



The National Association for
People Abused in Childhood

A close-up portrait of a young woman with dark, curly hair. She is looking directly at the camera with a gentle expression. She is wearing a light-colored, ribbed, short-sleeved top. A thin necklace with small beads is visible around her neck.

Supporting someone
who was abused
as a child?

Supporting recovery from childhood abuse

Supporting someone who was abused as a child?

If someone you care about has told you that they suffered abuse in childhood, there are a few simple things you should know. We know that this might be an upsetting and difficult time for you, so this leaflet sets out what NAPAC has learned about supporting survivors. We hope you find it helpful.

NAPAC takes all types of abuse equally seriously including sexual, physical, emotional abuse and neglect. We know that it is rare for people to suffer from just one type of abuse in isolation; usually there is a context where the survivor has suffered other types of abuse or neglect as well.

The word ‘survivor’ is used here to describe people who suffered abuse in childhood, but we recognise that not everybody is happy to be described that way. Few people like the word ‘victim’ which is the legal term - survivors were victims in childhood but in adulthood they can move on from that if they can access the right support. Some people prefer the word ‘thriver’, for instance. NAPAC does not intend to impose any language or identity on anyone.

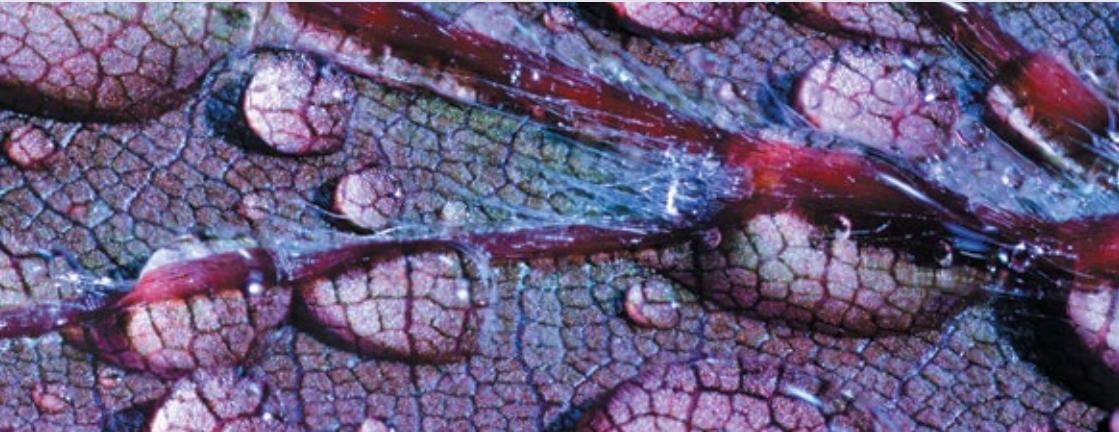
What can I do if I’m supporting someone who was abused as a child?



Believe them

Sometimes the survivor may not believe their own memories, so they are trying to find a way to make sense of partial memories. Children often dissociate during extreme abuse, so they are not fully present mentally or emotionally and are therefore unable to form clear memories. This is a natural adaptation to intolerable experiences, and it may become increasingly embedded if the abuse continues over time. The painful memories may remain hard to face long into adulthood and as the person starts to work through the memories, things may get worse before they start to get better.

Try to be led by the survivor on the amount they can bear talking about. One thing that can be helpful is to focus on how they are feeling about it now rather than talking about the detail of the trauma. But recognise that it can be difficult for survivors to separate the past from their current feelings.



Let the survivor work at their own pace

Pressuring survivors to take steps before they are ready can be counterproductive and lead to a loss of trust. For example, making a report to police of non-recent crimes may seem like the right thing to do but it is enormously challenging for the survivor for a range of complex reasons. Many survivors feel more confident about reporting to police when they have had some support to work through what actually happened.

It is also important to keep in mind that survivors have different hopes and expectations when they report their abuse to the police. Some want their perpetrators brought to justice, whilst others (especially in cases where the perpetrator has died or cannot be found) want their experience recorded.

If the person you are supporting is going through a court case this will be a very difficult time for them and they will need all the support they can get. There are professional services such as Victim Support which may be able to help.



In recent years many more survivors have been making reports to the police and there have been significant improvements in police taking these allegations seriously and cases going to court. Recent statistics show that successful convictions for non-recent abuse have risen and that offenders are being brought to justice regularly across the UK, sometimes many years after the abuse happened.

While all this is very positive news, survivors and their supporters should know that it is still a challenging process to prove a case in court and get convictions for crimes that occurred decades ago. Cases can fail for a number of reasons, and it will be hugely disappointing for the survivor if this happens. But you can offer reassurance that they did do the right thing.



Many survivors feel more confident about reporting to police...

Don't assume anything

Each experience of childhood trauma is unique and so is each survivor's reaction to it. There are some common themes we hear about from survivors but there is no clearly defined set of impacts or sequence of actions leading to recovery. Try not to judge the person for their moods or behaviours; they are working through issues most people never have to face.

It is always difficult to hear about child abuse, even if it is a long time ago. If you find yourself feeling upset by the accounts being shared that is entirely normal. Sometimes when survivors talk about the abuse they suffered they can describe it in a very 'matter of fact' way with little emotion. This can be because they are only slowly coming to face their painful memories having dissociated at the time in childhood. So, you may be upset when the survivor does not seem to be upset. It is okay to tell the survivor how you feel about hearing the painful accounts.

Some survivors may go through a stage of 'over-sharing' and telling everybody about their childhood abuse, which can place a strain on relationships. If this is happening with someone you care about then maybe it is time to suggest they seek professional help or maybe join a well moderated online forum such as <https://www.havoca.org/>



Gaining insight

The booklets for survivors on the NAPAC website answer the most common questions we hear from survivors who call our support line. Reading those booklets will give some insight into what the person you know might be struggling with. We also explain some problems we frequently hear about on the 'Common concerns' page of our website which we know people find very helpful.

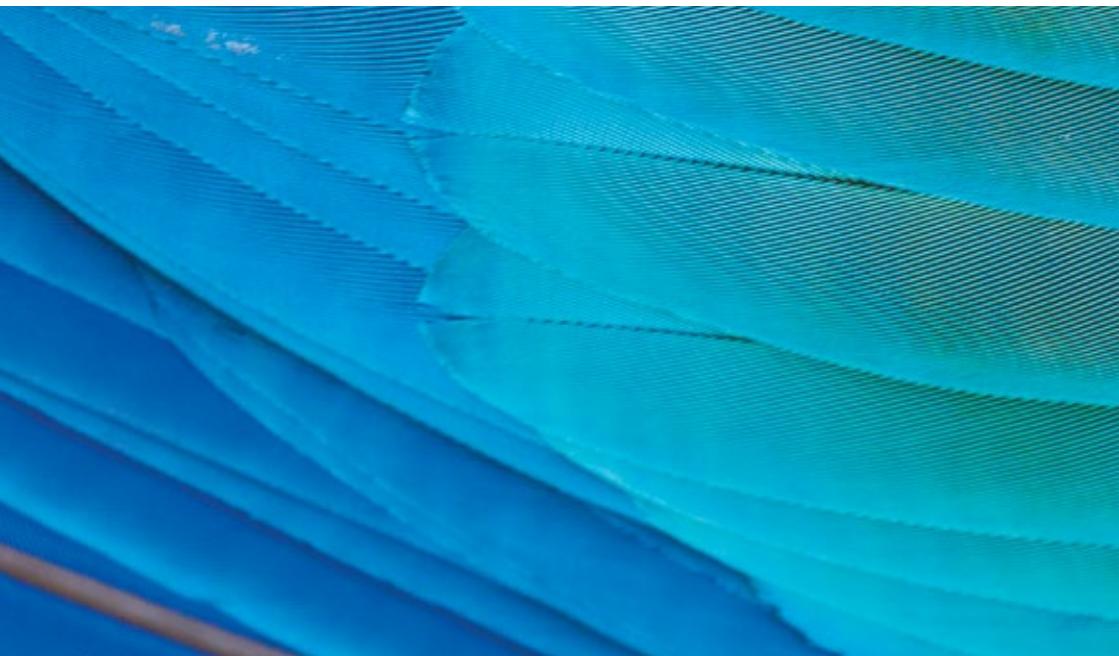
We know that it is hard for survivors to take that first step of telling someone about what happened to them. For instance, 14% of people who contacted the NAPAC support line in 2018-19 told us that they had never spoken to anyone about the abuse before. Many people who contact NAPAC are in their late thirties or older. If someone has decided to trust you to be the first person they disclose to they will probably be feeling nervous. It may have taken a long time to find the courage to speak about the trauma so you should not ask yourself why they did not speak about it before.

Some survivors may go through a stage of 'over-sharing' and telling everybody about their childhood abuse...

Professional support

If you are in a close personal relationship with a survivor you can offer very valuable support but you are too close to be their therapist. Many survivors struggle to find a suitable therapist or counsellor, especially if they cannot pay for private sector services, but you can still be supportive. If the survivor is in therapy they might want to talk about it with you or they might not. The working relationship with a mental health practitioner can be intense and personal and needs to remain confidential if that is what the survivor wants. So do not feel threatened or left out if that is the case.

You might think that the survivor who has disclosed to you should get some professional support but they may not want to do that. The idea of facing the painful memories is often overwhelming for survivors, even with the best professional support. It can take some time to find the courage to engage with recovery work. You cannot rush their decision but you can gently nudge them in the direction of finding support. If the person you know is not already aware of the NAPAC website it can be helpful to suggest that they have a look at the booklets in this series to help make some sense of things.



Feelings of shame

One of the big problems survivors often struggle with is a sense of shame about the abuse. This can be a consequence of the ‘grooming’ process used by abusers to make the child feel like they chose to participate in the abuse. One clear and simple message we always promote is that abuse is never the child’s fault – it is always the abuser’s fault. Although many adults can see the sense of this, the emotional legacy of shame from grooming and abuse in childhood can take a long time to change.

We hear from many survivors that they struggle with both emotional and physical intimacy which can include sexual difficulties. Their feelings and desires around intimacy can change as they work through their painful memories, especially if the abuse they suffered was perpetrated by someone they should have been able to trust. This will be difficult to work through and the details are too complex for this short booklet; we mention it only to highlight that it is a common problem. More detail on this can be found in the book *Allies in Healing* by Laura Davies.

Laura Davies *Allies in Healing: When the Person You Love Was Sexually Abused as a Child*. 1991 Harper Collins, New York

Be aware of family dynamics

The majority of the childhood abuse we hear about from callers to the support line was perpetrated by a family member or by someone known to the family and trusted. Children cannot make sense of the behaviour of family members who they love but who are also cruel to the child. In adulthood we can understand that it is possible to love someone but hate some of their behaviours.

As survivors face the memories of their abuse, their feelings about family members can change and they may decide to keep some distance. This can seem strange to other family members who are not aware of the abuse or who refuse to believe that another family member could do such terrible things.

Sometimes the family member who perpetrates the abuse is a sibling who happens to be stronger in some way. This may not have been apparent to carers at the time or they might not have known how to deal with it. A child who suffered at the hands of a sibling and is not supported or believed if they disclose at the time is likely to carry the hurt for a long time. The long-term consequences can be very similar to what happens as a result of abuse perpetrated by an adult. This can be made even more hurtful if the perpetrating child is treated as a favourite by the carers.



Your own feelings about it

If you have an established friendship with someone who the person you care about suddenly says is an abuser you might feel like you are ‘stuck in the middle’ with no clear way to be consistent in your relationships. This is one of the many serious and wide-reaching consequences of childhood abuse – it can tear families apart for many years afterwards.

In this difficult situation you have to make some choices about how you relate to those family members. One way to deal with it is to be led by the survivor while understanding that they are also likely to be conflicted about how to deal with other family members. There can be many different reasons why the survivor wants to stay in touch with the abuser, including financial.

*Children cannot make sense of the behaviour
of family members...*

Looking forward

Try to be led by what the survivor feels is right for them while keeping possible next steps included in conversations. Survivors need to be able to make their own choices and they need to find their own sense of empowerment. You can help with this by respecting their wishes, even if they do not seem logical. It all takes time. Abuse is about power - abusers take power away from children by forcing them or manipulating them into doing horrible things which is profoundly disempowering.

Try to help the survivor to find a way to take that power back by encouraging them to make their own choices as an informed adult.

The person you are trying to support may have disclosed to you in the past and you were not able to believe it. Until fairly recently there was widespread disbelief in society about the prevalence of child abuse, especially child sexual abuse. If the response to a disclosure is disbelief the survivor might simply shut down, leaving you unable to be effectively supportive. If this has happened you might be able to reopen the conversation by an indirect discussion of child abuse generally in connection with any of the many news stories or dramatisations that have come out in recent years.



Perpetrators of childhood abuse rarely admit that they have done anything wrong, and some even manage to convince themselves that what they did was harmless. This can be very frustrating for survivors seeking to come to terms with what they suffered. So, the only thing left for some survivors to do is to keep their distance and seek support for their own recovery.

Survivors can have very intensely felt emotions of many different types including anger, isolation, sadness, depression, anxiety, fear and distrust. If you are close to a survivor you might start to feel the same way and, for example, start to feel angry on their behalf. Or you might experience feelings of anger on behalf of survivors generally as you learn about the devastating long-term impacts. Empathising in this way is supportive but remember that it is the survivor who is doing the hard recovery work.

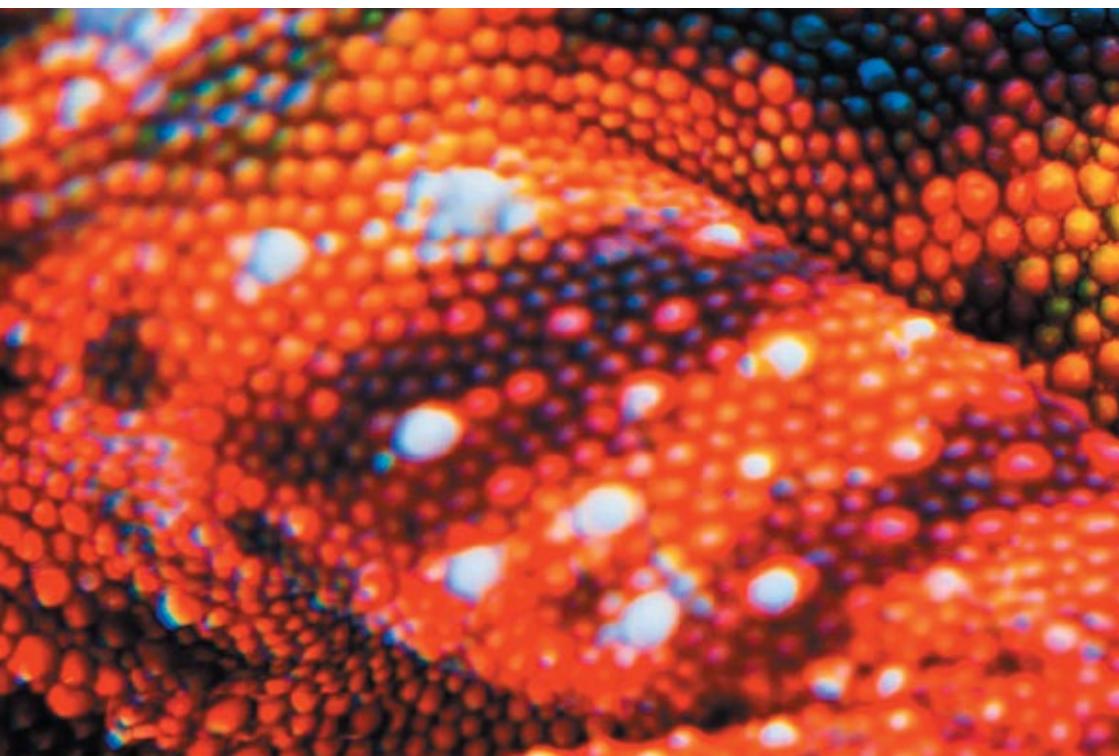


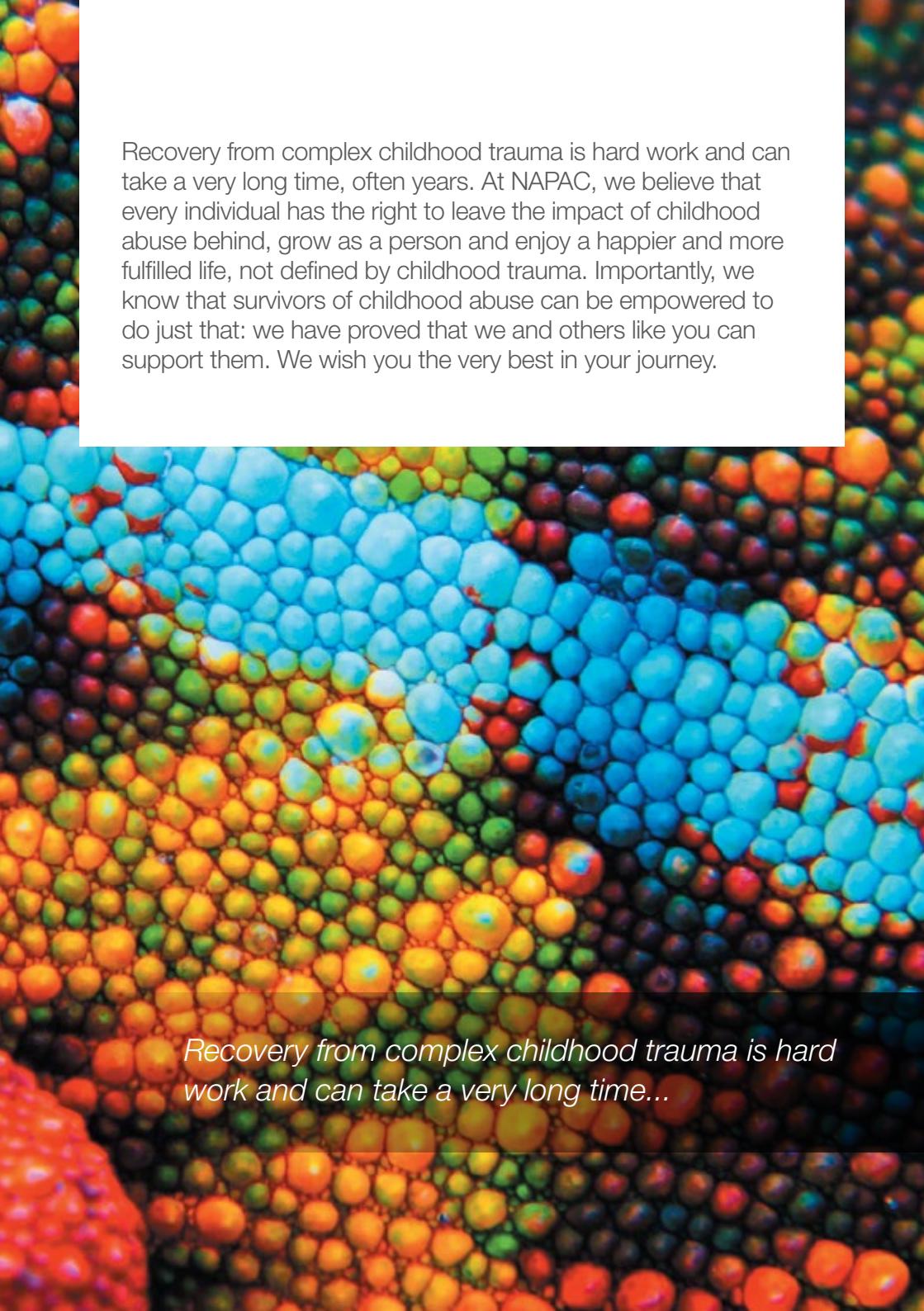
Abuse is about power - abusers take power away from children...

Coping behaviours

These powerful emotions can lead to survivors adopting behaviours to cope that other people may find hard to understand such as drinking or substance use, risky behaviours and sometimes infidelity. These behaviours are not inherent character traits. They are learned coping mechanisms which can be replaced with healthier ways to cope if the survivor is able to access appropriate support. This can and does happen, but it will take time and it is important to be patient.

Although there are very occasionally people who make false allegations, all the research we have seen points to the reality of widespread child abuse. But some of the accounts can be so horrific that they are hard to believe. In supporting a survivor in any state of mental health or ill health it is best to take what they say as their personal truth. At the same time we need to recognise that some manipulative abusers make children believe things that really are impossible. Those distortions of reality can last long into adulthood.





Recovery from complex childhood trauma is hard work and can take a very long time, often years. At NAPAC, we believe that every individual has the right to leave the impact of childhood abuse behind, grow as a person and enjoy a happier and more fulfilled life, not defined by childhood trauma. Importantly, we know that survivors of childhood abuse can be empowered to do just that: we have proved that we and others like you can support them. We wish you the very best in your journey.

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The National Association for
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napac.org.uk

Support line 0808 801 0331

Free from landlines and mobiles

Charity No 1069802

Scottish charity No SC049296

Company No 3565696

