



Sex and sexuality after childhood trauma

How does childhood trauma impact sex and sexuality in adults?

- Childhood trauma comes in many forms, including sexual and non-sexual abuse.
- For survivors of non-sexual abuse, childhood trauma may lead to difficulties with trust, self-image, or identity, such that they do not feel that it is safe to be close to another person or even to know themselves well enough to feel that they know who they might be attracted to or what they might enjoy, sexually.
- For survivors of sexual abuse, the consequences for adult sex and sexuality can be very complicated both directly and indirectly. These impacts might be different depending on the age when the abuse occurred, your sex or gender identity, or if the abuser was a same-sex or opposite-sex perpetrator.

How might sexual abuse impact an adult survivor?

- Childhood sexual abuse can make it hard for you to feel safe sexually and to feel like you can be fully open to your sexual feelings and desires.
- Childhood sexual abuse often happens before puberty, before the full development of your adult sexual body. Stimulating a body sexually, through force or through attempts to sexually arouse a child, can throw off the gradual and slow development of sexual responses and lead to problems with sexual pain, or difficulties with becoming aroused and having orgasms in adulthood.
- Childhood sexual abuse can cause some survivors to experience certain kinds of sexual activities or stimulation as triggering of flashbacks or nightmares.
- Some survivors find it hard to know what they do and do not find sexually pleasurable, and this can lead them to engage in sexual activities that end up feeling retraumatizing.
- Some survivors find that their sexual responses become “conditioned” to things connected to their abuse. That can often happen if the abuse itself was both arousing and painful or exciting and frightening. This can mean that survivors might be really turned on by things that, as an adult, now confuse, disgust, or frighten them. This can mean that they feel very turned on by things that are painful or involve harm to themselves or someone else.
- For some people, especially boys abused by men, this can mean that they are turned on sexually by adult men but identify as straight. This can cause people to feel anxious or confused about their sexual orientation.

How can the sexual impacts of trauma affect relationships?

- Being triggered by certain sexual positions or kinds of stimulation can make feeling close and safe in your sexual relationship with your partner very difficult and feel frustrating and painful.



- Being triggered by certain sexual positions or kinds of stimulation can leave your partner feeling as though they are hurting you or feeling like they are getting it wrong with you, especially if you can't talk about it.
- Having sexual pain can make it difficult to fully enjoy your sexual relationship with your partner.
- If the things that turn you on are things that you feel bad about, it can be hard to share these things with your partner, which may lead you to keep those parts of your sexual life a secret.

How have these sexual impacts affected your relationship?

- Have you been able to make a list of triggers and share and discuss these with your partner?
- How do you cope with feelings of fear or avoidance in your sexual relationship?
- Have you been able to talk together about what turns you on and what you would like more of and less of?
- Do you have sexual pain and, if so, have you been able to find appropriate resources to help you manage and treat this pain?