
ADVOCACY SKILLS



HELPING ADULT SURVIVORS ADDRESS HEALTH ISSUES

How can trauma affect a survivor's health?

The mind and the body are connected. When a person experiences something traumatic, it's natural for it to take a toll on a survivor's mental health. The trauma of childhood sexual violence also affects their physical health.

This happens in four key ways:

1. The abusive acts can result in physical injuries or delayed illnesses for the survivor. For example, the survivor might suffer broken bones, tissue tears or sexually transmitted infections as a result of the incidents. The circumstances surrounding the abuse often determines whether the survivor's injuries are cared for. Some adult survivors will be addressing the ramifications of those injuries and illnesses for the first time.

2. Traumatic events can lead a survivor to cope with the stress of the trauma in ways that take a toll on them physically. Oftentimes, overdoing fairly harmless behaviors that can then become a problem for the survivor. For example, over exercising to the point of causing injuries, overeating and in particular eating too many processed foods, drinking too much alcohol, or having risky sex are some of the ways survivors may cope that can give them a short-term relief. While these coping strategies help survivors deal with negative emotions in the moment, using these types of coping mechanisms long-term can cause negative health effects. For example, survivors can become dependent on these coping strategies and lose control of them. Then drinking alcohol to alleviate negative emotions can become a habit that is hard to break and leads to health issues. Over the course of years and decades these habits of coping with past trauma can cause chronic pain, gastrointestinal disorders, lung and breathing problems, diabetes and heart disease.

3. Trauma influences health because it can change a survivor's brain function. Over time, these changes can lead to biological changes due to chronic stress. Certain symptoms of PTSD actually cause changes in a survivor's brain and body. For the example, the act of constantly being on high alert and assessing for safety has been found to be connected

to high blood pressure, which can lead to heart disease. Flashbacks have also been found to be associated with heart disease. Survivors have also been found to have higher levels of cortisol, a hormone related to stress, which over the long term can lead to chronic health problems.

4. Adult survivors of child sexual abuse often find medical appointments and procedures invasive and triggering. As a result, they may avoid routine healthcare even though the abuse they suffered can result in lifelong impact on their health. Missing preventive care can increase the likelihood that the adult survivor will experience health issues and complications otherwise avoided through prevention. This can also extend to ignoring their bodies. This might mean that a survivor doesn't perform preventive monthly breast exams or blood pressure checks, or doesn't notice gastrointestinal problems.



WHAT CAN ADVOCATES DO TO HELP?

Advocacy programs exist to work in partnership with survivors as they find ways to heal both mind and body. There are a number of ways advocates can help adult survivors address health concerns. [Healing the Body: Exploring Comprehensive Medical Advocacy](#) is an in-depth discussion about how advocates, healthcare providers and survivors can partner to address long-term consequences of abuse and trauma. For example, advocates can:

- Normalize a survivor’s fear and stress around seeking medical care.
- [Provide information about the ways childhood trauma can make it difficult for survivors when seeking medical care.](#)
- Work with survivors to consider their options and choices for how to address health concerns.
- Help survivors find holistic and supportive healthcare for treatment of health conditions. These would include dental care, gynecological, reproductive and long-term general health needs.

- Assist survivors determine what they need from medical providers and help them decide how to ask for what they need.
- Help survivors prepare for visits. This could involve conducting role-play conversations with the survivor so they can practice asking for what they need during an exam or procedure and setting boundaries.
- Accompany survivors to medical appointments when necessary for support and trauma informed presence.
- Advocate for survivors with medical providers.
- Work with medical providers to understand the impact of sexual violence on survivors and establish trauma informed practices. Including the following:
 - » Discuss how to create and respect boundaries with patients.
 - » How to create trauma informed waiting rooms and examination rooms.
 - » Ask providers to prominently display information about the health complications associated with child sexual abuse and your program's brochure.
 - » Train providers on screening patients for a history of sexual violence.
 - » Remind providers that not all survivors will disclose, even when asked directly.

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