

Discovery and Disclosure

There are a number of reasons why victims and survivors do not tell anyone they have been sexually abused. The difficulty in telling reflects the trauma caused by the abuse, the offender's level of control and coercion, and the fear of not being believed.

Discovery is when someone finds out about the abuse before the victim has told anyone. In cases of Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse (TACSA), discovery is more common than disclosure due to the 'digital footprint' left behind. For example, an image may be discovered online, a professional might see a message on a phone, or a parent might overhear a conversation a child or young person is having on a gaming headset.

Disclosure is when a victim has told or indicated to someone that they are being abused or harmed. Sometimes the disclosure is in full, but often a victim may only reveal a small part of what is happening, and it takes time and trust before they will share more.

The impact of discovery can differ from the impact of disclosure, so it is important that we address both in this resource to ensure victims and survivors have the knowledge they need whilst on their recovery journey.



Discovery was so traumatic that I didn't want to talk about it and tell them anymore, and they didn't probe further about anything else.

Discovery

Discovery is often described by survivors as like 'a bomb going off'. It strips a victim of their choice over when, where, what and who to tell. It can, in an instant, change everything in a child or a young person's life and this lack of control can have a long-lasting impact on victims and survivors.

For some survivor's discovery feels like a weight has been lifted off them. They feel reassured that someone knows about the abuse and believes them. Or they might feel relieved that they did not have to find the words to explain what was done to them.



For other survivors' discovery can lead to a range of complex negative feelings such as anger, betrayal or shock. In fact, after discovery children and young people often deny the abuse took place, say that it was consensual, or refuse to talk to anyone about what was done to them. These reactions can occur for many reasons, including fearing what the offender may do post discovery, or not realising that what was done to them was harmful.

This is a common trauma response for victims to experience but unfortunately these reactions can leave survivors feeling confused or bewildered. If this is how you reacted after your abuse was discovered, please know this is a completely natural response. It does not mean that what was done to you was not harmful or that you did not want or deserve help and support.

Regardless of whether victims were left feeling relieved or angry post discovery, almost all survivors we speak say they felt feelings of shame or embarrassment, realising that others knew what had happened. This is especially common in cases where images or videos are discovered, with survivors saying it causes additional harm to know others have seen the material.

If there is more to share after discovery

You might be reading this resource to gain a better understanding of why you reacted after discovery. Or you might now be at a point in your recovery journey where you wish to, or are unsure whether to, disclose further information that wasn't found in the initial discovery.

The choice to disclose further information, no matter how long ago the discovery was, lies with you as a victim or survivor. You will not get into trouble for not speaking out at the time. Professionals understand that it is common for delayed disclosure to occur with victims of TACSA and the time passed since discovery should not stop you from seeking help and support if you need it.

I think it gets easier each time, especially if you get positive responses.



Disclosure

Victims and survivors who disclose their abuse will embark on a different journey. Whilst they can control, where, what, when and who they tell about the abuse they experienced, it is not an easy journey and comes with its own additional impacts.

Disclosure can feel daunting, painful or even awkward at first. Some survivors say disclosure can feel like a step back by allowing someone to learn about your trauma, but recovery is not linear. It is a complex process with ups and downs, and it is normal to experience periods of time where you feel like you are going backwards, even though you are making progress.

The impact of trauma can make it difficult to remember exactly what happened and for survivors who have fragmented memories this can discourage them from speaking out. But you do not have to share every detail about your abuse in order to seek help. Survivors may feel intense anxiety around not being believed or fear the reaction of those they tell. It is natural to worry about the impact disclosure will have on loved ones. As difficult as it is, other people's emotions are not your responsibility, and this should not prevent you from seeking help.

Some victims and survivors report failed disclosures, where they have previously tried to speak about the harm they have experienced, but it did not go to plan or the person they disclosed to did not listen. Sadly, failed disclosures can happen even when trying to tell a professional. It can be extremely difficult to find the strength after a failed disclosure to make another attempt, but there are many people who will listen and support you on your recovery journey.

We like to think of disclosure as a process. It is not a one-off occasion but something survivors can choose to do throughout their life. With the right support, talking about abuse and the impact it has on you can and does get easier.

You might feel pressure to disclose your abuse, but the choice to disclose lies with you as a victim or survivor and it is okay if you do not feel ready to do this. There is no right or wrong way or time to disclose, only the way you choose.

If you want to disclose TACSA but aren't sure where to begin, it might be useful to read our suite of victim and survivor resources which might help you to explain what TACSA is, the impact it has had on you and how to combat victim blaming language should you encounter it. You can find our suite of resources [here](#).

You are brave. The fact you're reading this, is brave.



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