

Supporting
someone who
has experienced
sexual violence:

INFORMATION FOR PARTNERS

**RAPE
CRISIS
SCOTLAND**

Supporting your partner

This booklet is for people who are supporting a partner who has experienced any form of sexual violence.

It gives information about sexual violence; how it might affect your partner, you and your relationship; and how you can help your partner while taking care of yourself too.

Background to this information

Survivors of sexual violence are often traumatised by the experience, whether it happened:

- Once, occasionally or often
- In adulthood or childhood
- With one or several or different perpetrators¹ at different times
- Recently or many years ago

This can affect survivors' relationships with their friends and family, including intimate partners. If you are a partner you may find it hard to understand or know how to respond to the strong feelings and reactions which such trauma can cause, or how to help.

Many partners feel guilt or blame, even if they were not around, for not stopping the violence. Finding out that your partner has been raped or sexually assaulted may be very frightening and distressing. Being affected by what you hear can lead to you experiencing some of the same after effects as the survivor, sometimes called 'secondary' or 'vicarious trauma'.

Depending on how and when the sexual violence took place or when and how you heard about it, you may feel some of the same things as your partner. This could include feeling shocked, angry, guilty, disbelief and in denial. It can be hard to see someone you care about in distress or in difficulty or changed. It can be

¹ In this booklet, RCS calls the person who harmed your partner the 'perpetrator'.

stressful for you too and affect your relationship, intimacy and sex. This is a big loss or change and it is a lot to cope with. If the perpetrator is a family member or someone you are close to or connected with, this can make things more complicated.

But whether the sexual violence is still happening or happened in the past, you can be a vital support. It is possible for your partner to heal from the experience. Having support, feeling safe, and time all make a big difference. There are things that you can do to help with this. This can also strengthen your relationship with your partner.

It is good to look after yourself too because you are also an important person. Sometimes that may mean realising that you cannot offer what your partner needs and that you are not the best person to support them. Sometimes the hardest decisions you make are the best ones.

You and/or your partner may identify as male or female, LGBTI and/or as heterosexual. You may be:

- A new or an established partner
- Hearing about the sexual violence for the first time
- Supporting your partner with a recent assault
- Supporting them with something that happened a long time ago, as an adult or child, but which is affecting them and your relationship now

We have tried to make this information helpful whatever your circumstances or the nature of your relationship. But you may need to find out more or ask for advice, for example from the [RCS Helpline](#), depending on what is happening for you and in your relationship. You can phone or email the [RCS Helpline](#) any day. The helpline can tell you about support in your local area. There is more information on our website. Our leaflets are mostly aimed at survivors but they have information which partners will also find helpful.

Note:

If the perpetrator is a family member, you may be concerned about the risk to a child in the family. If there is a child involved who is at risk of serious harm of abuse you must protect them. Contact the police or your local social work department. You do not need to give your name.

Some basics

Partners can often feel helpless. But think about the times in your own life when you have faced some sort of crisis or upset, and remember what helped you most then. It probably wasn't any one thing – simply knowing that your friends or partner believed you, were on your side, and wanted to see you through. That is how you can help now.

You can be a good support if you:

- Listen to your partner
- Accept and don't judge
- Be patient with your partner
- Take the lead from your partner – it is important for them to feel in control
- Don't try to push them into making decisions such as reporting to the police if they don't want to
- Avoid asking intrusive questions about the abuse
- Learn about sexual violence and its effects
- Learn about ways of coping with these effects
- Avoid feeling responsible or trying to fix things
- Ask your partner what they need from you
- Look after yourself too

Forms of sexual violence

There are different forms of sexual violence such as:

- Rape
- Sexual assault (which can include unwanted touching or kissing or being forced to perform or watch sexual acts)
- Childhood sexual abuse
- Sexual harassment at work or elsewhere (this could include posting sexual images of someone on social media)
- Stalking
- Forced marriage
- Female genital mutilation (FGM)
- Commercial sexual exploitation (such as prostitution; pornography; lap dancing; trafficking)
- So called 'honour-based' violence

Sexual violence is common. Anyone can experience it.

If someone is harmed in this way, it is not their fault. It is always the responsibility of the person who harmed them. Sexual violence does not 'just happen'. People commit sexual violence because, at some level, they decide to do so. They had a choice about what they did.

This person (or people) may have been a complete stranger. But they are more likely to be someone your partner knows such as a family member, former partner, colleague or other acquaintance. This can mean that your partner finds it very hard to trust anyone – maybe even you. If so, how you support your partner can help to re-build trust.

Although there are different forms of sexual violence, the effects are similar because the experience is frightening and shocking and difficult to cope with. This is partly because of the abuse itself. But it is also because there may be other factors which make a distressing or frightening experience much worse. There may be unique stresses, threats or barriers which make it difficult for your partner to tell anyone what happened, to ask for help, and to be safe from further abuse. For example:

- The perpetrator of the violence may be a close family member, member of the community (in the widest sense including area, friendship group, religious group and so on), a work colleague, a teacher – and have some kind of hold over your partner or a presence in your partner's life and family
- The perpetrator may have threatened to harm your partner, you and other family if they say anything. This could include 'outing' their sexual orientation to friends, family or employer
- The perpetrator may be a former partner
- Even if your partner does tell someone what happened they may not be believed. It is still common for people to think that the survivor is to blame for what happened. Your partner might believe that too (especially if the perpetrator has told them that they are). You may struggle with your own beliefs about responsibility and who is to blame

Blame and shame

It is very common for survivors to think that they somehow caused the abuse, and that, had they done something or behaved differently, or been somewhere else, it would not have happened.

How sexual violence can affect survivors and their relationships with partners

Everyone's experience of sexual violence is different. It also affects people in different ways. Much depends on what happened; the help someone gets at the time; and the other circumstances of their life.

Some common effects of sexual violence and the trauma which can result from this are:

- Fear and shock
- Pain and injury
- Feeling ashamed, guilty and responsible for the abuse
- Feeling trapped, silenced, lonely and powerless
- Short and long-term physical and mental health problems
- Sleep disturbance, nightmares, panic attacks, flashbacks, feeling disconnected
- Anxiety, anger, depression, aggression
- Unhealthy ways of coping such as eating too much or too little; drinking too much alcohol; or taking too many over-the-counter or illegal drugs; self-harming and suicidal thoughts

Some ways you can help

There is a lot you can do to support your partner.

You cannot put yourself into your partner's shoes. Even if you have experienced sexual violence too, your reactions, responses and circumstances are different. What works or worked for you will not necessarily work for them.

It is hard because you care about your partner, and you may be frightened for them or worried about the effect on your relationship. But, it is up to them to decide whether or not to accept your help or advice. And it also has to come at the right time for them. It is important for your partner to feel that they have some control. This is because, when people experience sexual violence, they have control taken away from them.

Some suggestions are:

Listen to and believe your partner

- Listen to your partner. Give them time to talk. It can be tempting to tell them about your own experiences. Try not to do that. They need you to listen to them for now
- Good or 'active' listening means you help your partner to develop their own thoughts so they can look at options and make their own decisions. It means not taking sides, and not making decisions for your partner
- Become comfortable with silence. Your partner may be thinking about how or whether to say something. They may not want to talk.
- Many survivors want to protect their partners from hearing about abuse, or are worried about how their partner will respond or that it will get you into some sort of trouble, so they may not want to tell you much
- If you need to ask questions – keep them open 'how are you feeling about that?' rather than 'are you feeling OK/angry/bad?' Avoid loaded questions and comments such as 'you could have done such and such couldn't you?' or 'you must be feeling terrible?'
- Questions are not always helpful. You don't need to know the details of what happened in order to help someone. Also, it may 're-traumatise' your partner to have to go over it/try to remember it/and say the words
- Accept and believe what your partner says. Perpetrators often tell survivors that no-one will believe them. It is very hard for people to talk about abuse. Imagine what it must be like to pluck up the courage to talk about it.
- Don't judge your partner's story or be surprised if what they tell you does not fully add up. They may not tell you everything. They may not remember everything that happened, especially if it was a long time ago. Memory is also affected by trauma or ill-health or shock or fear, they may have been asleep at the time, or unconscious, or a very young child
- If your partner talks to you about the sexual violence, it is good to tell them how brave they are for telling you, rather than ask why they never told you before

Accept how your partner reacts and what they decide to do

- However your partner reacts to abuse, accept and try to understand their reaction, even if you do not find some of these reactions very likeable or acceptable
- Rather than questioning what your partner does or did in order to cope with the violence, accept that they did and do what they think best to cope and to protect themselves. For example, if someone raped your partner, self-protection may have meant not ‘fighting back’ as some people might think they should have been able to do. ‘Freezing’ is a natural survival response to danger (other survival responses are to run away or to fight). The brain takes over – people don’t choose how they will react; it is automatic
- Your partner may have certain ties to the perpetrator and the wider family and/or community. If a previous partner abused them, there may be children involved. If it was a family member they may still be around. This can affect your wider family and relationships
- Remember that your partner is not responsible for abuse. If your partner blames themselves, it may help if you say to them that the perpetrator had a choice about how he acted
- Respond safely and without directing them
- Listen and understand without trying to find solutions. It is tempting to try to ‘fix’ things and to want to make things better. You may think that a certain course of action is clear, but your partner needs to decide for themselves and find their own solutions. If you try to fix the problem for them, it might not be a good solution for them, or they might not be able to follow through on it. This could undermine your partner
- Be patient. It can be tempting to think or say things like ‘you’ve just got to get on with it’ or ‘it’s time to move on’ or ‘it happened years ago, forget about it’. But abuse, trauma and their effects are persistent. Even after someone has come to terms with what happened, and has healed from the immediate trauma, they may react to some trigger years later

- It's important to be realistic. Many people do heal from abuse. But some people may never fully 'get over it' in the way that these words imply. They may want to 'block it out' or try to forget it, and that can get in the way of healing
- Don't take things into your own hands such as confronting the perpetrator, threatening them, assaulting them, telling them to 'lay off' and so on. This is unhelpful, unsafe and could also be criminal
- Many people feel very angry about the abuse, and this is understandable. But try to find positive ways to get rid of your anger and to use it positively

Practical ways in which you may be able to help

- Be consistent. If you offer your support then be there for your partner and do what you say you will do or be how you say you will be
- Try to find out what your partner needs from you, if anything. Don't assume what they want or need. Stick with them and don't withdraw if they do not take your advice. Just let them know that you are there for them
- If your partner has panic attacks or flashbacks or nightmares or is self-harming or talking about suicide, it is useful to find out more about these symptoms of trauma, and learn what can help so that you can help your partner, for example if they are having a panic attack. The Rape Crisis Scotland website has a series of self-help leaflets with practical techniques. There are leaflets on:
 - **Anger**
 - **Coping after sexual violence**
 - **Dissociation**
 - **Flashbacks**
 - **Healing from sexual violence**
 - **Nightmares and sleeping problems**
 - **Panic attacks**
 - **Relationships**
 - **Self-harm**
 - **Sexual health**
 - **Suicidal thoughts/feelings**
 - **Trauma**

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- You can find them at www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/help. Also tell your partner about them
 - Some people report sexual violence to the police; others do not. It is important to respect your partner's choice in this. But if they do want to report, you may be able to help. Your partner may appreciate your company if they go to see lawyers, police and so on. You can also help by taking care of any children while they attend appointments, take notes at appointments or help with transport. You may also be able to give evidence to support the case
 - Your partner may not find it easy to cope with everyday life, for example going shopping or travelling to work. You may be able to help by taking on some of these tasks; or accompanying them; or driving them to places, whilst building their confidence and independence as they heal
 - Your partner may not want to spend all (or any) of their time thinking or talking about the abuse. They may feel lonely at times. Think about nice things which you could do together, or which you could encourage them to do for themselves or with others. This could include walking or relaxation or going for coffee or to a film or watching TV together or other simple pleasures or treats which nurture them and make them feel cared for. These do not need to cost money and they can help your partner feel better about themselves and also see that they are worth caring for
 - Respect your partner's privacy. They may or may not want other people to know what has happened. You may want to keep it secret for your own reasons, for example, you may feel shame. But it is best if you can take the lead from your partner because secrecy may reinforce their feelings of shame and humiliation; forced secrecy may have been a significant element of the abuse
 - Encourage your partner to get help if you think they need this. This could include medical support for physical health issues; or support from a local Rape Crisis Centre; and reminding them that the [RCS Helpline](#) provides phone and email support.

Sex and intimacy

- If your partner is finding sexual contact with you difficult because of the abuse, reassure them and let them take things at their own pace. Their reaction is not about you or them not liking you. But there may be a change in sexual contact
- If your partner has experienced a recent sexual assault, it can be hard to know when to have sex again. So, be open and honest about how you are feeling and ask your partner how they are feeling too. Your partner will need to go at their own pace and rebuild trust with you
- Your partner may find that sex can bring up feelings which they connect with the sexual violence and so they may want to limit what they do with you, for example to holding or hugging. Let them know that you are willing to follow their lead
- Your partner may experience flashbacks during sex. Flashbacks happen because, after a traumatic experience like sexual violence, it is natural for the brain to replay events to process or try to understand the attack. This is very frightening, and your partner may want to avoid sex in case of flashbacks. You can help to reduce the fear and panic they cause. For example, it may be useful to agree beforehand that if your partner says 'stop' that you will do so at once and move away from them. This will give your partner time to gain control and feel safe. RCS has a helpful leaflet on coping with flashbacks available on our website

Look after yourself too

It is important to look after yourself too. You are likely to be more helpful, and a more effective carer, if you are OK. This may include:

- Asking for help for yourself and speaking to someone else about what is happening. Organisations which support survivors of abuse are happy for friends, relatives and others to phone for advice and support too. This includes the **RCS Helpline** and local Rape Crisis centres. Some centres offer phone or face-to-face support for partners - singly or in groups
- Setting limits about what you can and cannot do. Remember that you are not responsible for your partner or for the abuse. And you can't change what happened
- While it is important to understand what your partner is going through and make some allowances for the way they behave as a result, it does not excuse unreasonable behavior to you or anyone else. If the way they are behaving is causing problems for you and your relationship, you have the right to do something about. That does not mean that you are being unsupportive
- Finding an outlet for your own feelings – whether this is through sport or exercise or yoga or something else that suits you. It will not help you to simply deny your feelings. It will not help if you take your feelings out on your partner
- If difficulties with physical or sexual contact with your partner are making you unhappy, then you may need to look for support to help you both in the relationship. This could be from an organisation such as Relationships Scotland: www.relationships-scotland.org.uk
- If there is any risk to your own sexual health from the sexual violence then it is important to get checked, for example, for sexually transmitted infections. Depending on the nature of the abuse and the risks, you may both need to use barrier methods for sex (condoms) so that you are protected from any STIs. You can be tested at a GUM clinic (NHS) or speak to your GP
- Finding out more about abuse and its effects so you can understand what is going on and why your partner is reacting the way they are:
www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk

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Text: Shirley Henderson www.shirleyhenderson.co.uk

Rape Crisis Scotland 2016



Rape Crisis Scotland Helpline

Confidential support by phone, email, webchat and text.

- » **Phone: 08088 01 03 02**
(calls are free and our number will not show on your itemised bill)
- » **Text: 07537 410 027**
(texts are charged at your normal network rate, texts to us will show on an itemised bill as texts to our mobile phone number)
- » **Webchat: www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk**
- » **Email: support@rapecrisisscotland.org.uk**

The **RCS Helpline** offers free and confidential support and information to anyone over the age of 13 who has been affected by sexual violence, no matter when or how it happened. We also support the friends and families of survivors. This includes people of all genders and sexualities.

The helpline can provide interpreters through LanguageLine. British Sign Language (BSL) users can contact us via contact SCOTLAND-BSL, the online BSL interpreting service.

We can put people in touch with local Rape Crisis Centres for longer term support.

Other useful contacts

Scottish Women's Rights Centre

Free and confidential legal information is available from the Scottish Women's Rights Centre helplines.

Experienced advocacy workers or solicitors will be handling your call and giving you initial information and support.

Helpline details and opening hours can be found at:
www.scottishwomensrightscentre.org.uk

