

# UNDERSTANDING **SEXUAL ABUSE**

*"I used to pretend it didn't happen,  
but it did and I hated my life."*



THE **HOPE** LINE  
[www.TheHopeLine.com](http://www.TheHopeLine.com)



## ***TRIGGER WARNING***

---

This guide talks honestly about sexual abuse, trauma, and their impact on mental health and relationships. Some stories and topics may feel heavy, upsetting, or bring back traumatic memories. If you feel overwhelmed, you can always [chat with one of our Hope Coaches at thehopeline.com.](#)



*I'm scared. I've never  
opened up about this.*

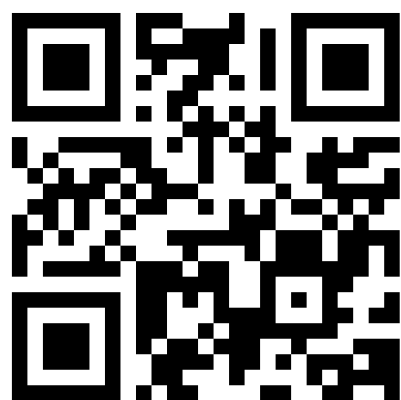
A person with long brown hair, wearing a green hoodie and purple pants, is sitting on a wooden dock. They are looking out at a body of water under a cloudy, overcast sky. The water is dark and reflects the sky.

THE **HOPE**LINE

**Know that you are not alone.**

### **Chat with a Hope Coach!**

If you need someone to talk to, visit [\*\*thehopeline.com/chat-live\*\*](https://thehopeline.com/chat-live) to chat with a Hope Coach about what you're experiencing. Hope Coaches are available 24/7 to listen and offer support whenever you need it.



# ABUSE

## WHAT IS IT?

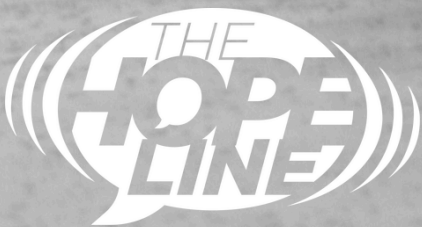
---

Abuse is **not just “bad behavior.”** It’s when someone uses their power, access, or your trust to treat you in a way that hurts you, controls you, or crosses your boundaries on purpose.

Sexual abuse is any physical, verbal, or visual sexual behavior that you did not freely choose, that is pushed on you, or that happens when you’re unable to give real consent (because of age, fear, intoxication, pressure, or a power difference). It is about what was done to you, not how you reacted in the moment.

Abuse is **INTENTIONAL**, not an accident, and it often comes from people who are already in your life—friends, family, partners, leaders, teachers, coaches, or pastors—not just random strangers. If someone makes you feel unsafe, pressured, or trapped, your feelings matter, and what they did is not your fault.

*Relatable? It's okay.  
Don't blame yourself.*





# STATS

## ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE

### **423,000** VICTIMS/YEAR

Approximately 423,000 people ages 12+ in the U.S. experience sexual violence each year, and more than half of all sexual violence victims are under age 30.

### **60%** ARE COMMITTED BY SOMEONE KNOWN TO THE VICTIM

31% are committed by strangers; 28.3% are committed by well-known or casual acquaintances; 21.4% are committed by intimate partners; 13.1% are committed by other relatives; 6.2% are unknown.



### **MOST GO UNREPORTED**

Only about 23%–31% of rape and sexual assault incidents are reported to police, meaning **around 2 out of 3 are never reported.**

For many victims ages 12–24, fear, shame, self-blame, and not wanting to “make it a big deal” are common reasons for staying silent, which helps explain why reporting rates are so low.

*Remember, with support, healing  
is absolutely possible!*

### **SURVIVORS**

OF SEXUAL ABUSE ON  
AVERAGE ARE

**2.7X More Likely**  
to have DEPRESSION, ANXIETY,  
and EATING DISORDERS

**6X More Likely**  
to attempt SUICIDE

**13X More Likely**  
to abuse ALCOHOL

**26X More Likely**  
to abuse DRUGS

# TYPES OF SEXUAL ABUSE

## RAPE

Rape is a form of sexual assault that involves forced sexual intercourse. It includes vaginal, anal, or oral penetration, which may be carried out with a body part or an object.

## MOLESTATION OR SEXUAL ASSAULT

Molestation or Sexual Assault involves any unwanted sexual contact that does not include penetration. This may include acts such as sexual touching or fondling.

## INCEST

Incest refers to sexual intercourse that occurs between closely related individuals. It can sometimes begin with inappropriate touching and escalate to sexual fondling or more extensive sexual activity.

## OTHER FORMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

**Exhibitionism:** Exposing private body parts to someone against their will, causing distress or violation.

**Forced Masturbation:** Compelling someone to masturbate themselves or another person without consent.

**Sexual Exploitation:** Forcing someone into prostitution or commercial sex acts against their will.

**Non-Consensual Exposure to Pornography:** Showing someone sexually explicit material without their permission.

**Non-Consensual Creation of Pornography:** Using someone against their will to produce sexually explicit images or videos.

**Obscene Communications:** Making harassing or explicit phone calls, texts, or messages of a sexual nature.

**Harmful Sexual Conduct:** Any sexual behavior that damages a person's mental, emotional, or physical well-being.

**Unwanted Physical Contact:** Non-consensual kissing, groping, or other intimate touching.

**Sexual Threats:** Verbal or implied threats of unwanted sexual activity to intimidate or coerce.





# Non-consensual sex is **RAPE**

---

If someone is too drunk or high to respond clearly, they cannot give consent. **Continuing is rape.**

If consent is not fully voluntary and mutual, it does not exist. **That constitutes rape.**

If someone initially agrees but then withdraws consent—verbally or by pulling away—**proceeding is rape.**

Prior consent does not imply ongoing permission. Assuming it does and **continuing is rape.**

## That includes **DATE RAPE**

---

**If you've experienced date rape or sexual assault at a party, it is not your fault.** Date rape occurs when someone you know—such as a date or acquaintance—forces non-consensual sexual intercourse through coercion, threats, intoxication, or when you're incapacitated and unable to consent.

No matter what you did or didn't do, the perpetrator made a 100% deliberate choice to violate you. They could have chosen otherwise, but they didn't—so the fault is entirely theirs.

*Seriously, don't  
blame yourself.*



THE  
**HOPE**  
LINE

# **WARNING SIGNS OF SEXUAL ABUSE**

Below are signs that someone may have experienced sexual abuse. Signs can appear in many forms, ranging from severe emotional distress to significant physical issues. These warning signs must be taken seriously and never dismissed.

## **PHYSICAL**

Memory loss or unexplained gaps in recall.  
Self-harm or compulsive habits like nail-biting or hair-pulling.  
Bedwetting or sudden changes in toilet habits.  
Bloody, torn, or stained underclothes.  
Bleeding, bruises, or swelling in the genital or anal area.  
Pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases/infections, particularly in children aged 14 or younger.

## **EMOTIONAL**

Anxiety or panic attacks.  
Confusion about sexual identity or boundaries.  
Persistent depression.  
Emotional withdrawal or increased introversion.  
Intense feelings of false guilt.  
Fear of bedtime, accompanied by nightmares or sleep disturbances.

## **BEHAVIORAL**

Increased alcohol or drug use as a form of escape.  
Shrinking away from or showing fear of physical contact.  
Inappropriate sexual behavior, including sexually abusing another person or child.  
Suicide attempts or self-harming behaviors, especially among teens and young adults.  
Overly protective attitudes toward siblings or others, taking on an inappropriate caretaker role.



# *I'm a guy and I was sexually abused... Does that make me less of a man?*

---

Sexual abuse can happen to anyone, no matter your age, sexual orientation, or gender identity. Women and girls are not the only victims; many men and boys experience sexual abuse as well. In the U.S., **more than 1 in 10 sexual assault victims are male**, and researchers estimate that 1 in 6 men have had abusive sexual experiences before age 18. This is likely an underestimate, since it doesn't include non-contact experiences that can also cause lasting harm.

There are many reasons male survivors may not report or seek help, including feeling like they should have been able to fight off the attacker or struggling with guilt and shame. Whatever you are facing, it is important to reach out for support as part of your recovery—no matter your gender.



# STEPS TO TAKE

## IF YOU ARE SEXUALLY ABUSED

### What to do **IMMEDIATELY** after a sexual assault

---

**Get to safety immediately.** Find a secure place away from the attacker. Your safety is the most important priority.

**Call for help right away.** In the U.S., dial 911 to report the assault and request emergency assistance.

**Seek medical care as soon as possible.** Even if there are no visible injuries, a healthcare professional can provide important treatment and documentation.

**Protect any evidence.** Try not to bathe, change clothes, or clean up before getting medical attention. Preserving evidence can be vital if you choose to report the assault later.





# *It happened so long ago...*

Even if the sexual abuse occurred in the past, you can still report it to the appropriate authorities and seek professional support. Whether the incident happened recently or years ago, it's important to speak with a counselor or therapist and begin your journey toward healing. If you'd like to talk with someone right now or need help finding local resources, you can **chat with a HopeCoach** at [www.TheHopeLine.com](http://www.TheHopeLine.com).

## GETTING HELP

---

Getting help is an important part of healing from sexual abuse. Recovery looks different for everyone, and the process takes time—but sharing your story and seeking support are vital steps for all survivors.

The journey can be difficult, so it's essential to care for yourself physically and emotionally. Make time for rest, and talk about your experience with someone you trust as you work toward healing.

### ***Helpful Recovery Resources***

---

**RAINN** - [rainn.org](http://rainn.org) - 1-800-656-4673

- Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network
- 24/7 Sexual Assault Chatline
- Helpful blogs and articles
- Various support services

**MERCY MULTIPLIED** - [mercymultiplied.com](http://mercymultiplied.com)

- Residential and outpatient programs
- Educational resources

**OPTION LINE** - [optionline.org](http://optionline.org)

- Pregnancy support
- Sexual wellness resources



# RECOVERY TIPS

## Talk to a Counselor

Talk with a professional counselor or therapist about your experience. If you need a referral to counseling services, you can contact TheHopeLine at [www.TheHopeLine.com/gethelp](http://www.TheHopeLine.com/gethelp).



## Get Support From Friends

Spend regular time with your support system so you don't feel alone. Family, friends, and other trusted people can be powerful sources of strength and encouragement during difficult times.

## Get Medical Help

If you have any medical concerns or injuries, seek professional medical help right away.

## Express Your Feelings

Many people recovering from sexual abuse find it helpful to keep a journal or use a creative outlet, such as painting or drawing, to express their feelings.

## Stay Healthy

Take care of your body by eating healthy foods, getting regular exercise, and making sure you get enough sleep. Your physical health is closely connected to your mental and emotional well-being.







*I want to be there for  
my friend.*

## **HOW TO SUPPORT SOMEONE WHO HAS BEEN THROUGH SEXUAL ABUSE**

---

### **LISTEN**

Listen without judging. Let your friend know you believe them and that you are there for them.

### **ENCOURAGE**

Encourage them to report the sexual assault to law enforcement if they feel safe doing so.

### **GO WITH THEM**

If they are willing to seek medical care or make a report, offer to go with them to the hospital, police station, or wherever they need to go.

### **CHECK IN ON THEM**

Check in on your friend regularly and watch for signs of self-harm or suicidal thoughts, since sexual abuse can be incredibly hard to cope with.

### **SHARE SUPPORT**

Remind your friend that professional help is available, including through the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1.800.656.HOPE.

# FORGIVENESS

*How could I possibly forgive someone who sexually abused me?*

**Forgiveness is NOT saying that what they did was okay.** It's about loosening the grip that pain, anger, and bitterness have on you, and slowly making room for peace instead. Forgiveness is often the only thing that can free us from the suffocating hold of a painful past. It's hard, and you are right—the abuser does not deserve it. **This is not for them; this is for you.**

As it's been said, "The brutal irony of unforgiveness is that it keeps us tied to the very people we most want to be free from." You may feel ready for this step, or you may not—and that's okay. You can move toward it at your own pace.







# How to **Forgive**

## 1. Write It Down

---

Write down the name of the person who sexually abused you, along with what they did and why it was not okay. Then, say out loud: “I choose to forgive (insert name) for violating me. I let go of the anger and bitterness I feel toward them. I choose forgiveness.” When you are finished, you can burn or tear up the paper as a symbolic way of releasing those feelings.

## 2. Pray About It

---

Realize that forgiving someone is a deeply spiritual act, and often feels impossible to do on your own. Many people find they cannot truly forgive without God’s help. The same God who has forgiven countless people also has the power to help you forgive. You might pray something like this:

“God, I admit I can’t forgive (insert name) in my own strength. Please help me. Help me understand how much You have forgiven me, so I can forgive the person who has hurt me.”

## 3. Understand Yourself

---

You can’t fully forgive until you’ve really acknowledged the depth of what was done to you. With the support of a counselor, minister, or another qualified professional, take time to explore what happened, how it affected you, and why it hurts so much.



## 4. Surrender Your Feelings

---

Now it's time to make a deliberate decision to let go. Release your deep desire to get even with the person who violated you. You might create a short prayer or statement to express this choice, such as: "By an act of my will, and with God's power, I give up my right to get even with (insert name). I commit that when those feelings return, I will release them again."

## 5. Choose Compassion

---

This takes time, but if possible, seek to respond with compassion toward the person who violated you. This does not excuse what they did, but it recognizes that they are deeply broken and in need of mercy. One way to show compassion is to pray for them. Jesus said to pray for your enemies, because it is hard to keep hating someone you regularly bring before God in prayer.

## 6. Move On

---

It's time to start releasing what happened so it doesn't control your whole life. It was not your fault; what was done to you was a serious violation and never okay. You didn't get to choose what happened, but you do have a choice now to keep taking steps forward and working toward a life beyond the abuse.

*I want to be free of this bitterness. I want to let go of the burden.*



# **SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ABUSE**

# **CHECKLIST**

---

- ☐ I acknowledge that something terrible happened to me.
- ☐ I have the right to seek and receive help and healing.
- ☐ I have the right to be believed.
- ☐ I am beginning to face and work through my feelings about what happened to me.
- ☐ I feel angry, but I do not want that anger to destroy me.
- ☐ I can talk about what happened, and I will.
- ☐ I place the responsibility for the sexual abuse on the person who attacked me. It was not my fault.
- ☐ I could not have prevented the assault; I did my best to survive it.
- ☐ I am valuable.
- ☐ I am going to work on my sense of self-worth.
- ☐ I have a choice to forgive the person who sexually abused me.



# A *Spiritual* Perspective

The burden of being sexually abused is a heavy one, but you do not have to carry it alone. Please reach out for help and encouragement from friends, family, counselors, and others who can support you. Here at [TheHopeLine](#), we truly care about you and want to walk with you as you heal mentally, physically, and spiritually.

We also want you to know that God loves you, and His heart breaks with yours over what you have gone through. This world is a sinful, broken place where evil exists, but God promises to help us through the hard times if we let Him. If you find yourself asking, "Why would God allow this to happen?" you may want to read "[Why Do Bad Things Happen?](#)" for more encouragement.

Jesus says in the Bible, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). He also promises to be with us in our suffering: "When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you. For I am the Lord, your God" (Isaiah 43:2-3a).



If you want to know more about what it means to have a relationship with God or have questions about the topic of sexual abuse, our Hope Coaches are available 24/7 to [chat with you](#) about whatever is on your mind.



← **CHAT LIVE  
WITH A HOPE  
COACH**







Our mission is to help students and young adults in crisis by offering sound advice and a safe place to connect. Through our online resources and the ability to chat live with a Hope Coach 24/7, we are here to help people make a true connection.

Founded by Dawson McAllister in 1991, TheHopeLine is a 100% donor funded ministry. If you would like to learn more about partnering with us, visit [thehopeline.com/partners-in-hope](https://thehopeline.com/partners-in-hope).



TheHopeLine



@thehopeline



@thehopeline



TheHopeLine

## Sources

Aspire Counseling Services. "Why Do Women Wait to Report Sexual Assault or Rape?" Aspire Counseling, [aspirecounselingmo.com/blog/women-wait-report-sexual-assault-rape](https://aspirecounselingmo.com/blog/women-wait-report-sexual-assault-rape). Accessed 13 Mar. 2026.

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. "Impacts of Child Sexual Abuse: Research Findings." IICSA, 2017, [www.iicsa.org.uk/reports-recommendations/publications/research/impacts-csa/research-findings/1-impacts-csa-victims-and-survivors.html](https://www.iicsa.org.uk/reports-recommendations/publications/research/impacts-csa/research-findings/1-impacts-csa-victims-and-survivors.html).

McElroy, Eibhlís, et al. "Mental Health, Trauma and Relational Processes in the Adult Lives of Child Sexual Abuse Survivors: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *The Lancet Psychiatry*, vol. 7, no. 7, 2020, pp. 567–80, doi:10.1016/S2215-0366(19)30286-X.

National Sexual Violence Resource Center. "CDC Releases New Sexual Violence Data." NSVRC, 21 Jan. 2026, [www.nsvrc.org/blog\\_post/cdc-releases-new-sexual-violence-data/](https://www.nsvrc.org/blog_post/cdc-releases-new-sexual-violence-data/).

Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network. "Statistics: Perpetrators of Sexual Violence." RAINN, [rainn.org/facts-statistics-the-scope-of-the-problem/statistics-perpetrators-of-sexual-violence/](https://rainn.org/facts-statistics-the-scope-of-the-problem/statistics-perpetrators-of-sexual-violence/). Accessed 13 Mar. 2026.

---. "Statistics: The Scope of the Problem." RAINN, [rainn.org/get-informed/facts-statistics-the-scope-of-the-problem/](https://rainn.org/get-informed/facts-statistics-the-scope-of-the-problem/). Accessed 13 Mar. 2026.

Rennison, Callie Marie. *Rape and Sexual Assault: Reporting to Police and Medical Attention, 1992–2000*. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2002, [bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/rsarp00.pdf](https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/rsarp00.pdf).

SOS Signs of Suicide. "The Connection Between Sexual Assault and Substance Abuse." MindWise Innovations, [sossignsofsuicide.org/blog/college/the-connection-between-sexual-assault-and-substance-abuse/](https://sossignsofsuicide.org/blog/college/the-connection-between-sexual-assault-and-substance-abuse/). Accessed 13 Mar. 2026.