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# ***How to support a partner who has been sexually abused***

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23.03.2022

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Irrespective of how long back it may have occurred, sexual abuse impacts intimate relationships.

Here's how partners can support survivors

When 32-year-old Samira walked into a therapist's office for the first time, she was already divorced. Although she felt emotionally invested in a couple of men she had started dating after her separation, every sexual interaction left her frustrated. It was like being back in bed with her 'detached' husband.

It took her therapist only a couple of sessions to discover that Samira had been sexually assaulted as a child, a memory she had erased as an adult. Her body, however, had carried the trauma for years, and this had impacted her intimate relationships, including her marriage.

"It wasn't a happy marriage to start with, but maybe my history of abuse made things worse," Samira says, adding "I didn't visit a therapist earlier as it was a taboo in my husband's house. And, like most women in India, I too was conditioned to keep my sexual trauma under wraps."

Therapists reveal that women who have experienced sexual abuse in any form, as a child or an adult, often find the corresponding trauma to be all-pervasive. “In almost all cases, there is a breakdown of personality, leading to adjustment disorders in life. Many women develop depression, anxiety, PTSD and often times suicidal ideation,” says Narendra Kinger, clinical psychologist and marriage counsellor from Mumbai.

The impact of this trauma can be immense on intimate relationships, leaving partners confused and helpless. Experts suggest ways in which partners can support survivors through the process of healing.

### **Acknowledging the trauma**

For the longest time, Chandni (now 27), didn’t understand why she felt ashamed of her body during lovemaking. Although she felt eager to please her partners through oral-genital stimulation, she found it triggering if they wanted to do the same. When this happened to her with three different partners, she decided to seek professional help.

Chandni’s therapist helped her realise that she still associated the act of oral stimulation to her childhood abuse. When she spoke about this to her current partner, it took him time and therapy to come to terms with the abuse and its impact on their intimacy.

Like Chandni, most survivors experience ‘behavioural patterns’ in relationships.

Reema Ahmed, NLP-based (neuro-linguistic programming) life coach, trauma healer and psychologist from Agra, wants partners to look out for repetitive signs. “If the relationship feels stuck or in a loop, with the same arguments or intimacy issues, these can be indicators of an underlying problem and it’s a good idea to begin with a conversation,” she says.

The fact that in many **cases of sexual violence**, the perpetrator is a trusted person, like a family member or friend, can lead a survivor to lose belief in herself and her trust in others. This causes intense shock, which may lead to a constant process of discovering what feels comfortable and what is triggering. It helps if the partner initiates the process of communication in a safe way rather than attempting to read her mind.

“Partners may need to move between the role of a supporter and a collaborator, to truly understand consent and intimacy. They must also be aware of how their own past experiences impact their reactions to the needs of the survivor,” says Devika Mehta Kadam, dance movement psychotherapist, psychologist and co-founder of Synchrony, a dance movement therapy platform that holds sessions and workshops for survivors of abuse and trauma.

## Supporting the healing process

Faced with guilt and anger, survivors of sexual assault can experience hyposexuality, hypersexuality, subconscious seductive behaviour, subconscious rejection of sexuality, repressed feelings of anger and lack of trust.

“These often lead to constant questioning and feelings of paranoia, ambivalence towards sexual needs of the partner along with mood swings. The partner has to be patient and kind,” Kinger says.

A partner may want to play the role of a confidant or a protector, but it is ultimately the survivor who may choose what to share and how much to share. “Sometimes partners tend to make it about themselves, in terms of ‘wanting to have known from the beginning’ or ‘feeling like their partner could not trust them’,” says Vani Subramaniam, counselling psychologist from Bengaluru.

Subramaniam says partners ought to understand that if the survivor's experience of sexual violence is impacting the relationship, it is a ‘relationship issue’ and not solely a ‘partner issue’. The partner should ask how the survivor wants to be supported: through doctor appointments, counselling or with more time for intimacy. “And, irrespective of how long back the abuse may have occurred, one must never discount its voice in the present,” she adds.

## Understanding the power dynamics

For 23-year-old Madhu, what seemed like a stable relationship spiralled out of control when she told her partner she was polyamorous. Although her partner tried to be supportive, each new relationship left her feeling more vulnerable and isolated. As things became messy, she decided to reach out to a therapist, who figured out that Madhu wasn’t polyamorous at all. The therapist also discovered that she had been sexually abused as a child and was dealing with loneliness as an adult.

As she moved from one partner to another, Madhu was in fact seeking sexual safety and attempting to have control over her sexual preferences, which she couldn’t as a child.

“It is important to understand how **the dynamics of power** function in our real life and in our minds. I have seen survivors of sexual abuse fantasise about painful sexual experiences as a means to take control of the situation, which they could not in real life. Some choose to play a dominant role in bed, and it is their way of taking their agency back. I try to bring to light these suppressed emotions through my sessions,” Ahmed, the NLP-based life-coach, says.

Ruchi Ruuh, counselling psychologist from Delhi, agrees that sexual abuse can traumatise women throughout their adult lives, unless they seek help. She hopes that partners understand that the anger they may witness is actually resentment towards the abuser.

“If a survivor is ready to open up, she may want to recount certain events multiple times, and it is important that the partner is empathetic every time. Never gaslight them or minimise their experience; in fact, help them seek therapy if needed,” Ruuh says.

### **Having the tools to protect yourself**

Zoya (25), with a history of multiple sexual assaults, decided to seek therapy when she met a partner she felt serious about. Although she described her past relationships as fairly casual, she couldn't pinpoint what had been amiss.

Nine months into therapy, Zoya found it comfortable **to bring her partner into the process**. And, as they worked together, the partner's experiences of childhood trauma surfaced. As they witnessed each other's processes, both took turns in playing the roles of the protector and rescuer.

“In such cases, where therapy reveals a partner's shared trauma, experiences of intimacy become an important area for both to understand and work on. The ideal outcome is a larger window of tolerance of trauma triggers, power over one's own narrative, reduction in intensity of emotions connected with trauma and ownership of their role in the relationship,” Kadam says.

For a partner, without any history of sexual abuse, receiving intense information can also lead to secondary trauma. “Partners may experience physical symptoms of anxiety, fear or vulnerability. Therapy may help them understand this secondary trauma and provide tools, such as body exercises and breathing, for charged moments,” Subramaniam adds.

For a partner, it becomes important to understand and navigate the complexities of embodied experiences and triggers, and the survivor's reactions and responses. One needs to develop a deep commitment to the relationship and to their own self in order to support the survivor and also protect themselves from trauma.

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