

# Helping Adult Victims of Child Abuse

## Healing Exercises 1

Many survivors view desire as threatening or bad. This causes them to shut down any sexual desire that they feel. It is important for partner of survivors to let the survivor feel her own desire and not be worried about fending off the partners. When a survivor feels desire, it is important to remember that you be the one in control. You do not have to go all the way. You may be afraid to express any desire for fear that you will have no choice but to carry through with the sexual act, gritting your teeth, pretending that you aren't there. That is what many survivors had to do as children.

Safety is very important here. Before you begin to explore sexual desire, a Survivor must be in a safe situation. A safe situation is one in which the survivor feels that if she or he suddenly feels disgust, sick, or just like they can't go any further that the partner will understand. The survivor needs to know that the person she or he is with, cares more about the survivor than about the sex. This trust takes along time to develop. A good thing for survivors to do is to be in situations where it is agreed that sex will NOT be the end result. For instance intimacy has to be gained. Long walks, candle lit dinner, movies together, without sex as an end result are important. The survivor will begin to feel less threatened if the pressure for sex is not there.

**FLASHBACKS:** these refer to vivid memories of the abuse. Flashbacks can be visual, auditory, or body sensations. You could be in the middle of making love when suddenly a song playing on the radio or the smell of a barb-b-cue outside makes the survivor revolted. Flashbacks are one of the primary ways that survivors get information about their histories. A survivor must work at integrating flashbacks into lovemaking. Remember that when this happens during sex do not shut down, tell your partner. Cry, explain what you are feeling, stop for a moment and realize that this is a part of sex that you need to get past. This is a way for you to start to connect rather than disconnect. Sex is good when it is connected to real feelings. So whether or not you are experiencing the real feeling of sexual arousal or a feeling of dread and panic, communicate this. Survivors must struggle to stay present and not disconnect. Realize that this hurts you, but it is an opportunity to find out about what happened to you, it is knowledge, validation, and a chance to get to know your inner child. Give yourself permission to explore each flashback and learn what it has to tell you. Don't freeze, push your partner away and feel ashamed and hopeless. You are learning to heal sexually and it is not necessary in the beginning to have total "hot" orgasmic sex as much as it is important to not shut your partner out when you are experiencing this. Touch is important. Practice touches that DO NOT lead to sex. Make it a point with your partner that you will give each other a back rub but it WILL NOT lead to sex.

Another important healing point to do the other healing work, like therapy, writing, exploring your inner child) don't save everything up for the memories to only flood back to you during sex. A good method for getting in touch with being touched is to go for a body massage. Learn to like being touched. Practice touching other people...a light touch on the arm, a hug, a pat. Start to try and accept touches that are meant in a friendly and warm way. Sit down with your partner and write a list of what sex is to you. You each do this separately. Compare lists. Find what you have in common. The goal is to redefine your sexual relationship and come up with a common goal for sexual intimacy. This will get you talking about sex. This being intimate in itself will help you bridge that gap between sex and intimacy. Healing the sexual aspect of your life is about being aware and awake to both the pain and the pleasure.

Talk about the things that are triggers. Survivors can devise a signal such as a tap on arm or a code word such as "ghosts" so that what ever it is during the sex act that is making you uncomfortable, you can quickly change positions or stop and just talk. Is there a way that you can get through it if you just change whatever it is that is making you uncomfortable? Try and find a way to stay close when you have to stop in the middle of making love and don't turn away in pain. Try and find creative ways that you and your partner can make love that are not threatening to you.

Decide what are **SAFE**, **POSSIBLY SAFE** and **UNSAFE** sexual behaviors for you. Write them down. Start your sexual healing by limiting yourself to what you feel is safe for you. What is safe will vary but for many the safe activities are more sensual than sexual, like holding hands, dancing, eating by candlelight, curling up in bed with a big fluffy comforter. While other survivors may find touch and cuddling much more threatening than stimulation a partner to orgasm, there are no right answers in filling out your safe sex guidelines. The idea is to give survivors help in identifying negative triggers and to give them a safe place to begin. Share these with your partner, it is an excellent way to explore common ground. You can also rate them on a scale using most comfortable, usually comfortable, least comfortable.

Put these headings at the top of a page and make three columns. Take at least 15 minutes to fill them in. When you do this with a partner, it is often a surprise to find that there are many things you have in common. Many people find that they have been doing things for years that neither really liked but thought the other person did. If there are several things on your safe list that you both share, you can begin with them. You may find some things your partner wrote on his or her safe list that you could add to yours. In this way both partner and survivor can feel comfortable knowing what that they won't feel threatened or rejected.

Remember that it takes along time for the survivor to feel safe, in control and secure enough in their own sexuality to go onto the next level. Think of it as being sexual for the first time, most people do not start out going all the way. They do things that lead up to sex and different sexual acts. That is sexual development and for Survivors it is being relearned. Survivors need to learn to love and respect people that love them but desire them sexually, they have to bridge that gap between sex and intimacy. To break old patterns of behavior is to learn that sex, caring and vulnerability do go together. This is only some very basic things that have to do with survivors and sexuality.

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