

Sexual Trauma Survivors: What Men Need to Know. How Men Can Aid Recovery.

By Michael Castleman

Fifteen percent. According to a recent University of California survey of sex in America, that's the proportion of U.S. women who have survived childhood sexual exploitation. For men, the figure is 3 percent.

Ninety-five percent. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, that's the proportion of sexual assaults with women victims. Throughout the 1990s, approximately 300,000 women were raped in the U.S. each year. For men, the figure was around 20,000, approximately 5 percent of the total.

Eight percent. According to the National Violence Against Women Survey, that's the proportion of American women who are criminally harassed by stalkers. For men, the figure is 2 percent.

For poignant looks at male rape victims, read accounts of pedophile priests, or the novels *Deliverance* by James Dickey or *The Prince of Tides* by Pat Conroy, or watch the movies.

But the overwhelming majority of victims of these crimes are women. For all but a small fraction of men, sex is fun and carries little baggage. However, for many women, memories of sex crimes complicate—and possibly ruin—lovemaking. Even for women who were never sexually abused as children, and have never been sexually assaulted or stalked, the possibility of sex-crime victimization looms large on the sexual landscape, and may distract from the deep relaxation and undivided attention necessary for great sex.

After Sexual Trauma: Healing—and Great Sex—Are Possible

Combine the statistics on women's risk of sexual victimization, and men have approximately one chance in five or six of becoming intimate with a woman who has survived a sex crime. The myth is that victimization is so traumatizing that

survivors become sexually crippled for life. Actually healing is possible, and so is a satisfying sex life. Survivors can always move from where their sad experiences have left them to sexually better places. The issue is how far they can move how fast.

Compared with adults, children are psychologically fragile. They have less life experience, and fewer skills for coping with trauma. As a result, childhood sexual exploitation tends to be the sex crime that causes the deepest wounds and requires the longest recovery period. But the recovery process is similar for sexual assault and sexual harassment. Depending on the crime, recovery typically takes from a few months to several years, and often requires professional therapy. Survivors who eventually emerge from the dark tunnel of recovery into the light of healing often experience sexual transformation. Their sex lives change from awful to deeply nurturing and erotically fulfilling.

Staci Haines, San Francisco author of *The Survivor's Guide to Sex: How to Have an Empowered Sex Life After Child Sexual Abuse*, spent years recovering from childhood sexual abuse. Today, she enjoys sex and has become a therapist who specializes in survivors of sexual trauma. "Healing is possible," she explains. "Emotional and sexual healing. I tell survivors: You survived. You're more powerful than what happened to you. Victimization is a terrible thing. Surviving it is very hard. But you have the capacity to recover, to build the life--and the sex life--you choose."

No matter whether survivors are men or women, their lovers can play a key role in their recovery. Lovers who embrace this challenge with knowledge, caring, and a great deal of patience are often rewarded by relationships that become more intimate and sexually fulfilling. It's not easy for a man to support a survivor, especially when her recovery involves a long period of celibacy. Enforced abstinence is struggle for many men. But the key for men is to be patient and supportive, to be a man who's not abusive, exploitive, or violent, but rather loving and nurturing--even though that's difficult.

Because the vast majority of sex-crime victims are women, this discussion focuses on how men can help women recover. The dynamics of healing are similar for male survivors.

How Sexual Trauma Affects Survivors

A key issue is trust. Someone who should have been loving and trustworthy was the opposite. Survivors have a hard time with trust, which is why they have trouble with sex. Great sex requires trust.

Another issue is control. Survivors were robbed of it. As a result, recovery often involves survivors taking total control of their sexuality. This, too, makes sex difficult. Great sex involves a combination of setting limits and then, within them, letting yourself go. Survivors' need to control sex often interferes with their ability to let themselves go during it.

A third issue is “dissociation,” a natural defense mechanism for trauma survivors, especially children. Their minds deny what happened to their bodies. Children dissociate the most because they are emotionally immature and have not developed adult coping skills. As a result, recovery from childhood sexual abuse usually takes much longer than recovery from sex crimes later in life. But survivors of all ages often push memories of their victimization out of their conscious minds, and store them subconsciously.

Dissociation extends to survivors' bodies. Childhood sexual abuse survivor Laura Davis, of Santa Cruz, California, author of *Allies in Healing: When the Person You Love Was Sexually Abused as a Child*, once asked a survivor how she felt about her body. The survivor replied, “What body?” Many survivors speak of feeling numb, or of living only from the neck up. They have difficulty feeling physical pleasure, which means they can't enjoy sex.

A fourth issue is guilt. Many survivors hold themselves responsible for their abuse, as though they brought it on themselves. Of course, they didn't but, “every survivor I've worked with has expressed some guilt,” says Haines.

Childhood sex abuse has the widest range of possible sexual effects. Some survivors lose their libidos or feel disgusted by the thought of lovemaking. Others become hypersexual and can't say no to sex. And some swing wildly back and forth, wanting physical closeness with a lover, but when things heat up, they freeze or flee. Cincinnati researchers surveyed 832 women survivors of child sexual exploitation, aged 14 to 59, and compared their responses with similar women who had not been abused. Survivors were more likely to have poor self-esteem, negative body image, eating disorders, relationship difficulties, and problematic sex lives—either withdrawal from sex or sexual recklessness.

The Road To Sexual Healing

Therapeutic approaches vary, but Haines, who specializes in child sexual abuse, combines traditional “talk” therapy with hands-on exercises designed to reintroduce survivors to their capacity for sensual pleasure.

A key element of talk therapy involves processing survivors’ guilt. Haines asks survivors of childhood sex abuse what they think was their fault. “We make a list,” she explains. “It usually includes things like: I liked his attention. I liked being held. I didn’t stop it from happening to my sister.” Then Haines invites survivors to analyze their lists. “Eventually, they come to understand that they were powerless in the situation and are not to blame for it. They begin to forgive themselves.” Survivors of sexual assault and stalking also typically have guilt feelings to process: I shouldn’t have flirted with him. I shouldn’t have accepted that ride, given him my address, trusted him.

Talk therapy also explores how survivors feel about sex. Survivors of childhood sexual exploitation typically have the most complicated feelings: aversion, disgust, engaging in sex only to keep their lovers happy, and faking pleasure and orgasm. But survivors of other sex crimes also experience sexual negativity. Counselors say that recovery involves honestly owning up to these feelings—and eventually confessing them to their lovers. It’s excruciating for survivors to confess that they hate sex, Haines explains, and it’s agonizing for lovers to hear it. “But,” she says, “sexual honesty is the foundation of sexual recovery.”

On the “body” side of therapy, the goal is to overcome dissociation, transcend sexual negativity and learn—or relearn—to enjoy physical pleasure. “To feel is to heal,” Haines explains. The process often begins with a period of sexual celibacy, or perhaps sensual—but no genital—contact: hand-holding, cuddling, hugging, but no more. For survivors of rape or stalking, the time-out typically lasts a few weeks to several months. For survivors of childhood sex abuse, it may last years. During this period, therapists encourage self-touch—massage and masturbation—which allows survivors to experience physical pleasure while completely controlling the experience.

“Masturbation is the foundation of sexual self-education and recovery,” Haines explains. “Know thyself.” During masturbation, survivors learn or relearn how to enjoy sensual pleasure without the complications of partner sex. By the time they return to their lovers, they have more sexual self-knowledge, and a firmer foundation for enjoyable partner sex. For survivors who have difficulty experiencing sensual pleasure and genital arousal, vibrators are often a boon to

masturbation because they provide more intense stimulation than a woman can provide for herself. If to feel is to heal, vibrators facilitating feeling, and as a result contribute to healing.

Unfortunately, masturbation often triggers flashbacks, vivid memories of victimization. Therapists urge survivors not to deny these memories, but to embrace them while reassuring themselves: This is loving touch, not abuse. I have a right to pleasure.

Masturbation begins the process of sexual self-rediscovery, but the real challenge is partner sex. One key is for recovering survivors to take total control of the experience. During the abuse, they had no control. Healing involves reasserting control, deciding if they want to be sexual, and how they would like sex to proceed. It means learning to say “no,” “don’t,” and “stop” and having those decisions honored. It often means becoming sexual, and then deciding to stop. That, too, must be honored.

Recovery is arduous, especially for survivors of child sexual exploitation. “There were times I wished I was dead,” Davis recalls. “I remember thinking I would always be obsessed by my abuse. But I was wrong. I have a life now, not a perfect life, but a good one, with integrity, joy, and pleasure. I am rooted in the present. I’m no longer sentenced to replay the past over and over again. Healing is worth it. With the right support, 100 percent of survivors can heal.”

How Men Can Help

To support a sex-crime survivor through recovery takes the wisdom of Solomon and the patience of a saint. Few men are Solomon or saints. All you can do is your best. Many relationships do not survive the recovery process. Let’s hope yours does. But understand that, despite both of your best efforts, it might not.

Here’s how to help:

- First, take care of yourself. On airplanes, shortly after take-off, you hear the oxygen-mask drill: “If you are traveling with anyone who needs assistance, put your mask on first....” Why? Because in an emergency if you’re struggling to breathe, you can’t help anyone else. Recovery from sexual abuse is also an emergency. You can’t help your lover recover if you’re not taking care of yourself. “The major mistake I see is that partners try to become rescuers,” Haines explains. “They martyr themselves, and deny their own needs.” At first, this seems noble, but in the long run, it doesn’t work for anyone. No one can “save” sex-crime victims from their emotional

trauma. Survivors must recover on their own. A lover can help by being patient, available, and understanding, and be willing to discuss the many issues the recovery process raises. But recovery is something survivors ultimately do for themselves.

- Get some social support. Your lover can't provide the support you need. She has enough on her plate. Instead, make regular dates with a few trusted friends. Better yet, join a support group for partners of survivors. In a support group, you don't have to explain how you're feeling. Everyone knows. To find a support group, try women's social service organizations or the rape crisis organization in your area.
- Marshall your resources. These include: compassion, flexibility, resourcefulness, humor, knowledge of your own needs and limits—and patience, lots of patience, tons of patience.
- Learn as much as you can. Read up on the crime from which your lover is recovering. Web sites are a good place to start.
- Ask questions. Don't wait for the survivor to discuss her feelings. Ask. Then listen carefully. If she doesn't want to talk, try again another time. Don't badger her, but let her know you're interested in her feelings and willing to listen.
- Don't try to "fix" her. You can't. Over time, she can heal herself—with your support, sympathy, and love—and, often, professional therapy.
- Suggest therapy. This is especially necessary for survivors of childhood sexual exploitation.
- Be prepared for personality changes. Brace yourself for a long period during which the survivor is maddeningly self-absorbed or seems like a different person. You might think: Who are you? I don't know you any more. If she withdraws from sex, or starts to make love, then insists on stopping, you're likely to feel confused, distraught, and angry. Personality changes are temporary, but they're part of the recovery process.
- Be honest about how you're feeling. If you feel frustrated, say so. But try not to blame the survivor. Blame the perpetrator.

- Seek therapy for yourself. For survivors, voicing anger is an important step beyond guilt and dissociation. Unfortunately, survivors sometimes direct their anger not only at the perpetrator, but also at their lovers. Try not to take this personally. Of course, that's virtually impossible. That's why it's so important for you to get emotional support outside of your relationship. In addition to turning to friends and a support group, consider professional therapy yourself.
- Schedule fun together. Insist on a day off—one day a week when you spend fun time together and don't discuss the abuse.
- Get out of her way. You can't "make" anyone heal sexually. You can't orchestrate progress to recovery. You can't make someone enjoy sex. All you can do is get out of survivors' way, not put up any more roadblocks to healing than they already face.
- Get a grip. Childhood sex abuse, rape, and stalking teach women that men are out of control. Control yourself. Respect her need to take total control of her sex life, even if she does not want to make love with you for an extended period.
- Don't rush the touch. When she feels ready to return to physical contact with you, begin with cuddling, hugging, and gentle, whole-body massage. Postpone anything genital until she invites it. If she's open to receiving professional massage, offer to make the arrangements. Encourage her to masturbate. Offer to buy her a vibrator, or two, or more.

It's okay for you to want sex. If she needs a long break from it, it's okay for you to express frustration. But don't pressure her for sex. She has to return to sexuality on her own schedule. She needs to know that you care about her more than you care about sex with her.

- When she returns to lovemaking, bear in mind that just because she feels ready to for sex, doesn't mean she's recovered. She still has a long way to go, especially if she is a survivor of childhood sex abuse. Even when sex seems to be going fine, don't assume that it is. Check in with her. Ask: Is this okay. Do you need to talk? Do you need a break?

She also may express interest in sex, and then insist on stopping. Respect her

wishes. Invite her to talk about what she's feeling. Don't express your frustration at that point. Discuss it some other time.

- Expect her to experience flashbacks during sex. Develop a signal so she can tell you she's having one. When she signals you, ask what she would like to do. Some women want to change sexual positions. Others need to be held. Some need time by themselves. Others want to talk. If she wants to talk, ask what she's feeling, what she's afraid of. Help her explore her fears and stay in the present. When flashbacks happen, remind her that her memories are real, but they're not happening now. She's not with the perpetrator. She's with someone who loves and respects her, someone who's doing everything he can to support her healing.
- Don't seek revenge. If the perpetrator is still in your lover's life and yours—her father, step-father, other relative or friend of the family—don't get violent. Control yourself. If she wants to maintain contact with her abuser, respect her wishes. If she wants to shun the abuser, that's fine, too. It's normal to have revenge fantasies. But such fantasies are also a sign that you could use professional therapy.
- Accept that the relationship may not last. Dealing with sexual-trauma survivors is hard, especially survivors of childhood sex abuse. Your relationship may break up. That's sad, but possible, and in the case of childhood sex abuse, fairly common.
- Those who hang in there usually find it a major growth experience. Surviving the recovery process deepens the love and intimacy in the relationship. Ultimately, that helps both of you enjoy great sex.

“Survivors can have happy, fulfilling lives, and great sex lives,” Haines says. “As one survivor told me: ‘We who have done the work of sexual healing have some of the best sex lives around. We’ve had to redefine sex for ourselves. We’ve done the personal work that most people need to do, whether they’re survivors or not.’”

For help dealing with sexual trauma recovery, consult a sex therapist. To find one near you, visit aasect.org, the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists, or sstarnet.org, the Society for Sex Therapy and Research.

Resources:

Davis, Laura. *Allies in Healing: When the Person You Love Was Sexually Abused as a Child*. HarperCollins, NY, 1991.

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