

Help!



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It can come like a bolt out of the blue if someone close to you tells you, without any warning, that they were abused as a child. Perhaps it is your partner, an adult son or daughter or even a close friend who has confided in you. CCPAS has produced this booklet to help you through some of the many challenges you will be facing and having to deal with. You are not alone, and we hope you can draw some comfort from this fact through the comments (in blue) of someone known to CCPAS whose partner disclosed one day without any warning that they had been abused in childhood.

How did I react?

Your reaction is likely to be one of shock, repulsion and anger. After all this is someone you care deeply about! Your mind will be buzzing with questions; 'Why didn't they tell me before, what actually happened, who did it?' The effect of these revelations may be compounded by your loved one not being able to give you the answers you are so desperately seeking. They may be overwhelmed by the release of their own emotions and oblivious to the effects on those around them and unable to cope with your pain as well as their own.

How should I respond?

The most important thing you can do is quite simply 'be there' for your loved one. They may or may not want, at this stage, to talk in any more detail about what has happened but they may need help in thinking through the consequences of what they have told you, particularly if it raises current child protection concerns.

The abuse may have happened some time ago but your loved one may not have been the only victim. Other children and young people could still be at risk if the perpetrator has continued

The shock of finding out after so many years was almost unbearable. I just wanted to wipe it out, didn't want it to be part of our lives.

to be in a position of trust over children and young people.

This is why it is important after the disclosure of abuse is made, your loved one considers passing this information on to the police and/or social services. If subsequently, an interview is arranged, you could show your support by offering to accompany them to it. It is essential that any outstanding child protection issues can be followed up.

I knew my partner had wanted to tell me, wanted it out in the open but didn't know how to do it. Being there for her when she did was important, but there are a thousand ripples, problems I had never thought about. I needed to find some safe help.

How can I help the person who has been abused?

In the bible it says: "There is a time to be silent and a time to speak...a time to weep and a time to laugh..." (Ecclesiastes 3) Sometimes a quiet compassion and solidarity is more effective than any amount of well-meaning words. Your loved one may want to talk to you about the abuse or they may not. You really have to take your cue from them and try to be sensitive to their needs.

We do know that disclosure can be prompted by previous events and experiences and the person may well have already tried to tell someone but were not believed. For this reason it is very important to respect and validate what is being said. Just because the abuse happened a long time ago doesn't mean that it does not have significant and continuing consequences in their life.

If you don't know what they are thinking and feeling then why not gently ask? If they don't want to talk then they can always let you know.

Many adult survivors of child abuse have difficulty in the physical aspects of relationships because touch and intimacy bring back memories of their abuser. Your patient understanding of their fears may well, over time, enable them to accept that you are nothing like the person who abused them.

There are also lots of other ways that you can help especially in the immediate aftermath of your loved one's disclosure. Life goes on, and there are all sorts of practical things to take care of such as meals, shopping, domestic chores etc that they may not feel much like doing. Any means of removing some of this pressure can be a great help, and it also demonstrates that you care.

I made the mistake of asking too many questions too soon and talking too much about the abuse - it's hard but important to be patient and get the balance right. Be brave and slowly work things through, especially the sexual issues, but don't put it off.

How should I deal with my feelings?

There may be times when you feel overwhelmed by a roller coaster of emotion; you may feel numb, shocked, and confused. It is reassuring to know that anger, disgust, and even shame are very normal and you are not alone. Many people have gone through similar experiences.

It may seem that the exposure of this secret that has been kept hidden for so long changes everything; you don't know where you stand any more because the person you thought you knew has turned out to be different at a deep level. You may even feel betrayed despite knowing that they are not responsible for what has happened.

A shock like this will take time for you to come to terms with. Your reactions are perfectly understandable so don't be too hard on yourself. Hopefully at some point you will be able to talk about how you feel to your loved one and this should help both of you to get things in perspective. Your relationship may have received an unexpected knock but, in time and with God's help, it can recover and be even stronger than it was before.

What professional support is available?

The effects of childhood abuse on an adult vary greatly from person to person and we cannot therefore be prescriptive. However, many adult survivors benefit greatly from professional help including counselling. But this needs to be at their request, when they feel ready.

Adult survivors tell us of the real sense of relief in being able to accept professional help because of the intense pressure they have been under to keep their experiences secret. Many also say that in sharing their experiences with a counsellor or therapist they are helped in beginning to address issues where the abuse of the past is affecting their enjoyment of the present and their relationships with partners and friends.

Whilst it's not for everybody, professional counselling was crucial in bringing my partner through this trauma and should definitely be a consideration for anyone in this situation.

Your role can be to assist in getting this kind of help if and when they want it. There is a great deal of healing power in being able to uncover the secrets and receive reassurance that the abuse was not their fault.

Time does help, but feelings still rise up. It's times like this it's good to talk.

Some survivors find it helpful to join a self help group where they can share with others who have been through similar experiences.

You also may find it beneficial to talk to someone. It could be a counsellor or someone who can offer support and reassurance, particularly if your loved one does not, at this stage, wish to consider counselling.

What about prosecution?

In the situation where an adult discloses abuse that happened to them as a child, the decision about whether or not to go to the police is theirs, but we have already said, reporting it to the police may bring to light current child protection concerns or help an existing investigation that your loved one knows nothing about.

It is worth bearing in mind that from a police point of view there is no time limit to carrying out an investigation or bringing charges against a perpetrator. Having said this, it is difficult proving when it is one person's word against another, especially something that occurred many years previously.

It is not unusual for a person who has been abused to want to report the matter to the police and/or social services in order to protect other children, but not get involved in a prosecution. This is quite understandable, particularly if the perpetrator is a close relative.

In such circumstances, we advise people to discuss this with the police child protection team to decide whether or not to take the matter further. The person who has been abused has ultimate control over the information they give and will not be forced to make a statement. Generally speaking, criminal proceedings are not brought if it is not in the interests of a child or adult victim.

Some adult survivors feel that little would be gained by reporting the abuse to the police, particularly if there is no perceived risk to children now, but others feel strongly that the person who has abused them should be brought to justice and punished for the crime they have committed. If your loved one wants to pursue this course of action and, having reported the matter to the police, the Crown Prosecution Service consider there is enough evidence to bring the case to court, both of you will need a considerable amount of support. The police would obviously undertake to do this but your church may be able to help and experienced staff at CCPAS are also available to talk to you and support you.

Giving testimony in court and being cross-examined is a nerve-racking experience for anyone and it is not surprising that some people can't face going ahead with it. If this is the case you should not assume that because your loved one has backed off or even withdrawn their statement that the allegations they have made are untrue.

I do believe that 'rendering to Caesar that which is Caesar's' is about abiding by the laws of the land. God has allowed the authorities to be in place. However, most important for me was giving my wife 100% support whatever she decided to do.

Even when there is a court case, sometimes the accused is found 'not guilty'. This can be devastating and should not be taken to mean that the person alleging the abuse has lied, rather that the jury could not be sure, beyond all reasonable doubt, that the defendant was guilty as charged. If this happens to you, you will need a lot of support and your loved one will also need reassuring that whatever others may say, you believe them and God also knows the truth of what happened.

Why did God let this happen?

For a Christian the inevitable questions raised by past abuse can be particularly disturbing and painful. If, for example, the abuser claimed to be a Christian, then issues to do with trust can be very difficult to work through 'if a Christian cannot be trusted then who can? If churches are not safe places then where can we be safe? If God cares about me then why did He let this happen?' There are no easy answers. What is more, the instant answers some are so desperately seeking will never be satisfied by mere words.

Coming to terms with what has happened, particularly in the context of belief in a loving and faithful God, is a process that will take time, both for the person who has been abused and for those close to them. What is clear from the bible is that actions have consequences, and in Matthew 18 v 5-6 we can be left in no doubt just how seriously Christ viewed offences against children. We know also that God is on the side of those who are oppressed, abused and victimised, offering comfort, healing and solace.

Though there may remain many unanswered questions, my partner and I continue to find God in our situation on a daily basis. That has gone a long way to proving he is loving and faithful.

What about forgiveness?

Forgiveness is always difficult where people have been deeply hurt. It is sad that in some Christian circles, victims and their families are put under great pressure to forgive an abuser when this is not appropriate, before they have had time to work through the effects of the abuse, a process which may last a lifetime. This is certainly not the way Jesus responded to suffering and injustice and although there are biblical principles surrounding forgiveness, being heavy handed demonstrates a lack of compassion, understanding and pastoral care. Forgiveness, like healing, cannot be rushed. Some may choose not to forgive and their choice in this has to be respected.

At the beginning I said I would never, ever forgive. Now I've taken some steps towards forgiveness, maybe not fully because the hurts cut very deep. However, I am on a journey and the steps I have taken have brought a sense of freedom.

Can the church help?

Sensitive pastoral care for adults abused as children is a big challenge for the church. When spiritual help is offered in an appropriate and respectful way it can definitely aid the healing process. Pastoral help or counselling that is offered to your loved one needs to be on a confidential basis and in liaison with any specialist, professional counselling they are receiving. For an adult survivor, talking and praying with someone they trust can be very therapeutic. Abuse in childhood may have spiritual consequences and it is not unusual for survivors to have difficulties relating to God as a Heavenly Father, but many Christians experience a real sense of release and healing when they are able to pray through the issues.

Unfortunately there didn't seem to be anyone to tell us what to do or where to turn. Some people in the church, including leaders, didn't respond well. However, we had friends who stood by us, didn't judge and didn't quote scriptures at us. They were simply there for us and this was definitely instrumental in our recovery. All church leaders should take abuse seriously and seek out the kind of training CCPAS can provide.

Coming through

You may feel that things are never going to get back to normal and, in one sense, they won't because the abuse has happened and we can't turn the clock back. For your loved one things might seem to get worse before they improve but, over time and with help, the impact the abuse has had on your loved one (and on you) will lessen. Although something really bad has happened things will get better.

Even though the scars and consequences will always be there, the good news is that things do get better.

CCPAS provides training and advice on all areas of child protection, good working practice and helping those affected by abuse. CCPAS also operates a 24 hour helpline.

This is one of an expanding series of **Help!** Guides published by CCPAS, many of which are particularly relevant to workers.

See CCPAS website for more details www.ccpas.co.uk



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