

fact sheet

PARENTING AFTER CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE



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Becoming a parent after experiencing childhood sexual abuse can be uniquely challenging and may reawaken old wounds. Pregnancy, the birthing process, breastfeeding and changing nappies may be confronting, each in their own way.

Parents with a history of childhood sexual abuse often face trauma triggers during pregnancy, birth, and the postpartum period. However, survivors of childhood sexual abuse also bring unique strengths and skills to parenting, allowing them to become deeply loving and protective parents.

Gidget Foundation Australia recognises the complexity of what survivors of childhood sexual abuse have endured, especially during this particularly vulnerable time as you become a parent. Understanding and acknowledging the specific challenges that you may experience and how you can respond can be incredibly helpful.

PREGNANCY:

During pregnancy, many women experience a loss of control over their bodies, reminding them of the loss of control they faced when they were abused. This response is completely normal, and seeking counselling or other forms of professional support can be helpful during this time.

GIVING BIRTH:

The birthing process is frightening for many women. For those who have experienced sexual abuse, giving birth can trigger additional fears — including anxiety about physical pain, the exposure of one's genitals, and potential procedures such as episiotomies, stitches, or lingering vaginal pain after delivery. Talking to your midwife, obstetrician, GP or a specialist mental health clinician will help address and alleviate your fears.

BREASTFEEDING:

Breastfeeding may stir memories of sexual abuse, especially if your breasts were involved in the traumatic experience. You may feel grief whilst breastfeeding, or if there is physical discomfort during breastfeeding, this may remind you of the abuse you experienced. Talking to a lactation consultant, your midwife or a specialist mental health clinician before or during your breastfeeding journey may help you to navigate the process in a way that ensures it feels manageable for you and your baby.

CHANGING NAPPIES AND BATHING BABY:

Changing nappies and bathing your baby may reawaken old memories of vulnerability or exposure as a victim of sexual abuse. Remind yourself that your baby is safe and secure, and that you are a trustworthy parent who will always keep them safe from harm. Caring for your baby in a nurturing way can be a deeply healing and restorative experience.

SUBSTANCE USE:

Those who have been sexually abused may experience substance use, including the use of alcohol, nicotine and other drugs. Substance use may have served to manage the pain of the harm that occurred during childhood. However, pregnant and postpartum women are encouraged to stop using substances. New and expectant fathers should also be mindful of the implications of their own substance use in the perinatal period. This may be challenging, and you deserve additional supports. There are free Alcohol and Other Drug Services who can help. Your GP, midwife or a specialist mental health clinician will assist you to find the right support.





MISTRUST OF MEN:

98% of abuse is perpetrated by males. Mistrust of men may be heightened for a parent during the complexities of the perinatal period. For example, you may fear that your male partner, a male family member or a male stranger may abuse your baby. This is a natural and understandable fear, reflecting your deep desire to love and keep your baby safe from harm. Discussing these worries with a trusted support person can help you establish and explain boundaries of care and connection from others toward your baby that you feel comfortable with.

THE 3 STAGES OF HEALING FROM CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE PERINATAL PERIOD

While we each have our unique experience, Psychiatrist, Researcher and Author, Judith L Herman's¹ has developed a model of trauma recovery outlining three stages to healing commonly experienced by those with a history of childhood sexual abuse.

While some of these ideas may be established comfortably on your own, Gidget Foundation Australia recommends engaging additional support from a specialist mental health clinician.

1. Establishing Safety During the Perinatal Period

The focus of this first stage is on restoring control, self-care, and establishing a safe and secure environment, both physically and emotionally. This includes:

- **Creating a Safe Environment:** Ensuring that the surroundings are safe and supportive for yourself and your baby. This may mean exploring the boundaries you have with regards to others caring for your baby and feeling comfortable expressing these boundaries.
- **Emotional Regulation:** Learning techniques to manage overwhelming emotions and reactions is crucial during the perinatal period.

- **Addressing Basic Needs:** Paying attention to essential needs like eating and sleeping to ensure both you and your baby are well-nourished and rested.
- **Building Self-Care Routines:** Developing habits that promote physical and mental well-being, such as regular exercise, healthy eating, and adequate sleep.

2. Remembrance and Mourning During the Perinatal Period

The focus of this second stage is on processing the trauma through memory and emotion. This includes:

- **Talking with a Trusted Person:** Sharing past experiences with a safe and trusted person, who acts as an ally and affirms a position of solidarity, can help you mourn what was lost due to your traumatic experience. Go gently and listen to what you need to support this process. It can take time, but giving yourself permission to remember and mourn, with the support of someone you trust, can lead to healing.
- **Therapeutic Activities:** Engaging in activities such as writing, art therapy, mindfulness, and working with a specialist mental health clinician to process these traumatic memories.

3. Reconnection with Daily Life During the Perinatal Period

The focus of this final stage is on reconnecting with ordinary daily life and rebuilding relationships. This includes:

- **Creating a Loving Bond with your Baby:** Focus on getting to know your baby and nurturing your relationship with them.





- **Building Supportive Relationships:** Connecting with safe and supportive individuals who can provide emotional and practical support may be helpful.
- **Engaging in Meaningful Activities:** Finding hobbies, community involvement, and other fulfilling activities that may bring you joy and purpose.
- **Developing a New Sense of Self:** For many, past traumatic experiences feel like they define who we are. However, with compassion and a self-paced healing process, over time this trauma may become part of your history but no longer define your sense of self.
- **Supporting Others:** Once you feel well supported yourself, it can be additionally healing to find healthy, manageable ways to support others who have experienced trauma, fostering a sense of community and resilience.

You have the right to:

- **Safety:** You deserve to feel safe and secure.
- **Belief:** Your experiences should be believed and validated.
- **Accountability:** The perpetrator is responsible for their actions.
- **Respect:** You should be treated with dignity and respect.
- **Information:** You have the right to know your choices, rights, safety measures, and available services.
- **Privacy:** Your privacy must be protected.
- **Support:** You have access to medical and counselling services.

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO SEEK SUPPORT

Prevalence:

Sexual abuse is unfortunately a very common crime. You are not alone, and you need not suffer in isolation. There is strength and healing to be gained from disclosing your abuse and seeking support from a trusted professional, family member or friend.

- An estimated 1 in 4 Australians aged 16 years and over have experienced childhood sexual abuse.²
 - With females twice as likely to have experienced childhood sexual abuse than males (37.3% compared with 18.8%)
- 65% of women who experienced physical assault and 81% of women who experienced sexual assault reported that the perpetrator was known to them. This includes assaults by a spouse/partner, ex-partner, family member, or other known individuals.³
- An estimated 1 in 10 Australian men have sexually offended against children.⁴

DEALING WITH COMPLEX-POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER:

C-PTSD refers to the cumulative harm of multiple adverse circumstances in a child's life. During pregnancy and after giving birth, women may experience an increase in C-PTSD symptoms, including:

- Re-experiencing the trauma (e.g., flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive thoughts)
- Avoidance of trauma reminders (people, places, feelings)
- Hyperarousal (e.g., irritability, sleep problems, being easily startled)
- Negative thoughts and mood (e.g., guilt, shame, numbness)



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SEEKING HELP:

Acknowledging the need for professional help is often the first, and sometimes the most difficult step. It is not uncommon to engage support for past experiences when we begin our parenting journey. Persistent feelings of overwhelm, stress, or intrusive trauma memories are clear signals that you may need external support. Recognising these signs early can help prevent difficulties from becoming more severe.

BUILDING A SUPPORT NETWORK:

Every parent needs a support network around them, and for parents with a sexual abuse history, this is vital. There are many social media groups that provide survivors with support and connection, including The Survivor Hub. There are also several free sexual assault support services available across Australia.

- The Survivor Hub: thesurvivorhub.org.au
- 1800 RESPECT (Helpline): **1800 737 732**
- 1800 FULL STOP: **1800 385 578**
- Bravehearts Free Call **1800 272 831**
- Victims Services Access Line: **1800 633 063**
- Victims Services Aboriginal Contact Line: **1800 019 123**
- Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline: **1800 250 015**

Sexual Assault Services:

- Australian Capital Territory – Canberra Rape Crisis Centre **(02) 6247 2525**
- New South Wales – NSW Sexual Violence Helpline: **1800 424 017** or visit NSW Health Sexual Assault Services to find the number for a service near you.
- Northern Territory – Darwin Sexual Assault Referral Centre: **(08) 8922 6472**
- Northern Territory – Katherine Sexual Assault Referral Centre: **(08) 8973 8524**

- Northern Territory – Tennant Creek Sexual Assault Referral Centre: **(08) 8962 4361**
- Northern Territory – Alice Springs Sexual Assault Referral Centre: **(08) 8955 4500**
- Queensland – Sexual Assault Helpline: **1800 010 120**
- South Australia – Yarrow Place Rape and Sexual Assault Service: **1800 817 421**
- Tasmania – Sexual Assault Support Service: **1800 697 877**
- Victoria – Sexual Assault Crisis Line: **1800 806 292**
- Central Victoria – Centre Against Sexual Assault: **(03) 5441 0430**
- Western Australia – Sexual Assault Resource Centre: **(08) 6458 1828** or **1800 199 888** (free call from landlines) 🌸

REFERENCES

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