthwhile person.

Treat *yourself* as a worthwhile person.

Keep your friendships active; use your support network when times are hard for you.

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*Some information in these guidelines is drawn from the contributions of Mic Hunter, author of **Abused Boys** (1990).*