

WHEN YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Guide for a young person

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What is sexual violence?

There are many forms of sexual violence ranging from inappropriate touching to rape, and anyone can become a victim of it regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. Sexual violence can include name-calling, harassment or exposure to sex and sexual activity that is not age-appropriate. It can involve pressuring or violent coercion. It can also happen online. Sexual violence does not necessarily include physical abuse, intercourse or leave visible signs on the body.

Different words and definitions can be used to describe sexual violence: sexual abuse, molestation, rape, incest (sexual abuse within the family), exposure to sexual material such as pornography or sexually suggestive talk. It can involve forcing a person to have sexual intercourse or other sexual acts. It may also include persuasion with money and things or trying to purchase sex. Simply trying to persuade a minor to engage in sex fulfils the characteristics of a crime. The perpetrator may be a family member, a person close to you, a relative, a familiar person or a complete stranger. The person's gender may be the same as or different from yours.

In Finland, legislation determines what sexual violence means. For some people, touching or sexually suggestive talk can create an experience of being violated, which should be processed. The age of consent is intended to protect children and young people against such sexual experiences and acts that they are not mentally and physically ready for. The age of consent is 16 years.

Sexual abuse or coercion may also occur when dating people of your own age. Forcing or pressuring someone to engage in sexual activity or an activity with sexual undertones is always wrong.

Why should you talk about the sexual violence you have experienced with someone?

Sexual violence is often a traumatic and difficult experience that reduces your sense of safety. An unprocessed experience of sexual violence can cause you long-term harm. This is why it is a good idea to talk about it with a professional adult you can trust. Talking about the experience may seem difficult. However, it is important that you process what happened and receive professional help.

The experience of sexual violence or violation of your personal, intimate boundaries causes many kinds of unpleasant emotions. It is very common to feel guilt, shame, fear and hatred, particularly when thinking about the issue. When you have experienced sexual violence, abuse or harassment, you are not guilty or responsible for the act. While your life is not ruined, an unprocessed experience can weaken the quality of your life. Accepting the right kinds of help allows you to help yourself and survive the experience.

What is a traumatic crisis?

The experience of sexual violence involves different stages. It is described as a traumatic crisis.

The stages of a crisis

- The shock stage: You may not immediately understand what has happened and may not be able to process what you have experienced. It may seem unreal. You may wonder if it really even happened. It may take a few days or even years for you to recall the incident.
- Reaction stage: You may experience a variety of symptoms, which typically include
 - difficulty sleeping and irritability
 - bodily reactions, such as excessive tiredness or hyperactivity
 - avoidance and withdrawal
 - anxiety
 - depression
 - strong emotional responses, such as crying and rage.
- Processing stage: You begin comprehending and understanding what has happened. At this stage, you will need a lot of support from adults and help from professionals. You can seek help from various places such as Tyttöjen Talo (Girls' House) or Poikien Talo (Boys' House). Health care professionals, school health care and child welfare services are also there for you.
- Integration stage (internalisation): You start getting used to the idea that you have experienced sexual violence. At the same time, you start forming an idea that you will be able to live with the experience.

The duration of each stage varies from person to person.

Do not be left alone with your experience! You will get through it as long as you get enough help. Although you may find it difficult to receive help, it is necessary for you.

Even if a lot of time has passed since the incident, you still have the right to get help. It may take years until the experience starts disturbing your life. If this happens, it is very important to seek help or support. It is common to stay silent about sexual violence experienced during childhood and only recalling things more clearly later in life.

How can the experiences of sexual violence affect your life?

Those who have been sexually abused often have a low mood and feel depressed. Your boundaries have been violated and things have been done to you without your consent. It is normal to experience such emotions. You may experience feelings of rage, anxiety and grief. You have been wronged. It is natural to feel this way. Fears, panic reactions and crying may come as a surprise, but they are all related to experiencing sexual violence. While these emotions feel rough and unpleasant, they will get easier as you process the experience.

Your body may also react to the experienced sexual violence. You may feel unreasonably tired and have various aches and pains in your body. You might be scared about pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Dealing with the authorities and uncertainty about legal matters often cause anxiety. You may find it difficult to concentrate at school and in daily life. You may feel absent-minded. As a result of the reactions related to the trauma, the experience of violence may affect your ability to concentrate, alertness, memory and learning.

You may feel like you do not belong when spending time with friends, and feel like withdrawing from others. You may feel lonely and like an outsider. Others are unfamiliar with your experience. For yourself and your coping, it is good to stay in touch with friends and continue with familiar recreational activities where possible.

Sexual abuse and the violation of your boundaries cause feelings of shame, guilt and self-accusations. You may feel worthless, dirty or broken, even too strange or sick to seek help. It is also common to blame yourself for feeling aroused or unable to defend yourself. Remember that help is available for you. If the way you are feeling is completely unbearable, you should seek medical advice.

The criminal process and legal proceedings – Why you should report the incident

It is the job of the police to investigate whether a crime has taken place. When a minor is involved, the adult is always responsible for what has happened. You have a right to a support person at all stages of the criminal process. A person under 18 years of age is entitled to receiving help from the authorities, professional support persons and child welfare services alike. Legal representative services are always free of charge to the victims of sexual offences, and you get to pick your own lawyer.

Although dealing with the police and the judicial system may seem scary, it is important that the matter is taken to the police for investigation. The police will help you. Investigating a crime may require measures that feel difficult but are essential for the investigation, such as laboratory tests, samples taken from intimate body parts and photography. The police may also video record the interview.

The sooner you go to the police after the incident, the better from the viewpoint of getting evidence. You can always report an incident, even after years have passed, especially in cases involving child sexual abuse.

Many young people experience sexual violence but never report it. Filing a report enables you to seek justice for what has happened. The more reports are filed, the better equipped the authorities will be to influence reducing sexual offences and ensuring that help is available.

How to take care of yourself?

Sticking to familiar and normal everyday life helps you recover your sense of security. Hold onto the following things:

- school, studies and work
- eating, sleeping and staying physically active
- hobbies
- friends and loved ones.

Talking, professional help and processing the experience using approaches that suit you is essential. Let adults help you.

Self-care suitable for you can include exercise, art, writing, music and anything else you enjoy. You have the right to feel joy and spend time doing good things!

Remember that you are important and valuable

Sexual violence is associated with shame and guilt, even though what has happened is not the victim's fault. You may find it easier to deny what has happened and avoid thinking about it. It is a way to protect yourself against facing difficult emotions.

You may direct negligence and anger at yourself, which may lead you to neglecting your own body, self-harm or substance abuse. This sort of self-destructive behaviour is always alarming. You need to get help if you behave this way. To receive the help you need, you should tell others what happened to you.

Young people often find it difficult to talk to their parents or guardians about experiencing sexual violence. That is also why it is important to seek help. Sexual violence is never the victim's fault. Although the experience often leads to a feeling of neglecting yourself, it is important to remember that receiving help from others will help you, you can survive the experience, and your life can get better.

Tyttöjen Talo (Girls' House) and Poikien Talo (Boy's House) activities are free of charge and include

- individual support
- professionally guided peer group support
- individual and group support for guardians
- consultation and support related to sexual violence issues.

Work related to sexual violence at Tyttöjen Talo (Girls' House)

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Work related to sexual violence at Poikien Talo (Boys' House) +358 (0)40 779 9582