

## **Tips For Partners Of A Woman Who Has Been Abused**

Women who have been abused can heal and move on to form healthy and happy intimate relationships. If your partner has been abused, you're in a unique position to help her on her road to healing.

**1. Educate yourself on the effects of abuse.** While you may never be able to understand the abuse your partner experienced, do what you can to learn. Resources on abuse abound online, in the library and from various service providers. Make an effort to understand what your partner is going through.

**2. Don't push her to talk about the experience.** At the same time, make sure she knows you're ready to listen if she does want to discuss it with you. Know that you'll likely have to prove your trustworthiness over and over in other facets of the relationship before she will feel comfortable trusting you with knowing the details of such a traumatic experience.

**3. Don't ever pressure her to have sex.** Unwanted touching or sexual pressure will only reinforce her sense of distrust. Women who have been abused often develop extremely low self-esteem. In addition, sexual pressure will add guilt on top of her fear. Don't let yourself believe she's not aware of your needs; she undoubtedly is and she's likely wrestling with her own emotions and the feeling that she's "depriving" you of sex. This is not to say you can't be intimate, but you must go slow and speak with her to define her boundaries. Pay attention to her outward signals and be ready to back off.

**4. Be sensitive, but not pitying.** If your partner has come far enough to tell you about the abuse she experienced, she may exhibit a heightened awareness of your attitude toward her – e.g. if you now consider her to be "damaged goods." Be careful about apologizing for what's happened to her and try to refrain from making comments like "Oh, you poor thing." She may get the sense that you're taking pity on her and resent you for it. Possibly the best thing you can do for her after this sort of revelation is to simply be present and listening. It's tempting to try and problem-solve, but you can't "fix" a woman who has experienced abuse. You can only be there for her while she finds her own healing, hopefully in part through her relationship with you.

**5. Above all, be patient.** It may at times feel like you're bending over backward to cater to her emotions, but if you truly wish to pursue a meaningful, healthy relationship, you'll have to be patient. Frustration, anger and resentment on your part will only serve to add to her distress, drive a deeper wedge between you and possibly destroy whatever progress you've already made in becoming close to her. You must be dedicated to being there for your partner and offering the support she needs, or your relationship may have the potential to cause even more damage. She's experienced betrayal and humiliation on the deepest level and if she senses or experiences more hurt from you, it will only strengthen her reluctance and withdrawal.

Anyone who has been through a harrowing incident has had flashbacks to some degree. Whether it was a car accident or a physical fight, there are often triggers that pull a person back to that moment in time and the fear they felt. This also happens to people who have been in an abusive relationship and it's often uncontrollable and inconvenient, both to the person experiencing it and those around them.

The flashbacks and the fear that comes along with them can be incredibly tough for the victim to handle, let alone someone who knows nothing or very little about the incident. When you're going into a relationship with someone who has been abused – whether it was verbally, emotionally, physically or sexually – it's very important to know where their anxiety resides.

If you're dating someone who has been abused, there may be specific actions, sayings or movements that could really upset them. Sometimes the victim doesn't even know all of their triggers, which can take both of you by surprise. This is not in any way saying that people who have suffered are damaged and undeserving, but they just need a little extra consideration and understanding. Knowing these triggers upfront will prevent you from being the one that frightens them and will allow you to be the comfort they need if there isn't any warning.

Even if you know their experiences in depth, you can't control everything. So there will likely be a time when they experience post-traumatic stress. There are a few important things to understand about these situations and how to handle them.

- Stay calm and be supportive. If they were a victim of physical abuse, they may not want you to hug or console them. It could make them more afraid.
- Even though you may not fully understand what they are experiencing or why something that seems menial turns their world upside down, it's important that you be respectful and as sensitive as you can to their situation.
- Don't try to tell them that they are over-reacting or that they need to get over the past. They physically and mentally can't. That is what post-traumatic stress is all about. What they are experiencing is more than a flashback. They are reliving the past as if it were happening at that very moment. Letting them experience things in a supportive, safe environment will help them gain control of the memories instead of feeling like a victim to them. They are sharing their most vulnerable parts with you, so don't do anything to make them feel emotional or physical concern.
- Know that time really does heal them. The more time that passes, the easier it will be to cope. You'll notice their reactions will become more controlled and less terrifying. This is progress and with support, they may not have any flashbacks or anxiety attacks in the future.

Being a little bit broken doesn't mean someone is permanently destroyed. Just remember to be sensitive, understanding and supportive. Knowing that you are reliable and comforting will ultimately help heal your partner. Don't be alarmed if gentleness and understanding brings out some deeper and more difficult emotions. They are allowing themselves to be vulnerable because they feel safe enough to let it out. If it seems like things are too much to work out together, you can always consider seeking professional help. Since 1 out of 4 women and many men have experienced some type of abuse in intimate relationships, this is a much more common issue than people realize.