

Role of carers and supporters

Friends and partners are important allies for survivors of child abuse, but survivors often struggle with communication and trust in their close relationships. Romantic relationships can be especially fraught. When a survivor decides to address the impact of abuse on her/his life, this can put even more stress on a relationship or a friendship, as the survivor can quickly feel over-whelmed, as painful emotions and memories flood back. Partners, in particular, can be left feeling unloved and unappreciated.

It's hard to watch someone you care about in pain, and some people walk away. Carers and supporters can often feel helpless as they watch their loved ones struggle with issues that they may not understand, however, simply "being there" with a survivor as they try to reconnect with the world makes the journey all the shorter. Partners and friends don't need to be heroes. It's a fine line to walk between offering support, and trying to "rescue" someone, but it's an important one. Survivors need people who are constant, consistent and trustworthy presences in their lives. "Rescue" fantasies are just that, fantasies.

During periods of crisis, or when the survivor is incapacitated, partners and friends can experience high levels of stress. The day-to-day of looking after someone and caring for them is hectic. For many partners and carers, being confronted with reality of child abuse, and its consequences, can challenge their understanding of themselves and their world. Just as survivors can feel alone on their journey, so can their partners. They too can feel as though there is no one to talk to, as if no one understands.

It is important that partners and friends develop clear boundaries, and look after themselves. Caring for a survivor can be an opportunity for warmth, intimacy and joy. Friends and partners can develop new faculties of empathy and understanding. Looking after a survivor means that, in the future, you have a friend or partner who is happier, stronger, and able to give back the support they have received.

(From Australian Adults Surviving Child Abuse Organization www.asca.org)