



# Reclaiming Intimacy After Trauma



## **What is intimacy?**

This question may seem obvious especially when looking at it from surface level. Indeed intimacy does include engaging in sex with another person, but also with yourself.

Being able to feel a high-degree of comfortability with your own body and self is a form of intimacy that can create a strong feeling of relaxed intimacy.

As well as this, besides the sexual element, creating and growing a close bond with a partner through communication and honesty is a form of intimacy which should be prioritised. Having a worthy partner that is willing to understand you and your trauma is what you deserve.

# How trauma can effect intimacy



Sexual trauma and difficulties can be seen on a spectrum.

With people who have gone through sexual assault or violence, they can experience hypersexuality, low libido (sex drive) or remaining abstinent from sex. Most people will be somewhere in the middle or fluctuate between them, but regardless, this is completely normal

Not being able to become aroused during sex is also normal after trauma.

For many who have gone through trauma, they find it hard to understand that the assault/violence is starkly different from consensual sex with a respectful partner.

Hence, triggers or flashbacks can effect being intimate and it's reasonable to have the thoughts that once came about during sexual violence and assault to come forward, once again, when having sex; even if it's in a safe environment, with someone you feel comfortable with.



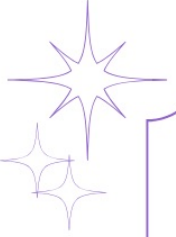
# How trauma can effect intimacy

There are different reactions to dealing with these triggers with with some people avoiding the things/situations that brought on triggers (e.g. smell of alcohol) whilst others can't understand their triggers for years. Both responses are completely valid

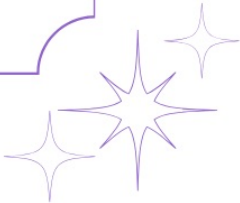
Often people turn to coping mechanisms to be able to have sex such as drinking alcohol, taking drugs, self-harming, overworking oneself. Reminder, there is no right way to respond to trauma and the responses that you have had are normal and rational. It's imperative to remove any blame or stigma surrounding this topic.

It's suggested that by looking through the lens of a 'trauma-informed approach', coping mechanisms encompass a wide variety of responses and are individual to each person and their experiences. Therefore these can effect how we view sex and what we feel like we need to do to "endure or "get through" sexual intercourse (drinking for example)

# How trauma can effect intimacy



Research suggests (Morrow and Smith, 1995; Eaton and Paterson-Young, 2018) that coping mechanisms come down to 2 purposes

- Keep ourselves from being overwhelmed with feelings and memories we cannot cope with
  - Reduce feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness and lack of control
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Those who have been subjected to sexual violence and abuse may have feelings of blame or guilt for what you have been through or how they reacted to it, which can lead to feelings of unworthiness in terms of being in a relationship

Feelings of self-blame may arise resulting in people feeling like it was their fault for the abuse or trauma which is extremely common. People may search for why it happened, concluding they did something wrong






# How trauma can effect intimacy



## Reminder:

Everyone is different! There is no right or wrong to feel when re-introducing intimacy into your life. Some people will go straight back into intimacy and relationship whilst others will abstain for years – both of these are valid paths forward.

Some people who have gone through trauma do report that they've experienced changes in sexuality or what they like during sex. However, research on this is limited. Nevertheless, it cannot be disputed that going through trauma from violence, abuse and assault can effect your identity and may make you question you sexuality or the type of sex you enjoy.



Despite feeling a number of these things – a reminder can be made that the abuse/violence/assault you went through does not define you and you are worthy of having intimacy

## Beginning to become comfortable with intimacy

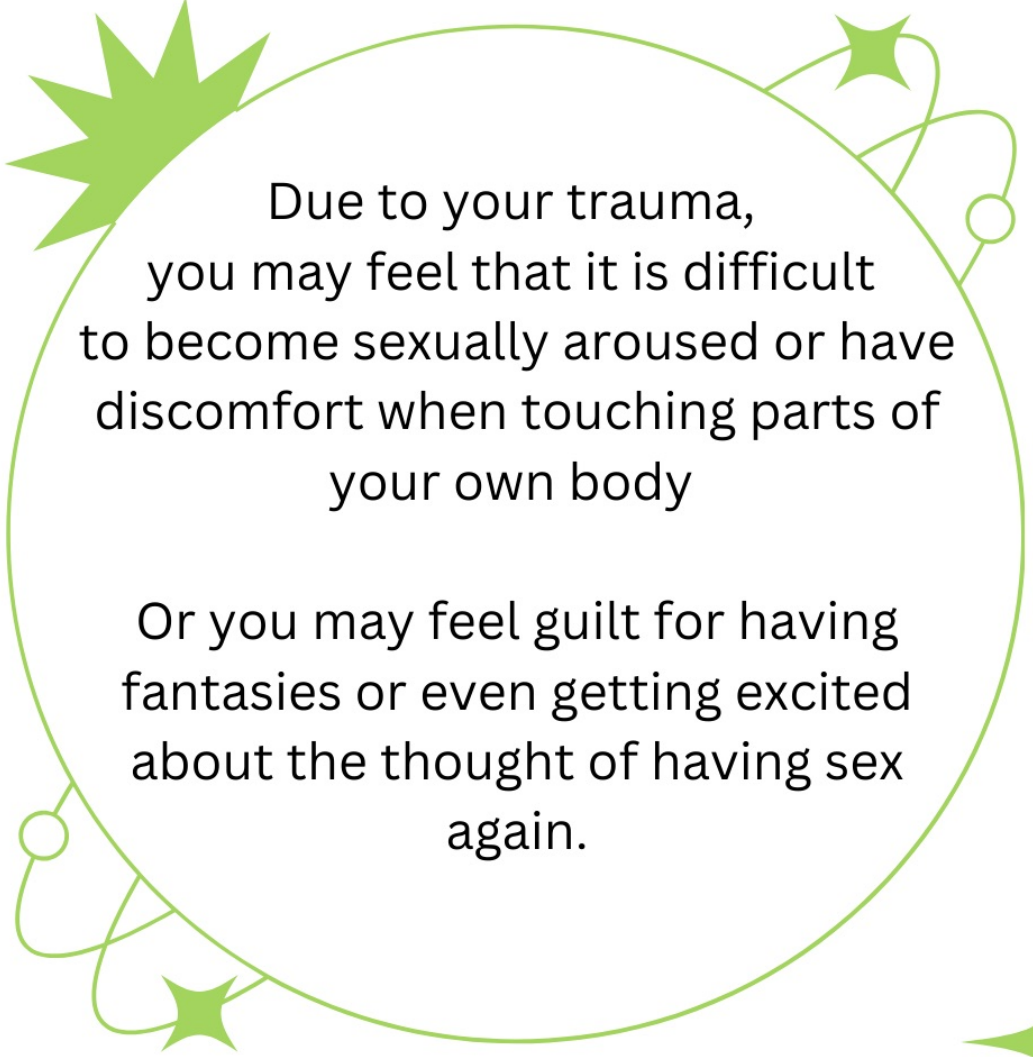
Be patient and kind to yourself – move at your own pace.

There's lots of different advice out there on how to seek help with much advice pertaining to seeking professional help – this is completely your decision.

By being able to take back your body, you're regaining your **sexual agency**.


The cliché of being happy in yourself before being happy with someone else can apply to this to the subject of masturbation. Some may find this helpful to become more in tune with their selves after violence or trauma – wanting to fully understand your self.

## Sex and masturbation - the empowerment of it





Due to your trauma, you may feel that it is difficult to become sexually aroused or have discomfort when touching parts of your own body

Or you may feel guilt for having fantasies or even getting excited about the thought of having sex again.



But you should not feel ashamed for having these perfectly normal human-thoughts!

Thinking and being sexually intimate with another person or with yourself should be a positive experience. You're allowed to communicate your wants and needs without feeling like a burden. You shouldn't feel silenced.





# Masturbation



By experiencing intimacy on your own before with a partner, you can begin to re-learn what you like, dislike and how to navigate your triggers.

Because what used to feel good before sexual violence or abuse may no longer be the same, trying new things and exploring your pleasures can be positive and exciting

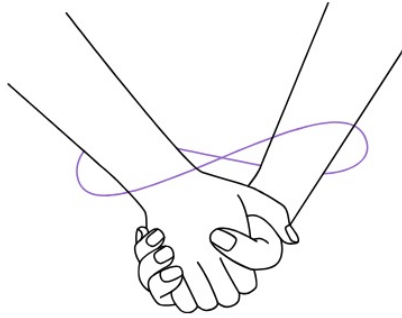
By being completely in control of your own pleasure, you can rediscover that feeling intimate is a positive experience and can help you regain power over your sexual pleasure.

By touching your body, think of it as though you are reclaiming it – it does belong to you, you own it



# Sex with a partner

When you decide you are ready to be intimate with a partner, you can communicate what you have learnt about yourself, what you find feels good and the boundaries you want to abide by – your partner should be your ally.



However, you mustn't feel like there is a time frame on this – take your time rediscovering your own intimacy as well as intimacy with someone else .

## **Reminder:**

Feeling the pressure to orgasm in order to have achieved good sex or intimacy is not something only people who have been subjected to sexual trauma, violence and abuse deal with – many people in today's society also hold this belief. However by going through violence or assault, it can make it more difficult to reach the big O. To negate this, focus on the pleasure and sensations you're feeling – enjoy the journey rather than focussing on the destination.

# Relationships and Partners

Many people who have experienced sexual trauma have voiced that finding a partner who you're comfortable with can really help with reclaiming intimacy.



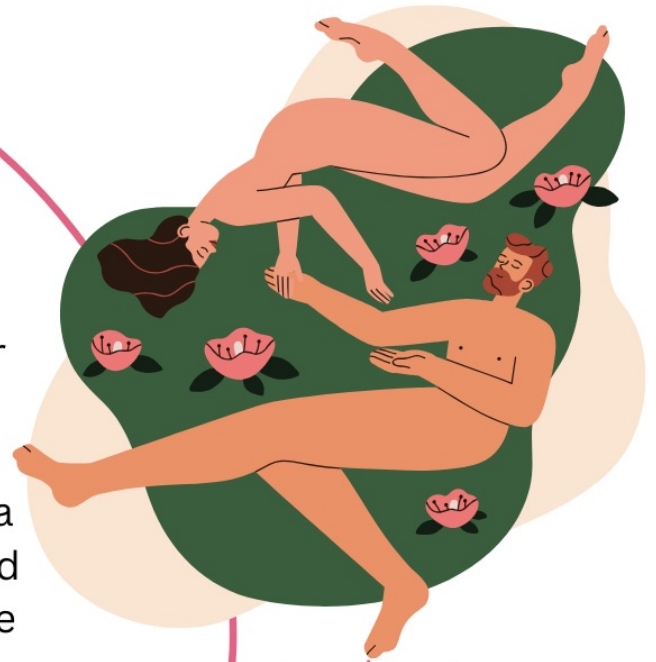
Dr Jessica Taylor did a study with 756 men and women who were subjected to sexual violence and found over half of the sample said they were able to have pleasurable sex with partners since their rape or abuse.

Key attributes to look for in a partner include being honest, trustworthy, loving, respectful, reliable. The men and women from the sample also reported that sex was enjoyable because their partners made sure to check they were okay throughout.



# Relationships and Partners

Also, research has found that people who have told their partners of their trauma have revealed that it has helped their sex lives. When partners are willing to listen to their partner who has gone through the trauma and learn about their triggers and boundaries, it creates a clear line of reliable communication – whether that be whilst engaging in sex or not.



## Reminder:

**Telling your partner about your trauma is completely your choice. When you feel as though your partner is ready to understand and support you, you can make the choice in your own time and decide how you would like to explain it your experience. This could be within a deep conversation or in a passing chat. Do what you feel is safe.**

For example, using gentle communication whilst having sex and asking simple questions such as ‘is it okay if I do (blank)?’, is ensuring consent is present throughout, thus creating a more enjoyable experience for both parties.

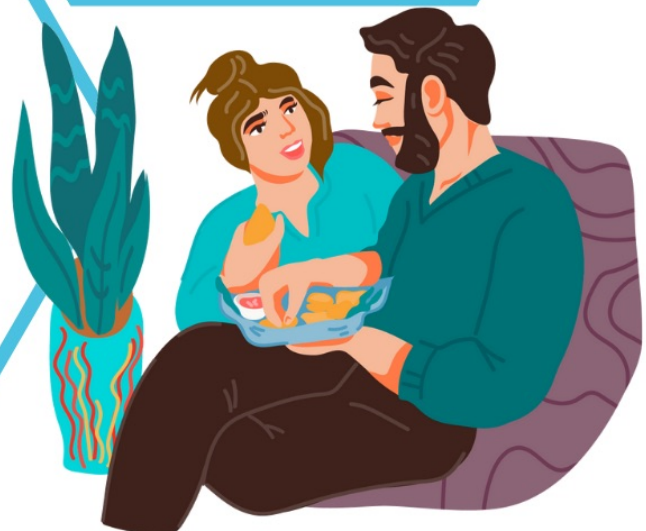
# Relationships and Partners

Remember, that no matter what the reaction is, you deserve to be respected and loved. You are not to blame for what has happened



Some partners may feel lost in how to react and to help you. Therefore you may both decide to find professional support. By partners educating themselves on how trauma can affect intimacy, it may help them feel supportive of you.

This is ensuring that the person who has been subjected to sexual violence, trauma or abuse is at the centre of discussions and that they are always guaranteed to feel supported. Outside reassurance can really help bolster a persons return to intimacy.





# Forming New Relationships



It can be nerve-racking to trust someone again after trauma so perhaps when meeting with someone new, it could be best to meet them in a public space therefore exiting is easier.

When forming new relationships after trauma, communicating your boundaries and your terms of consent in the earlier stages can be vital to feel safe in a new environment



It can be difficult to jump straight into another relationship especially if your trauma with sexual violence, abuse and assault was with someone who you previously felt like you could trust. This is completely normal and okay though.



# Choice

Despite previously having choice taken away, now you have complete control.

You decide what you do  
You can decide the pace

You shouldn't have to feel obliged to have sex with anyone. You should be able to enjoy being intimate with who you want to and when you want to.

Everyone has the right to say 'no' to something they don't want or don't feel comfortable doing – and if your partner disagrees, that is a red flag.

Whether you find that you want to increase or decrease your intimacy, you deserve it

Sex is a choice not an obligation – you don't owe anyone sex.

Finding intimacy is empowering

## Final Reminders

Remember, recover is not linear and reclaiming your intimacy will not look or feel the same for everyone – you may have good and bad days, but by continuing to push forward, you are allowing yourself to not be withheld by your trauma

Regardless of anyone's experience, you deserve to have intimacy in your life again

Be empathetic towards yourself, take the time you need – find pleasure in learning about yourself

# Signposts for Further Information

- Victim Focus - Caring For Yourself After Sexual Violence
- Living Well - Partners: Sexual Intimacy
- Embrace Sexual Wellness LLC - Physical Intimacy After Sexual Trauma
- Survivors UK - Sex After Sexual Abuse
- CAASE - Reclaiming Sex and Romance After Assault
- Everyday Feminism - Sex After Sexual Assault: A Guide for When It's Tough
- InStyle - Sex Life After Rape or Assault
- Scarleteen - A Guide to Orgasm After Rape
- The Mix - How to Manage The Fear of Intimacy After Rape
- Safeline - Surviving Christmas