



# A brief guide to...

# ***sexual exploitation***

# What is... *sexual exploitation?*



Sexual exploitation is a form of sexual abuse. A person can be thought of as a victim of sexual exploitation (though some people prefer the word survivor) if sex takes place and:

- > it is in exchange for basic necessities, such as food, shelter or protection
- > it is in exchange for something they need or want
- > they are made to feel frightened of the consequences if they do not (coercion)
- > the person who is exploiting them stands to gain financially or socially.

Sexual exploitation is usually talked about in relation to children; however, adults can be affected too. An adult may have been sexually exploited as a child, re-exploited in adulthood or exploited for the first time when over the age of 18.

There can be some circumstances where adults are at increased risk of being sexually exploited. For example, if they:

- > are homeless
- > are using drugs or alcohol
- > are lacking the mental capacity to consent to sexual activity
- > are being trafficked
- > were sexually abused as a child.

How...

## ***does sexual exploitation affect adults?***



Sexual exploitation has a serious effect on the health and wellbeing of adults.

Common mental health problems that people who have been sexually exploited may have include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety. People who have been sexually exploited may sometimes have complicated feelings about the person who has exploited them; this can include thinking positively about their relationship, which makes it difficult to understand the harm they have experienced.

As well as the possible impact on mental wellbeing, sexual exploitation often has a harmful impact on a person's physical health.

A person can experience physical and sexual violence when they are sexually exploited and may have long-term health problems from injuries they sustain. There is an increased likelihood that a person who has been sexually exploited will have sexual health problems; for example, sexually transmitted diseases and poor reproductive health.

There is also a strong link between sexual exploitation and drug use. People may be sexually exploited when they have taken drugs or because they are dependent on drugs. People may also use drugs as a means of coping with the trauma they have experienced (this is sometimes called self-medication).

It is important for adults who have been sexually exploited to be supported in a way that will help their health and wellbeing to improve. The support someone needs will vary from one person to the next.

Whether sexual exploitation happened in the past or is ongoing, there are many reasons why a person can find it difficult to get the help they need. People who need support may feel frightened, unsafe, ashamed or worried that they will not be taken seriously; they may also find it difficult to understand or explain what has happened to them.

If someone is being sexually exploited, anyone can tell the police, social services, or find anonymous advice and support from charities and services. If you are unable to contact services by yourself, talk to someone that you trust.

If a friend or loved one is being sexually exploited, you can talk to them about it or you can report your concerns to social services, the police or Crimestoppers - [www.crimestoppers-uk.org](http://www.crimestoppers-uk.org). You do not have to give your name if you do this.

If a person tells social services about abuse this is called 'raising a concern'. If abuse is happening, the council will work together with people and organisations to try and stop it. This is called 'safeguarding adults'. You can find more information about raising a concern and safeguarding adults in the Research in Practice for Adults resource *What is... safeguarding adults?* (2015).



## How...

### ***do I know if things are working well?***

- > People will listen to you if you tell them about sexual exploitation, whether it is happening now or has happened in the past. You will be given a clear explanation of what will happen, by when and how you will be involved.
- > If you have experienced sexual exploitation people will ask you what you would like to happen. People will explain how they can help and what can and can't be done.
- > Services will provide the support you need to stay safe.
- > When a crime has been committed, it will be reported to the police.
- > You will get the outcome you want – or people will explain why something different might need to happen, for example if others are at risk.
- > If you are experiencing sexual exploitation and you are finding it difficult to understand or be involved with services, and there is no one else to support you (like a family member or friend), the council must arrange for an advocate to support you instead. An advocate is someone who will find out what you want and speak on your behalf.
- > If you have experienced sexual exploitation and it is impacting upon your health and wellbeing, you will be offered support to help you improve these areas of your life.

You can contact your local council if you have any questions or concerns. Councils want to know how well things are working for people.

## Practical advice



If you think someone is being sexually exploited, tell someone. Even if you are not sure, it is really important to speak up so that other people do not get hurt.

Remember that sexual exploitation of adults may have taken place even if the person being exploited believes they have given consent to engage in sexual activity.

If you need help to contact adult social care in the area you live in, ask somebody you trust to help you. For example; a friend, family member, police officer, nurse or doctor.

Sexual exploitation can include the use of technology such as websites, chatrooms, webcams, mobile apps and social networks and so it may not always involve any physical contact.

You do not have to give your name if you raise a concern.

Ask questions if you don't understand what is happening or why.

Tell somebody if you need support to reduce the effect of sexual exploitation on your health and wellbeing.

research  
in practice  
*for adults*

This guide has been produced by Research in Practice for Adults. We are a charity that uses evidence from research and people's experience to help understand adult social care and to improve how it works.

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