



Sexual relationships after sexual trauma

Building a healthy sexual relationship

A healthy, satisfying sexual relationship requires work for all couples. It's not necessary to have a partner to work through sexual healing but, if you do, try to involve them in the process. It can be a challenging time for them too.

Tips for sexual healing

- **Slowly become comfortable with your body.**
- **Talk with your partner about how you are feeling and what you each need.** Work out what is sensual, playful, sensitive, joyful and fulfilling for both of you. Tell your partner what you like, what you don't like, what you would like to be able to do.
- **It may be helpful to try some touching exercises** to develop intimacy and trust.
- **Remember to make sex playful and fun.** Laugh with your partner and include the small things such as cuddling, kissing and holding hands.
- **Be really clear about your own and your partner's boundaries and limits.** Make sure everyone feels safe. Everyone has the right to say no to things that don't feel comfortable or safe. Agree to respect each other's boundaries always. Agree in advance on what you will both do if you are triggered during sex. Have a word or signal to pause what is happening if you feel anxious.
- **Consider using other avenues to assist with healing.** These might include a sex therapist, books, and online forums and information. Remember that your partner is also impacted and may benefit from accessing information. Avoid using pornography because this usually depicts sex that is not equal and respectful for everyone.
- **Everyone heals from sexual trauma at different rates.** Try not to push yourself too fast or be too harsh on yourself. Many people find that if they work through other areas of healing, their difficulties with sex and intimacy start to lessen.
- **Be gentle, kind and patient with yourself.** Some days will be good and others not so good. When difficulties arise, reassure yourself that it isn't because you are unattractive or flawed. Persist, and over time, things should become easier and better.



What to do when triggered

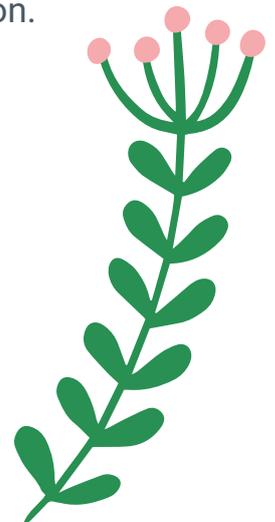
People who have been sexually abused or sexually assaulted often experience difficulties with touch. For some, touch can trigger an automatic reaction such as freezing, flashbacks, zoning out (dissociation), feeling sick or panic attacks. These reactions can overwhelm the body.

When this happens, it is important to stop what you are doing and calm the body. Take deep, slow breaths and focus on your surroundings so that you are aware of the present. Remind yourself that you are safe now and that the abuse/assault happened in the past. It can be helpful to try to identify what caused or triggered the reaction. Becoming aroused during sex can be a trigger for some people. It is helpful to talk with your partner about your reaction and try to identify what would make you feel safer during sex and intimacy.

If you are finding sex and intimate touch distressing, it may be helpful to agree with your partner on a no-sex period of time to allow you to work through the difficulties you are having as a result of the trauma. This can take the pressure and feelings of expectations off you and allow you to focus on healing first.

A summary of things to remember for healthy sex

- 🌿 Difficulties with intimacy and sex after sexual trauma are very common.
- 🌿 Healthy sex and sexual trauma are very different.
- 🌿 Healthy sex involves respect, equal control and safety for everyone.
- 🌿 Healthy sex is pleasurable, enjoyable and satisfying.
- 🌿 Take your time, be patient and kind to yourself.
- 🌿 Communicate with and involve your partner.
- 🌿 There are people, books and websites that can assist.
- 🌿 It is possible to achieve a positive sex life.



There are many things you can do to look after yourself and promote recovery from a traumatic event or situation. A **Care Package** for adults who have experienced sexual trauma is available on the SARC website. The package explores difficulties commonly experienced by trauma survivors, and offers suggestions for coping and healing.

The **Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC)** is a free 24-hour emergency service providing medical and counselling services for people who have experienced a recent (within 14 days) sexual assault. Counselling for any sexual assault/abuse experienced recently or in the past is also available to people of all genders aged 13 years and above. Call SARC on **(08) 6458 1828** or Freecall **1800 199 888**.