

The Ripple Effects of Sexual Abuse

Impacts on Survivors and Families – How to Help

Written and compiled by
Victoria Weedon
for Auckland Sexual Abuse HELP

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Using this guide

This is one of three booklets created by the Auckland Sexual Abuse HELP Foundation to provide information for parents and caregivers of young women who have experienced sexual abuse.

- Understanding Sexual Abuse
Who, Why, How?
- The Ripple Effects of Sexual Abuse
Impacts on Survivors and Families – How to Help
- One Path Ahead
Reporting the Abuse/Assault

The booklets contain general information for providing support following a disclosure, information about the effects of sexual abuse on young women and their families, along with information about services.

The dilemma which arises when creating this type of guide, is that although there are similar themes within sexual abuse, no two experiences are the same. Therefore, the specific details of your daughter's experience and the questions you have, may not be fully attended to within this booklet. We recommend you contact a sexual abuse support service if you have any further queries.

You can call the number at the bottom of this page or see the national directory of useful services in the companion books *What is Sexual Abuse* and *The Path Ahead* to find your local support service.

Terms

1. Many words are used to describe the person who sexually abuses. For the purpose of these booklets we have used the word 'offender' although this may not be suitable in some contexts, such as for children and young people.
2. We have also referred to the person who sexually abuses as 'he' but do not wish to deny that occasionally females also sexually abuse others.
3. We have used the terms 'parent' and 'caregiver' interchangeably throughout this booklet. This is to acknowledge the different family structures that young people may live in.
4. These booklets focus on the needs and experiences of young women. If you are the caregiver of a young man who has experienced sexual abuse, contact us or your local sexual assault agency to access appropriate support and information.

The Ripple Effects of Sexual Abuse

Impacts on Survivors and Families – How to Help

Introduction

Research suggests that 1 in 3-4 women may have unwanted sexual experiences before the age of 16 (Fanslow, Robinson, Crengle & Perese, 2007). Such experiences may have been a one time event by a boy at school, ongoing abuse by a family member or a life threatening attack by a stranger. Contrary to popular belief, more often than not, the offender is a family member or acquaintance, rather than a stranger.

Finding out your daughter has been sexually abused can be a very emotional and sometimes traumatic experience. Following a disclosure, you may witness the effect of the sexual abuse not only on your daughter, but also your family and yourself.

This information is intended to help you make sense of THE RIPPLE EFFECT sexual abuse can have on young women and their families. Like a stone dropped in a pond, the ripples spread widely, affecting every family member in some way. Understanding the impact of these ripples can assist you to provide a supportive environment for your daughter and your family.

In Summary, this booklet will emphasise that:

1. Young people are not islands, yet sexual abuse is isolating. Your responses and interactions with others will have a major impact on your daughter. She is part of a family unit and is not yet fully responsible for herself. She does not have the same power or capacity as an adult to make decisions about her life. As her parent you can provide a supporting, caring, safe environment so that she does not continue to feel isolated because of the sexual abuse.
2. A disclosure of sexual abuse will impact on the young person's family dynamic, environment and other significant relationships in some way. This is especially true if any of these people are survivors of abuse themselves.
3. The timing of your daughter being ready to talk and process her experience of sexual abuse may be very different from the needs and responses of other family members.
4. Research tells us that most of the time a young person will disclose to a non-family member first (Jackson, 2002). This may be due to a fear of the changes that may come when others know.
5. No two responses to sexual abuse are exactly the same. Many factors will contribute to how your daughter has responded so far, how she has come to understand the sexual abuse and how she is coping now.
6. Although a disclosure may bring a sense of immediate relief, long term emotional, mental and physical safety is paramount and needs to be attended to.
7. At times the path ahead may be difficult and the process may feel out of your control. This is especially true when statutory agencies such as the New Zealand Police and Child, Youth and Family are involved or the offender denies the allegations. The impact of this can be cushioned with information to assist your decision making.
8. You and your family members may also need support.
9. Responsibility for sexual offending lies with the offender.
10. The nature of the relationship with the person who has abused, will shape the impact this sexual abuse has on your daughter and the type of responses she will need from you.
11. Your daughter's journey may be long and varied. Understanding your daughter's pace and needs will help.

How important is your response?

Hearing your daughter has been sexually abused can bring forward a range of responses from parents and other people in a young person's family environment. These responses can include; shock, anger, confusion, denial, fear and even powerlessness. You may want to take revenge for your daughter or confront the offender, if they are known. As a parent you have a significant place and influence on your daughter's journey. We find parents' reactions to disclosure, as well as managing the post-disclosure period, can have a significant impact.

It is common for young people to build a picture of how their parents will respond to disclosure well before it happens. This may direct when and how they disclose abuse. The response they predict is often fed by intense secrecy, worries and fears they carry. If their fear of disclosure is big enough, young people may look for responses that match this picture. She may watch how you respond and change the way she is coping depending on how you react.

*"You tell because you want things to change - it's got to be worth it."
(young person)*

Part of your role as a caregiver is to navigate your family through the disclosure period and beyond, containing and cushioning the impact of these experiences.

No matter how well you take up this role there is no guarantee about how smoothly the path ahead will be. Sexual abuse allegations can not only overwhelm your daughter, they can also shatter your views of others and relationships with people, including family members.

Sometimes, when the abuse is historical and there is no apparent risk of further abuse, it is important to understand that your daughter may have been managing the situation for a long time. She may have found other ways to manage her distress. Sometimes your reactions, worries and pressures to deal with the situation may intensify and trigger distressing responses for her. There may be times when she feels overwhelmed by reactions to the disclosure and the events that follow.

You may be relieved that some of her confusing behaviours suddenly make sense. Alternatively, the disclosures can come as a shock. For some it may even be too hard to believe.

"I just didn't think they would believe me, I thought they knew and didn't care. Believing me showed me they cared for me, it was important to feel believed straight away...a relief."

(young person)

SUPPORT SUGGESTIONS (→):

- Acknowledge her experience by talking with her.
- Try not to expose your daughter to all of your emotional reactions and processes.
- It can help to find other supportive adults to talk to about how you feel.

If alcohol or other drugs were involved, this can sometimes blur how adults view responsibility for the sexual abuse. However, we all have the right to be safe wherever we are and it is never your daughter's fault if she has been sexually abused.

- Find support for your daughter and leave your views, questions and judgements to one side for now.
- Tell her you are there for her and will support her through her emotional responses.
- Show her you are supporting her through your actions and behaviours.
- Protect her from others' responses if they question the validity of her experience.

Although we suggest you process your personal responses away from your daughter and children, totally hiding feelings and vulnerabilities from your daughter may give her the impression that what's happened is not important, or even that you don't care.

- Let her know you care and are hurting with her; but that you don't need her to look after you.

If you are concerned about the safety of your daughter or others, this may mean a statutory agency needs to be involved earlier than your daughter may be ready for.

- Providing there is no longer a risk of continued abuse, wherever possible we believe it is best for your daughter to go at her own pace without adding pressure to involve the NZ Police or the Child, Youth and Family.
- Ask her what she needs and what she would like to do next.

"You want to know what's going to happen - you don't want any surprises. You don't know what's going to happen before you tell - which is really scary, and then to not know what's going to happen afterwards can be really stressful."
(young person)

Sometimes statutory processes can feel like they mirror the dynamics of the abuse itself. For example, if your daughter used secrecy to protect herself from the reactions of others, disclosing takes away this type of protection and things can feel out of control, as the abuse did.

- Wherever possible, it is important for your daughter to have some sense of control and contribute to decisions.
- When the choices are limited, continue to include your daughter in decision making and information sharing.
- Endeavor to provide and maintain a safe, healthy environment by being honest, open and consistent. This will build a foundation for her to experience support and care.

"My family's response was so important to me, they're not going to go away - they're not like friends, you have to be around them for the rest of your life."
(young person)

Talking about what happened

As a first response to hearing that something has happened to your daughter, it is normal to want to know the details about what happened so you can attempt to make sense of it. She may not be able to tell you.

"You need to trust and be around people you can trust." (young person)

Telling another person she has been sexually abused requires a great deal of trust that she will be believed or taken seriously. It is an understandable parental reaction that you will want to know the whole story about what has happened in detail. You may find your daughter is not ready or able yet to talk with you. She may even want to protect you from hearing the details or feel she is to blame for what happened.

→ Be mindful to not put pressure on your daughter to disclose more information because of your own shock and confusion.

Sometimes young people do not want to talk about what has happened right away. This may leave you feeling like there are information blanks. It might seem you are trying to believe the almost unbelievable. Although the urgency to know is understandable, it can be overwhelming for your daughter to be expected to speak about what happened. Sometimes feeling pressured to talk more or to 'just do something' may result in your daughter retreating and closing down or even retracting her disclosure.

Talking too soon about what has happened could be extremely upsetting. Feelings and memories that come forward may have in some cases never been spoken out loud before.

"The hardest thing was not knowing the details about what happened. . . and it's still the hardest thing to face. . . I hated it. . . . I wanted to know exactly what happened. . . exactly what he did to her. It was really clear she wasn't able to talk about it. I would gently try and see her shut down. It's one of the most selfless acts I've ever had to do." (parent)

Validity: Is it really true?

Sometimes when a disclosure is made people may question it and the young person's ability to remember what happened. We acknowledge there is a very small percentage of allegations that are made up, and this is usually due to other significant factors. Given the prevalence of sexual abuse and the barriers which make it difficult to disclose, we believe all allegations of sexual abuse should be investigated.

We have found that on very rare occasions a young person may not have been truthful about the sexual abuse. However, it is almost always the case that there are significant distressing problems occurring in the young person's environment for this to occur. These also need to be investigated and taken seriously and your daughter may need help. It is important not to ignore or require her to work through the other issues alone.

"It's important to know that your response to what you hear is going to change. Other things may influence it. . . . you have to absolutely say to yourself I believe my daughter and be committed to it totally and 100% believe your daughter. You have to stay really staunch for your daughter." (parent)

Some people find it difficult to accept that sexual abuse happens. Many opinions exist about the reliability of memories. It can be easier to take a position of 'not believing this could have happened' because it's easier than having to believe that it could.

- ▶ Disbelief of the sexual abuse with even the most visible evidence is common, partly because ongoing denial is a central strategy offenders use to deflect responsibility and blame.
- ▶ No matter if alcohol or drugs were involved, or her appearance was blamed for the assault, remember your daughter did not ask or deserve to be raped or abused. If someone is incapacitated they should be looked after, not violated.

- ▶ When some content doesn't make sense, it doesn't mean it's not true.
- ▶ When young people feel like they will be blamed, they may occasionally lie about a detail. This doesn't mean the rest of the story is not true.

Some people will argue that young people often make up allegations or that counsellors convince them it happened - even that someone has placed a false memory in the young person's head.

When a counsellor receives a disclosure they should not seek to uncover any hidden memories through questioning or suggestions in order to find out the truth of an allegation. Nor should they just believe everything they are told. They are alert to many verbal and non-verbal cues which indicate the validity of what they are being told.

Counsellors endeavour to make a full assessment of the current situation to inform any further actions. If a disclosure of sexual abuse is made to a counsellor, it is the counsellor's role to support the young person in what to do next. If an official complaint to the police is made then it is important the detail of the sexual abuse is reported to police first and not the counsellor or caregiver.

- ➔ Be patient, try to avoid pressuring for details and allow her to express her feelings as she is able. She may be experiencing some confusion and it may take time for her to begin making sense of it. She may not be able to talk with you just yet, so encourage her to talk with someone she trusts or to seek counselling.
- ➔ Not everyone needs therapy, but information and support still need to be available.
- ➔ Separate out issues. Not everything going on between you and her will be related to the sexual abuse.
- ➔ Sometimes the fear of doing more harm makes parents step back from their normal parenting style. Young people still need adults to protect and guide them.

Your daughter may be looking for your support as she looks for new ways to cope with the visibility of her experience

"The Journey"

Takes time and patience

Path uncertain

Time unknown

Let her know that:

- You believe her
- Responsibility lies with the offender
- She can have as much support as she needs

- She is not to blame
- You will protect her
- What she thinks matters
- She has choices

Show her:

- You understand her needs
 - Care
 - Support
- Compassion
- Patience

Provide:

- A safe family environment
 - Predictability
 - Consistency

- A place she can talk
 - Respect for her pace
 - Minimal pressure
- A flexible environment
- Permission to be different

Secrecy

Why do many young women find it hard to tell someone about their sexually abusive experience(s) or don't want to tell at all?

Research suggests that young people are more likely to disclose to a friend before a family member. Some young people may have tried to give signs in the past which were not understood, so they then withdrew because they felt no one helped them. This can evoke strong and confusing fears, especially when a disclosure does occur. There are many reasons for this.

“The fears of speaking out”

Fear is a frequent factor why young people do not disclose to their family members. This list outlines some of the most common fears of speaking out that young people hold.

- Being blamed for what happened to her.
- Believing it was her fault or that she should have told earlier.
- Not being believed.
- Feeling responsible for breaking up the family and/or changing its financial circumstances.
- Adding pressure to the family.
- Not being understood.
- Feeling like she has told before and not been taken seriously.
- Changes to the way she will be parented.
- The threats used by the person who abused may become real.
- Being asked lots of questions.
- A lack of words to describe what has happened, or losing words to describe what happened.
- Shame and embarrassment.
- Negative family and peer responses to the impact of sexual abuse on virginity.
- A belief that a parent or caregiver already knows about the abuse and has not acted.
- Being punished for ‘making up stories’.
- She may still care about the person who has sexually abused her and may worry about what will happen to them.
- Not being able to protect parents from feeling bad or guilty.
- Losing control of her life.
- Not being old enough to make decisions about what happens after a disclosure has occurred.
- Minimization of the sexual abuse.
- Confusion around statutory agency responses.
- Being taken away from her family.

Depending on the relationship your daughter has with the person who has sexually abused her, the fears she carries will vary. The fears may change or evolve following a disclosure. Fears can be disabling and traumatising. You can help your daughter by...

1. Relegating responsibility for all aspects of the sexual abuse to the person who has sexually abused.
2. Checking in with her to see what she needs.
3. Maintaining open lines of communication.
4. Not minimising the impact of the sexual abuse.
5. Respecting your daughter's pace.

Many young women feel intimidated, fear, shame and guilt as part of an experience of sexual abuse and become fearful of disclosing. Sexual assault often involves secrecy. If the young person was threatened into maintaining secrecy, this intensifies their feelings associated with the assault. Over time this can lead young women to become experts at covering up what has taken place as a way to protect themselves, and in some cases, to protect others. Secrecy over a long period of time can intensify and complicate responses.

Sometimes young people even feel the sexual abuse is 'written all over their face'. Not only do many young people feel to blame and responsible for what has happened to them, sometimes they feel they are being blamed by those around them through their reactions and questions.

There is a clear difference in reactions from young people when the offender is known to the family. When a close

family member is the sexual offender, making a disclosure can create a huge sense of blame and responsibility for the changes that will take place in the family.

If secrecy has been used to conceal the sexual abuse over a long period of time, young people may outwardly show what seem like 'unusual behaviours' - things like avoiding people or places with no explanation. Following the disclosure such behaviours can actually be understood as being logical, understandable and the result of a sequence of events.

*"When I told my parents I didn't want them to tell anyone, I was embarrassed, scared and confused."
(young person)*

Widening the circle of support and breaking the secrecy by telling other people can become a source of contention. As a caregiver, you may need to link into other adults or talk to other family members. However your daughter may be signalling to you that she is not ready for others to know. It is understandable you may wish to tell people, however this may feel like another breach of trust for her.

- Wherever possible, talk with your daughter before telling others so that she understands the purpose of telling and check out how this may be for her.
- Where your decisions and choices will have a direct impact on your daughter, explain the reasons to her so she has a chance to understand.

Not giving any explanation may be misinterpreted as not caring.

How your daughter may be affected by this experience?

As a first response, parents can react to a disclosure by feeling frightened of further hurting their daughter. You might feel like you should hand everything on to experts. However as a parent of a young person, you hold one of the most significant roles in your daughter's journey. There is a lot you can do that cannot be replicated by those outside of the family.

"When I found out I had this overwhelming sense of relief, the minute she told me everything fell into place; her relationship difficulties, her body image difficulties, her eating difficulties, her bouts of crying, her mood swings - everything fell into place." (parent)

All young people are different and not every person feels or reacts the same to the experience of sexual abuse. Some young people just want to forget it ever happened. There are many ways to support your daughter during the different stages of her journey. If your daughter isn't acting upset right now or outwardly showing her hurt, or says she just wants to forget it, this may be how she is managing her situation

right now. It doesn't mean nothing happened or that there has been no impact in her life. She may not feel ready to talk now, she may need to talk later, or to someone else like a counsellor. She may have been carrying this alone or with limited support for a very long time, and developed resources to manage the impact on her life. Sometimes lowering defences and safety mechanisms to let others in can take time.

It is possible that not all of your daughter's behaviour is completely related to the sexual abuse. It may be due to other factors or even part of normal adolescent behaviour. For example, changes in mood and behaviour and sexual experimentation can relate to abuse, or just be a part of normal development.

- Endeavour to be open to a variety of explanations when trying to understand your daughter's behaviour.
- Focus on what is happening now, not what you think may happen.
- Try not to make assumptions.
- Talk to professionals about the general effects of sexual abuse or find the information yourself.

The impact of what has happened will vary for each person depending on their own unique history and life experiences, and the nature, frequency and time the sexual abuse occurred. For some the effects may be more long term. There may need to be some repair of family relationships. Safety and trust has been compromised. Your daughter may need to reclaim her body to have positive sexual experiences. She may have only a few or a combination of many responses and these reactions may change over time. They may even evolve into a variety of different behaviours as she experiences different developmental milestones, such as consensual sexual relationships or making adult decisions about her life.

"I remember when I found out, that night I went to bed and thought thank God, and now it's going to be alright — and it wasn't because other things happen and you need to be ready for that." (parent)

- Talk with her to gauge what she views the impact of the abuse to be.

'You may witness a range of responses from your daughter following sexually abusive experiences. They may include some of the following...'

Behavioural responses

- Finding it more difficult to stay calm
- A sense of restlessness and difficulty concentrating
- Sudden changes in her appearance
- Over use or unsafe use of alcohol and/or drugs
- Cutting or burning herself
- A sudden change in sexual behavior
- Physical responses to smells, sounds or even a taste which reminds her of the abuse
- Avoidance
- Nightmares
- Flashbacks
- Suicidal thoughts and attempts
- Washing
- Excessive organisation
- Changes to her eating patterns
- Excessive exercise
- Finding excuses not to be around the offender for example, by staying at school or at friends places

Relationship responses

- Getting into arguments easily
- Not wanting to talk about it
- Withdrawal
- Difficulty connecting
- Difficulty dealing with others' reactions to their behaviour
- Feeling pressured to put it behind them and get over faster than they are able
- Difficulty trusting others

Physical responses

- Changes to her sleep patterns
- Nausea
- Feeling run down
- Bedwetting
- Lack of energy
- Reduced hygiene
- Not wanting to be touched
- Easily startled
- Anxiety
- Panic Attacks

Emotional responses

- Guilt, failure and/or self blaming thoughts
- Wanting to forget completely what happened
- Feeling under pressure
- Finding it difficult to manage school pressure leading to academic decline
- A sense that everything is out of control or chaotic
- Believing they were responsible for what happened
- A sense of anger and betrayal
- Feeling really down or sad
- Heightened sensitivity to other sexual abuse stories
- Fear, feeling scared something else may happen to them
- Wanting to die or having thoughts about dying
- Thoughts that are confusing or don't make sense
- Mood swings
- Shame
- Feeling dirty
- Hostility towards men, lack of trust in men
- Hopelessness and despair
- A sense of worthlessness
- Strong emotional responses when life feels 'out of control'
- Embarrassment
- Feeling exposed

The type of impact may change over time with frequent exposure to triggers (these are things that remind her about what happened).

Does she see her current life difficulties completely as a result of the sexual abuse or only part of many problems happening in her life? If the latter is the case, making the abuse bigger than how she currently sees it may have the effect of pushing your daughter away.

→ Ask, and periodically keep asking her what type of support she may need.

Respond at a pace that meets your daughter's need. Pace plays a significant role in the process. Wanting it to be over and 'fixed' by rushing into therapy might be counterproductive.

"People say just get over it...they don't know what you have been through...what you have had to live. Hearing people say that adds pressure because it makes you want to get over it faster and you try to, and when you can't do it you feel like shit. It makes it worse." (young person)

- Respect her privacy and allow her to tell you only what she's ready to.
- Allow her to re-enter the "everyday world" of school, friendships and family at her own pace.
- Spend time with her and be as available as possible if ever she does want to talk to you about what has happened.
- Be patient - her feelings may be confused, inconsistent and at times seem irrational.
- As your daughter grows and matures, be open to her changing needs.

As your daughter recovers from the sexual abuse, the way she thinks about the abuse may not always match the way she physically responds. It can take some time for physiological (body) responses to match their changing thought patterns. For example, she might remain hyper vigilant at times even while she is making progress in other areas of her life.

In some circumstances, the initial effects may have evolved into more severe behaviours where mental health issues have been identified. Many young consumers of mental health services have histories of sexual abuse that have

been major contributors to their current conditions. It is not uncommon for mental health issues to be identified as the problem rather than the sexual abuse itself. This does not mean your daughter cannot, with the right support, make progress and recover.

*"I wanted them to understand the stuff I use to do that looked like weird behaviour, it wasn't weird it was connected to what happened to me."
(young person)*

One very common behaviour we see is self-harm through cutting. Often this is used as a way to relieve distress and is sometimes confused with suicide attempts. Cutting and suicide are often two separate things, which can become distressing and confusing for those caring for the young person.

- ▶ Your daughter is not "sick or permanently damaged". Her journey may take time and may include revisiting old coping mechanisms before new ones are established.
- ▶ If you are concerned about your daughter's safety or that she may attempt suicide, do not hesitate to contact a support agency. They will be able to talk to

you about things like how to assess the risk and how to respond.

- ▶ Make plans about what is necessary to keep other children safe. This may include informing the offender you know of their behaviour. Plans will vary depending on your individual circumstances.
- ▶ Remember, although you may feel strongly about reporting and taking action, where there are no immediate safety concerns, it is important to go at a pace that respects your daughter's needs.
- ▶ Your responses and your way of supporting may need to be reviewed and altered as time passes.

- ➔ Do not attempt to overprotect or distract her from the reality of the experience or what she may be going through. This may cause her to deny the effects of the sexual abuse, internalise her distress and become disconnected from friends and family.
- ➔ She may or may not wish to be held or touched – respect her wishes and ask her permission first.
- ➔ Be consistent in your behaviour towards your daughter, especially when imposing boundaries. Being overprotective after an assault may not be

useful for your daughter. She may feel blame is implied if you change the rules and curfews due to your own fears for her safety.

- Be supportive, go slowly and respect your daughter's physical space, emotional safety, process and pace.

Before making a disclosure, many young people develop their own ways of coping with their distress. Sometimes these ways of coping no longer work or for some become out of control and destructive. You may have noticed some unusual behaviors. The sexual abuse may be over, but this stage of her journey is scary and has lots of new and challenging experiences.

New problems exist and can be equally as hard as the abuse itself. Life can change so much that it can feel like travelling to a strange country and not knowing the language, customs or how to live now.

Often we find it is not until the abuse has ended that the young person is able to acknowledge and feel their responses to what has happened. Your daughter may seem more moody and emotional.

- Give your daughter time to adjust. She may need to develop new ways of coping with distress. For some young women this may be the first time in memory that they have a life that is free of abuse.
- Consider talking to her about such things as her sleep, her feelings about being alone, her sense of safety and her ability to engage in day-to-day activities.

"It really helped when mum and dad did things that made me feel cared for. You don't want them to say nothing to you, telling them is such a big thing; you want them to say something to make you feel cared for." (young person)

Your daughter's other needs:

Medical Care

Appropriate medical attention following sexual abuse or assault can gather evidence, treat injuries and provide prophylactic care for other consequences of the sexual abuse or assault. It is important this is provided by specialist services who are trained to work with survivors and provide forensically informed services. In Auckland contact:

Te Puaruruhau Ph: (09) 307 2860 (up to 19yrs)

Pohutukawa Clinic Ph: (09) 630 9772 (over 17yrs)

While evidence is best gathered within 72 hours, it may still be available up to a week after the event. If you have any questions, please call the DHB provided services.

Counselling

The sexual abuse support agencies listed all offer a variety of support services following sexual abuse. What is available in each area will vary but for instance at Auckland Sexual Abuse HELP we offer the following services:

- **A counselling service** for women of any age offering support, information and education. Because these

experiences can often impact at a wider level, part of our service is also providing family therapy and support. We can provide ACC registered counsellors and support applications towards the WINZ disability allowance to contribute towards costs if appropriate.

- **24-hour phone support line.** This 24 hour telephone service offers support for young people, their friends and family, and other people who need information about issues relating to sexual abuse.
- **Crisis Team Services.** The crisis team is available for immediate responses. They also offer crisis appointments for women needing to make decisions about safety or therapeutic support through police interviewing and medical procedures following sexual abuse.

Depending on your location it may be possible to find equivalent services within your community. For example, in the Auckland region, Counselling Services Centre operates in Manukau and Waitakere Abuse & Trauma Counselling Services operates in Waitakere City.

How will a disclosure of sexual abuse affect your family?

Where abuse within the family has occurred - or if other family members have also experienced sexual abuse - it is likely that a disclosure will affect all members of a family in some way. An added dimension can occur when the sexual abuse has been carried out by a partner or another child in the family. These experiences will change family relationships and everyone in the family needs to have support available. The degree of the trauma and type of responses varies between individuals and their families depending on a number of factors.

Siblings may have noticed the special relationship created by the offender to hide his abuse. They may have made sense of it in other ways that affect how they feel about your daughter.

You may feel a range of emotions and responses after your daughter's disclosure. It is quite possible that your daughter and other family members may direct some of their own strong emotions towards you. Parenting can feel like a balancing act with strong emotions influencing decision-making.

"I felt helpless - it was so hard to wait for my daughter to be ready to tell the Police, I was on the verge so many times and taking things into my own hands secretly. I would go somewhere where there was no question about being traced, I got so obsessive and I would photocopy articles about the effects of sexual abuse on young women - really graphic articles. I got to the point where I put rubber gloves on to handle the brown manilla envelope and type the addresses. I was going to send it to him with bits highlighted. I made sure there were no finger prints - that's how upset I was. I felt terror that he would find out and create havoc for my daughter and my family; I felt the helplessness of not being able to confront him because I was waiting for my daughter to be ready. I wanted him to know someone knew without her being implicated. I never did it - but sometimes I wish I had." (parent)

Family Reactions

Some general responses by family members can be:

- Changes of closeness with no explanations
- Possibly more disclosures of sexual abuse within the family
- Questioning who else may have been abused
- Wanting to know in detail about what happened
- Sleep disturbance
- Self blame
- Questions around validity
- A sense of anger and betrayal
- Shame
- Distress
- Minimizing
- Strong emotional reactions
- Pressure to hold what has happened as a family secret
- Anger & rage
- Nightmares
- Eating disturbances
- Substance abuse
- Guilt
- Intense coping mechanisms

Parental Responses

- Parents can want to rush the healing process or become overprotective.
- Questioning own parenting ability.
- Confusion about what type of support to provide or how to respond to their daughter
- Pressure to make sudden decisions about safety and support

When the abuse is intrafamilial or the offender is well known to the survivor family reactions can also include:

- Sudden changes in relationship with the person who offended or survived the sexual abuse
- Financial concerns as result of separation
- Worry about what other people may think because of how they may be viewed
- Distress or confusion about having to explain to others.
- Pressure to hold or maintain family secrets
- Fear that the family may be broken up
- Blame of family break-up on the person who has been abused
- Sense of responsibility on other family members if they were also abused and had not made a disclosure or they held knowledge it was happening
- Hurt about loss of parent or sibling or family member

Parental Responses

- Fear of a family break-up or parenting alone
- Fear that children will be removed
- Parental rejection
- Feeling torn between family members
- Fear of statutory involvement
- Rage, anger and a wish to confront the offender

A number of other factors can also influence family reactions, meaning and interpretation of the sexual abuse. For example:

- Beliefs about sexual abuse
- The responses from other people that are important to you
- The position and power the alleged offender yields in your life
- Religious and/or cultural beliefs and attitudes
- Age of offender
- Gender of the offender
- Beliefs that sexual abuse is damaging, dirty or will make you sick in some way
- Mother blaming

"It was the biggest parenting struggle I've ever had. It was overwhelming. . . . I couldn't have done it without talking to someone. You're holding so much you have to look after yourself. You need to widen your circle of support so you're not alone." (parent)

"The hardest thing for me was that I didn't have anyone at all I could tell about how terrible it was, I wanted to talk with my daughter and I couldn't. The whole thing required the most overwhelming kind of staunchness, containment and discipline from me. One of the really helpful things was telling someone else, someone close to me. I checked out about telling with my daughter first. . . . I waited because she was terrified of me telling anyone at all. She was terrified it was going to destroy my family relationships." (parent)

➔ Find a support person or counsellor that you can talk with who will listen openly so you can process what has happened and what to do next.

We have noticed that when families aren't resourced and supported enough, or when other family problems are already present and relationships are fragile, the post-disclosure period can be more difficult.

- Family support, counselling and education are useful ways of working through this.
- Strengthening relationships by accessing support is really important for young people and their families.

If statutory services become involved many families may also feel that there is a breakdown in family privacy.

- ▶ Being fully informed of all statutory processes and possible outcomes may minimise any more sudden changes.
- ▶ Wherever possible maintain a normal home life without minimising what has happened.
- ▶ Support your family to do what they feel they need to do, rather than trying to make them do what you think they should.

- ▶ If you have concerns about choices, it may be important to seek further information.
- ▶ Your view will have a strong impact in the family. Your choices and behaviour can reduce a focus on worries.
- ▶ If you are thinking of confronting the offender, be prepared for many reactions. He may not react in a way in which you would hope for.
- ▶ As you make decisions, explain them at an appropriate developmental level to family members, to avoid assumptions being made.
- ▶ Focus on aspects of your family life where your decisions can have a positive impact, and try not to take responsibility for creating and sustaining change where you cannot.
- ▶ The losses i.e. relationships, time, money - which can occur as a result of the sexual abuse, are not your daughter's responsibility.

Safety

It is a parent's responsibility to endeavour to keep their family safe from further abuse or harm. Young people are not yet adults and still live in a family context. Short and long term safety is a shared responsibility. Often decision making becomes blurred depending on the significance and role of the offender to the family.

The person who has sexually offended can get help.
Your daughter's safety and well being is the priority.

"Having space and feeling safe at home is really important. It's kind of pointless to tell and go through all that stress at home if you don't feel safe after telling, for them not to care about your safety. You shouldn't even have to ask if you want the person around, if you say no once it should be respected." (young person)

Deciding to ignore safety and take no action may actually further impact on your daughter's long term mental health. Just because the person that sexually abused your daughter is discovered and gives a solemn promise that it won't happen again does not mean that everyone is safe and that no further action is necessary. You may be able to keep your daughter safe, but they may still pose a threat to other children.

Make plans about what is necessary to keep other children safe. This may include informing the offender you know of their behaviour. Plans will vary depending on your individual circumstances.

"I didn't want to have to go and tell the police myself, I wanted my parents to go and do all of that stuff because they wanted to do it. They shouldn't do it straight way. They should talk to their daughter first.....you don't want added stress of not knowing what's going to happen next because it's been so unpredictable for so long." (young person)

Looking after your family's physical, emotional
and mental safety in the short and long term



- If you don't lay a complaint with the NZ Police or contact Child, Youth & Family how will you ensure long term safety of your daughter and others?
- Who will be in charge of setting boundaries and negotiating relationships with the offender if they are a family member?
- Are you open to the reality that your family relationships may have changed?

"When I had to make decisions about safety it was a terrible dilemma but I knew that I had to consider her process. It was really important that I followed her direction, it made every difference to her recovery, it was everything. The dilemma around that and worrying about other kids was phenomenal." (parent)

There are a number of agencies that treat people who sexually offend. They can help you create a safety plan with your family. You are not alone in your decision making process.

Every family is unique and there is no one way to 'do things right'. Take into consideration your entire family's emotional and physical safety.

Remember, although you may feel strongly about reporting and taking actions, where there are no immediate safety

concerns, it is important to go at a pace that respects your daughter's needs.

For information about reporting sexual abuse, see booklet *One Path Ahead*.

Safety at School

If your daughter was sexually abused at school, she could still be exposed to the offender within the school environment or to abusive behaviour from peers as a result of a disclosure. Every school must provide a safe environment for each of its pupils. It is the responsibility of the Board of Trustees to meet this requirement. Each school is expected to have its own policies and procedures to ensure this. As a parent you are entitled to liaise with the school to discuss how your daughter's needs can be met. Most schools also have guidance departments that may also provide additional support services if required.

References

- Anderson, J., Martin, J., Mullen, P., Romans, S., & Herbison, P. (1993). Prevalence of childhood sexual experiences in a community sample of women. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, (32) 911-919.
- Jackson, S. (2002). Abuse in dating relationships: young people's accounts of disclosure, non-disclosure, help-seeking and prevention education. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, (2) 79-86.

Important Contact Details

Sometimes families find that many services become involved with them. This section is a place where you can record contact information.

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Questions

This space is for you to record any questions you have. Young people and families often find that questions arise about what has happened and what will happen next. No question is silly or unrealistic. You will find that people are willing to answer these for you.

Thank you for reading this information.

Your support will make a big difference to your daughter.

We wish your family well in your journey and would welcome
your call if you need further information or support.

