



# Supporting Male Partners With Sexual Abuse

## Overview

According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, about 43% of men reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment and/or assault in their lifetime. While some males may not identify themselves as victims or survivors, many do not label these instances as rape or sexual assault. Some males would characterize what happened to them as “abusive” or “unwanted.” Of the male survivors of sexual assault, 48.7% experienced it for the first time as adults, and 52.4% knew the perpetrator.

## Myths About Sexual Assault Against Men

MYTH	REALITY
<b>“Real” men are always able to resist sexual assault</b>	Like women, men can freeze during sexual assault. Factors such as drugs, alcohol, the threat of violence, or the presence of a weapon can also prevent men from fighting back against their assailant.
<b>Men are always looking for or willing to engage in sexual activity</b>	Consent to sexual activity must be given by a man, just as it must be by a woman. Choosing not to engage in sexual activity does not make someone “less of a man.”
<b>Only men sexually assault men</b>	Sexual assault can include any unwanted sexual contact, not just penetration. Therefore, a woman can sexually assault a man.

# Recognizing Stigma, Socialization, and Responses to Sexual Violence in Men

Most men are taught to suppress their emotions, avoid vulnerability, and refrain from asking for help, stemming from an internalized belief that expressing weakness or being a victim is unmanly. This societal norm portrays victimization as feminine and uses shame to discourage behaviors and feelings associated with femininity. To maintain a sense of power and safety, men may adhere to stereotypical gender roles and avoid anything perceived as feminine. Since men are socialized to desire sex, they may feel confused when experiencing unwanted sexual contact, questioning their masculinity and sexual identity. This confusion can lead to internal questions like “Does this make me less of a man?” Some men may not even recognize their experiences as sexual assault, especially if they occurred during rituals or traditions, or if parts of the experience were enjoyable or resulted in physical arousal.

## Effects of Sexual Assault on Men

<b>Emotional</b>	Men who have experienced sexual assault may struggle with complex emotions such as guilt, anger, fear, and confusion. Stereotypes and societal expectations about masculinity can exacerbate these challenges, making it difficult for them to express their feelings or seek help.
<b>Psychological</b>	Male survivors may suffer from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and a sense of powerlessness. Common experiences include flashbacks, nightmares, and intrusive thoughts. In a study, male survivors were 2.5 times more likely to have suicidal thoughts than men who had not been abused and less than 16 percent sought counseling.

<b>Physical</b>	These may include physical injuries sustained during the assault, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), chronic pain, and sexual dysfunction.
<b>Social and Relational Challenges</b>	Some male survivors develop intimacy issues, withdraw from relationships, and become isolated. The trauma of their assault and recurring flashbacks can prevent them from enjoying normal sexual relationships with a partner.

## Ways To Support Your Male Partner

<b>Provide a safe space</b>	Providing communication, acceptance, and care is crucial for a male survivor, helping him feel safe enough to open up. Since a survivor's trust has often been betrayed by someone close to him, his ability to trust others is deeply affected. Whether your partner has confided in you about being a survivor or you suspect he might be, it's essential to support him and gradually earn his trust.
<b>Validate your partner's experience</b>	Offering belief and empathizing with the survivor's pain and betrayal are crucial forms of support. Understand that it may take time for your partner to share their experiences at a pace that feels safe for them.
<b>Avoid shaming a male survivor for not being "man enough" to seek help</b>	He has already endured significant shame and does not need more. Acknowledge and affirm each positive step he takes, as these are crucial for valuing both his inner child and the adult man in your relationship.
<b>Help him find resources</b>	Let him know that you are willing to help him locate outside help such as therapists and support groups if he is afraid to reach out.

<b>Addressing intimacy issues</b>	<p>Some issues that may arise include the male survivor wanting to avoid sex altogether, wanting complete control, having difficulty combining sex with emotional intimacy, questioning sexual orientation, and having problems with arousal or triggers. If he withdraws during sex, stop immediately and be patient, as these reactions are common. Survivors can learn to combine sexual and emotional intimacy, and addressing sexual issues is important for both partners. Express your needs gently by seeking mutual understanding and support rather than blaming him for his difficulties.</p>
<b>Challenges in Emotional Conversations with Male Survivors</b>	<p>If your partner appears distant, sleepy or suddenly changes mood during emotionally challenging discussions, he may be dissociating as a defense mechanism to cope with intense emotions. Reassure him gently by using his name and expressing your willingness to talk whenever he is ready.</p>

## Resources

**National Sexual Assault Hotline:** 1-800-656-4673

**1in6:** Provides resources for male sexual assault survivors.

**The Breathe Network:** Provides survivors with trauma-informed healing resources.

**Male Survivor:** Provides discussion forums for male sexual assault survivors as well as recovery resources.

## References

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