



Supporting Survivor Sexualities

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Sex and sexuality are important and integral parts of most young people's lives, and survivors of sexual abuse and assault are no exception. In fact, survivors may find it more necessary to explore their sexual identity and more complex to navigate engaging in sexual activity. This may be due to a real, projected, or feared impacts of sexual assault on aspects of sexuality, including sexual identity, sexual relationships, and sexual experiences. As advocates, it's crucial we provide space for survivors to process sex and sexuality after experiencing sexual violence.

There's a lot of sexual mythology about survivors of sexual violence -- most of it shaped by rape culture and its agents and enablers -- and a lot of cultural mythology about sex and sexuality in general. Young people's sexuality, sexual lives, and identities are sexualized and stigmatized, all at once. That all gets amplified further for young people who are anything but strongly heteronormative, gender-conforming, and nonsexual.

All that thorniness also makes it pretty easy -- seriously! -- to be a real help to survivors with their sexualities and sexual lives. You may be the first or only source of earnest help and support in these arenas. You may be the first place they hear positive, supportive messaging about sexuality and sex, period, or the first place they get that after the violence they've survived. Just giving consistent, supportive, and basic messaging that they are not sexually broken or made invaluable, or that THEY are the sovereign owners of their sexuality is tremendously powerful. This messaging is likely to have a lifelong positive impact on their sexual lives, making those lives more likely to be healthy, beneficial, and satisfying.

The following are a few important and core things to consider, practical tools, and conversation starters when working with survivors of sexual violence about

sex and sexuality. Like others in this work, I am both a survivor of sexual violence as well as someone who works as a sex educator, crisis counselor, and advocate for survivors and victims. So, I will use “we” below sometimes in either or both contexts. (If you, too, are in this position, I would encourage you to let go of or refuse the notion that you can’t or shouldn’t be both at the same time. Many of us are both, and this dual identity/role can greatly benefit those we help and the field as a whole.)

Acknowledge and accept your awkward.

It’s common for people to feel uncomfortable or anxious discussing sex and sexuality. Anyone we are helping will likely feel awkward, and anyone doing the helping often does, too. Instead of letting that become a barrier, use it as an easy initial way to connect and to start your conversations about this subject. Just saying (if it is true for you) something like, “I don’t know about you, but I sometimes have a hard time talking about any of this and can feel uncomfortable, but know I will do my best,” can go a long way to create a more comfortable environment from the start. If you hit any areas or subjects where you just find you feel too uncomfortable to talk about them well, it’s okay to acknowledge that too, just be sure to do so in a way that makes that about you, not about whatever the survivor is saying. For example, “It’s okay to be interested in casual sex when you’re young, that’s just an area where I personally feel too uncomfortable to do a good job talking about it with anyone. Can I refer you to...?”

Focus on help with key domains¹ of healthy sexuality.

Sexual development is lifelong, but young people are in the time of life — childhood and adolescence — where more of that development usually happens than at any other time of life. Anything you can do to help decrease, soften, or correct the impact of sexual violence and support healthy sexual development can be immensely helpful. That can be as simple as basic messaging about healthy sexuality and that sexuality is itself a potentially positive and beneficial part of a person and life. Messages like:

- Sex should not be joyless
- Everyone involved in sex has a right to safety
- A survivor’s sexuality belongs 100% to them and no one else

¹ http://www.wcsap.org/sites/default/files/uploads/webinars/healthy_sexual_development.pdf

The concept that they and their sexuality are worthy of acceptance may seem basic, but sexual violence can shut them down or turn them on their head, so a survivor may need to first learn, relearn, or re-establish these norms.

In addition, support or counseling that helps develop or strengthen general resilience, positive self-esteem and body image, healthy boundaries, or communication skills are all things that support healthy sexual development in the key domains.

Sexual empowerment.

Sex, including masturbation, can be a powerful way to re-experience bodies as pleasurable rather than painful, as a source of comfort, and as a way to again feel control over one's body and life. Obviously, not everyone who has survived sexual violence will always want or feel ready for any, or sometimes all, kinds of sex, and sex can also be experienced as traumatic rather than as an antidote to trauma. Particularly very soon after abuse or assault, it's most common for survivors to not feel or want to be sexual. Remind them that that is both common and okay, and that one thing that makes their sex life their own is that it always, for any and every reason, gets to be about what they want, when they want it, at their pace, and on their terms. It's okay not to be sexual for as long as feels right to them, and that's an important way of honoring their sexuality.

So often, young people have the idea that to be sexually liberated or empowered means to be up for anything, with anyone, pretty much anytime. In reality, sexual empowerment simply means a person feels like they are in control of their sexuality and are living their sexual life on their own terms as they can. The way that sexual empowerment plays out will vary widely, there isn't one right way. This could mean participating in pretty much anything, setting strict parameters for who and how they engage in sex, or not engaging in sex with anyone.

Rape is not sex.

Don't forget that sex is something where everyone involved is an active and willing participant, which is very different from rape. Sexual violence and sex are different, just like robbery and giving gifts or a boxing match and a physical assault are different. Let them know that and gently remind and repeat as much as you can. It's a lot easier to reclaim your sexual life when you know that you didn't express or share your sexuality during sexual violence, and while our trauma can temporarily hijack that, the person who did us violence did NOT take our sexuality from us.

About masturbation.

While a lot of people have even more trouble talking about masturbation than they do about sex, recognize that masturbation may be the best sexual vehicle for many survivors of sexual violence for quite some time, even if they do want and feel ready for sex with partners. Masturbation allows a person to engage in sex only on their own terms by design, and without having to manage any fears with another person. It is easier to avoid parts of the body, or ways of engaging with them, that aren't wanted or that feel too painful in any respect.

Masturbation also allows a person to engage in any kind of sexual fantasy they want safely, which can include re-enactment fantasy or thoughts which might otherwise be very dangerous or unsafe if done with partners. Many young people, especially young women, still need assurance that masturbation is okay and something many people do. Often masturbation is a place where someone can learn the most about their own sexual responses (and is also almost exclusively the way most people learn to orgasm) and have a highly enjoyable sex life.

You don't have to know the answers to everything.

I have been a sex educator for almost 20 years now and I don't know all the answers. I never will. Human sexuality is just way too diverse, and sexuality research still far too new and behind for ANYONE to ever know everything, let alone people for whom it isn't a full-time job. Your best role will most likely be as a support person who listens more than someone who talks, and as an education-starter. There is great value to a survivor to find an open and accepting advocate when it comes to their sexualities and sexual lives.

Keep handy a list of good people and places as referrals, books, websites, films, podcasts, etc. To share with those you help. Help them learn where and how to get the answers online, in the library, from healthcare and mental health providers, and from themselves and partners through open reflection and communication. Hint: you can even go online with them to Scarleteen and show them our static content and direct services! It can also take a lot of pressure off to let someone know no one — not you or them — has to have the answers to everything, especially something that can be as confusing and complex as sex and sexuality as a younger survivor.

Don't assume an intense focus on sex is due to sexual violence.

People in their teens and twenties tend to be very focused on sexuality, sex, romantic and/or sexual relationships, period; often far more so than older people. It is often assumed that younger survivors of sexual violence who have such a focus must have it because of their abuse, when in fact; it is just as likely that they have it for the same reasons as their peers who have not survived sexual violence.

Talk about PTSD, trauma cues (post-traumatic "triggers") and body memories.

So often survivors aren't prepared for these common occurrences, don't know there are tools and practices to manage them, and also tend to have a great deal of both fear and shame around them. Some young people will have false, misleading, or substandard information about any or all of the above. Most survivors assume these impacts, if occurring, will also occur forever. Educating them not only gives them important help in dealing and healing, it can also give them the comfort of knowing that if these things are barriers to a wanted sexual life now, that does not mean they always will be.

When perps are partners.

This is an obviously dangerous situation that is also exceptionally difficult to support someone through. We will want to engage so that we can counter the isolation an abusive relationship creates. You might ask about the sexual relationship with the person you are helping, is it what they want? How does it benefit them and their lives? What do they like about it? What don't they like?

Try to engage survivors reluctant or currently unable to get and stay away from an abusive partner in conversation about how they might be able to increase their sexual safety while still with them. Harm reduction approaches may include talking about things like hidden methods of contraception, creating a safety plan, and ways they have learned they can safely avoid sex with the partner.

Counter sexual myths about abuse.

For instance, we know, from both study and anecdote, that people do not become gay, lesbian, or bisexual because of abuse or assault. Having been victimized by a man cannot itself create an attraction to women: repulsion to one gender isn't attraction to another. Another example of sexual mythology about survivors is attributing increased interest in sex after sexual violence as either problematic or only a reaction to the abuse. Counter myths with facts. It's also

beneficial to help those you work with to think about how they feel about something, and if it feels healthy and beneficial to them or not; that individual context and lived experience is where the truth lies, not stereotype.

Sexuality is largely formed by all our lived experiences.

Even if part of sexuality has been influenced by sexual violence, that doesn't mean it is necessarily bad, problematic, or should be repressed or avoided. Sexual violence is part of our life experience, and like so many other life experiences, it will influence and be part of our sexuality. Be open and accepting of situations that you have bias around and so may assign as harmful by default, without considering context; develop and maintain an awareness of those biases and learn to work around them. For example, you may have the idea it is never positive or beneficial for any teenager to have sexual partners, period, so it might be easy to figure that is doubly bad for teen survivors, even though for some, it is immensely positive and helps them heal.

It is difficult to know, that something done to you, that you didn't want will have an impact on your sexuality and sexual life. Particularly, impacts from the assault that create a need for more involved sexual communication or make certain ways of engaging in sex completely off-limits. There will almost always be some negative impacts, and while many will be temporary for survivors who get good help and support, some may be permanent. There's no dismissing or denying this, nor any way of making it okay. However, it can be helpful to make clear that just about everything has something to do with sexuality, and those who have and those who haven't experienced sexual violence often have had some kind of trauma and/or have struggles, frustrations, or emotional pain around sex or sexuality. Sexual challenges and difficulties are by no means exclusive to survivors of sexual violence.

At the same time, there are often positive outcomes -- superpowers, if you will - - that survivors, especially well-supported survivors, develop not due to sexual violence or the perpetrator(s), but through their own choices, efforts, and their healing process. In other words, our sexuality and sexual lives are often greatly impacted and influenced by the things we do, and the experiences we have. This includes our biggest challenges in our process of healing; not due to being victims, but due to being survivors.

Author

This resource was created for WCSAP by Heather Corinna, from Scarleteen.com.

Reading, Resources, & Tools

- [Guttmacher Overview](#)
- [Healthy Sexuality Development](#)
- [Healthy Sexuality Resource List](#)
- [Healthy Sexuality Values Clarification](#)
- [Ten Rules for Talking with Teenagers About Sex](#)
- [Youth Sexuality and New Media](#)