



What Is Sexual Abuse?

A comprehensive guide to
recognizing sexual abuse
and domestic violence


domesticshelters.org
A service of Theresa's Fund

Sexual abuse is any unwanted sexual contact obtained by force, threats or when a victim is unable to consent.

Overwhelmingly, people who experience sexual abuse report knowing the abuser. And for half of women, that person is their intimate partner. Men are more likely to be sexually abused by an acquaintance. That's because sexual abuse is about much more than sex. It's one of the many ways an abuser exerts power and control over a partner. Other ways include physical, emotional and financial abuse.

This toolkit will provide you with these insights and more. Inside you'll find:

- Helpful Articles
- Recommended Books
- Lists
- In-Depth Videos
- Survey Results
- Support Communities
- How to Find Help



There are hundreds of articles on [DomesticShelters.org](https://www.DomesticShelters.org) covering the many facets of domestic violence. Here are links to those that will help you understand “What Is Sexual Abuse?”

[What Is Sexual Abuse?](#)

A comprehensive guide to recognizing sexual abuse and domestic violence.

[10 Things to Know About IPV and HIV](#)

Violence shares an unfortunate link with an HIV diagnosis.

[What Is Sexual Coercion?](#)

Just because it's not rape, doesn't mean it's not abuse.

[Ending the Backlog of Rape Kits](#)

One state at a time, SVU star's nonprofit is trying to get justice for survivors.

[What is Rape Culture?](#)

Six everyday examples of normalizing sexual violence.

[Sexual Assault Is More Than Rape](#)

How to recognize if you're a victim.

[How to Help Protect Your Child from Sexual Abuse](#)

One of the scariest scenarios possible could be prevented by talking to kids early and often.

[When Abusers Use Sexual Abuse to Control](#)

It can take on many forms beyond rape.

[Withholding Intimacy Can Be Abusive, Too](#)

Another type of sexual abuse includes using sex to taunt, control a victim.

[Talk About Sexual Assault in April](#)

Increasing awareness is the key to stopping it.

What Are Grey Rape and Stealthing?

They have sinister definitions and dangerous consequences.

When Incest Accompanies Domestic Violence

How to recognize if you're a victim.

Domestic Violence in the Transgender Community

Rates of intimate partner violence are high and barriers stand in the way of getting help.

Sexual Assault and Stalking

Leading facts and statistics on sexual assault and stalking related to domestic violence.

Can He Rape Me if We're Married?

Marital rape is a very real—and very illegal—offense.

Beyond a Bruise

Would you recognize abuse even if it didn't leave a mark?

[Survivor Story: Maralee McLean](#)

Her ex-husband sexually abused their daughter—and then got custody of her.

[Understanding Teen Dating Violence](#)

A guide to recognizing abuse when it happens to young people.

[He's Forcing Me to Get Pregnant](#)

Reproductive coercion is domestic violence, and it's not OK.

[What Is Domestic Violence?](#)

A comprehensive guide to helping you understand domestic violence and abuse.

[An Untrue Comparison](#)

Men and women should not be considered equals when we talk about domestic violence.

[College Women Among Highest at Risk for Partner Violence](#)

Domestic violence widespread on college campuses.

Can I Kiss You?

One author says consent should be given for every intimate moment.

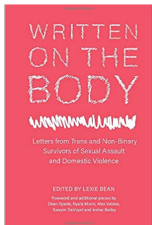
When Abusers Threaten Revenge Porn

When abusers share sexually explicit images without your permission.



Reading books can be a helpful way to understand sexual abuse and how to find a path to healing.

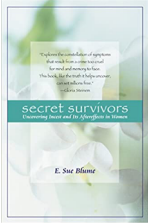
Here are our recommended reads:



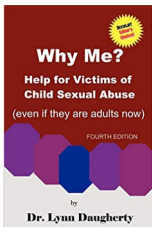
Written on the Body. Written by and for trans and non-binary survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, *Written on the Body* offers support, guidance and hope for those who struggle to find safety at home, in the body, and other unwelcoming places.



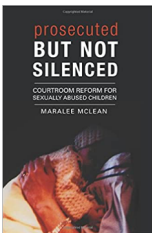
The Worst Interests of the Child: The Trafficking of Children and Parents Through U.S. Family Courts. The author's meticulously documented investigation into sex-trafficking of children by judges is not to be missed. This scandal is one of the most important censored stories of our time. Anyone who says they care about child welfare needs to learn what is happening in family courts and take action until it is stopped. Once you start reading this exposé, you won't be able to put it down.



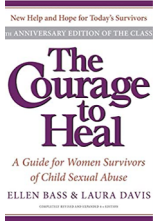
Secret Survivors: Uncovering Incest and Its Aftereffects in Women. This book focuses on what incest does to survivors. It shows how incest is often the root of depression, sexual and eating disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, and phobias and panic disorders. Readers will be able to identify themselves, develop alternative, nondestructive survival techniques and begin on a new path toward a rich and empowered life.



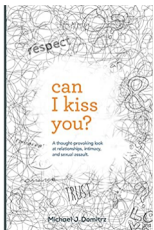
Why Me? Help for Victims of Child Sexual Abuse (Even if They Are Adults Now). People who were sexually abused as children find help and healing in this book from a respected clinical psychologist. This warm and personal, beginning guide gives you answers to child sexual abuse questions, stories of male and female victims, insights into sexual abusers, explanations of effects on victims, step-by-step guidance to begin your recovery and resources for additional assistance.



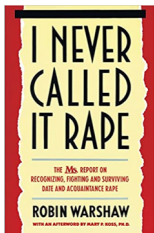
Prosecuted but Not Silenced. A powerful documentary about a mother and daughter's tragic involvement with the judicial system when there were allegations of child sexual abuse against the father, plus 27 tips on protecting your children when they are exposed to the courts and 100+ pages of educational tools, resources and other references to help you best prepare for the child custody and family court matters.



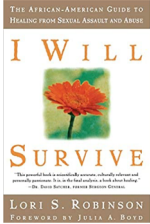
The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse. This guide offers a map of the healing journey to every woman who was sexually abused as a child. Although the effects of child sexual abuse are long-term and severe, healing is possible. Readers will feel recognized and encouraged by hundreds of moving first-person stories drawn from interviews and the authors' extensive work with survivors, both nationally and internationally.



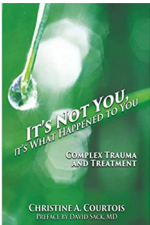
Can I Kiss You: A Thought-Provoking Look at Relationships, Intimacy & Sexual Assault. An in-depth look at the realities of relationships and sexual intimacy. While most people simply make their move with a partner, Mike Domitrz reveals why asking first makes all the difference. Domitrz's candid advice, real-life scenarios, and helpful strategies will revolutionize your approach to relationships while adding romance and building respect for all partners.



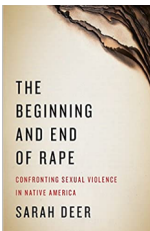
I Never Called It Rape: The Ms. Report on Recognizing, Fighting, and Surviving Date and Acquaintance Rape. The classic book that broke new ground by thoroughly reporting on the widespread problem of date and acquaintance rape has now been completely updated to include recent studies, issues, current events, and controversies.



The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse. This classic self-help book offers sound and detailed guidelines for sexual healing. Wendy Maltz stands out for her remarkable combination of wisdom, creativity, and heart. Harriet Lerner, Ph.D., author of *The Dance of Anger* Clear, non-judgmental, warm and hopeful, *The Sexual Healing Journey* is a precious gift for male and female survivors and for those who care about them.



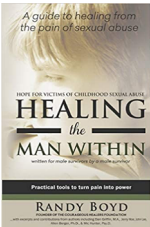
It's Not You, It's What Happened to You: Complex Trauma and Treatment. Complex Trauma and Treatment, Dr. Christine Courtois has simplified her extensive and, until now, quite scholarly work geared toward understanding and developing the concept of "complex trauma," and the assessment and treatment thereof. A universally acknowledged leader in this emerging psychotherapeutic field, Dr. Courtois provides here an abbreviated and easy-to-read explanation of what complex trauma is, how it develops, the ways in which it manifests, and how it can effectively be dealt with.



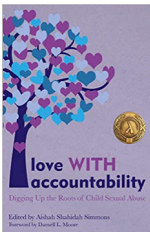
The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America. The classic book that broke new ground by thoroughly reporting on the widespread problem of date and acquaintance rape has now been completely updated to include recent studies, issues, current events, and controversies.



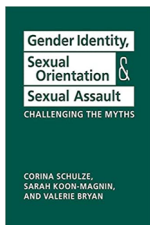
Empty Playground: A Survivor's Story. When most people think of child molesters, they think of children lured into vans or victims of creepy old men lurking around school grounds. They don't think of Josh Duggar's sisters or Irish Catholic boys from rural Wisconsin getting abused repeatedly by an older brother. They should. That is the reality. That is the untold story of untold millions.



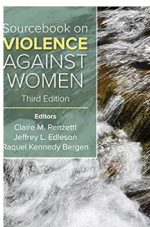
Healing the Man Within: Hope For Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse. Finally! A male survivor speaks out about male childhood sexual abuse. Randy offers survivors and their families answers to their questions of why they act out the way they do, and strategies to start living with greater purpose and happiness.



Love WITH Accountability: Digging up the Roots of Child Sexual Abuse. Despite the current survivor-affirming awareness around sexual violence, child sexual abuse, most notably when its a family member or friend, is still a very taboo topic. There are approximately 42 million child sexual abuse survivors in the U.S. and millions of bystanders who look the other way as the abuse occurs and cover for the harm-doers with no accountability.



Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation, and Sexual Assault: Challenging the Myths. The underlying argument of this groundbreaking study is this: Sexual orientation and gender identity influence how sexual assault is experienced, how it is perceived, and ultimately, how victims (and perpetrators) are treated by the criminal justice system.



Sourcebook on Violence Against Women. The book's 15 chapters are divided into three parts: theoretical and methodological issues in researching violence against women; types of violence against women and programs that work.



Sometimes lists are easier on the mind because they are uncluttered and to-the-point. If you'd rather read a few items versus articles or books, these lists are for you.

To view all list items at once, click the SEE ALL button located below the list text.

- [24 Teen Dating Abuse Warning Signs](#)
- [23 Signs of Human Trafficking](#)
- [27 Characteristics of Unsafe People](#)
- [29 Types of Personal Boundaries You Can Set](#)
- [20 Things Abusers Say](#)
- [19 Myths About Domestic Violence](#)
- [25 Relationship Red Flags](#)



Click video thumbnail to watch



WHAT IS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?



AM I BEING ABUSED?





A lot of lessons can be taken from people who have been through it before. Check out the following survey results to learn from the experiences of others.

- [Which type of abuse did you experience first?](#)
- [At what age did you or do you plan to talk to your kids about boundaries and consent?](#)
- [As a teen, did you feel like you had someone you could talk to about dating violence?](#)
- [Do you ask for consent before kissing your partner?](#)
- [Does the entertainment industry influence society's ideas on abuse, rape and consent](#)



Online forums and chats can help you connect with others who are in or have faced similar situations and find support and ideas from the survivor community.

[AfterSilence.org](https://www.aftersilence.org) aims to help victims become survivors and to communicate in the recovery of domestic and sexual violence. It offers an active message board and chat room for rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse, incest and molestation survivors. There are over 31,000 members and about 1,000,000 posts, including recent posts and many useful posts from days and months past.

[Pathways to Safety International](https://www.pathways.org/) If you're an American overseas, your situation is different than 99% of your fellow countryman, and this site will be a wonderful resource for you. Among the services is a 24-hour response to emails, as well as international phone options.

DomesticShelters.org Facebook Page offers one of the most active places where domestic violence survivors connect. You'll find conversation, past experiences and unvarnished stories, and occasionally advice from professionals who have joined in on a topic.

DomesticShelters.org Facebook Group is a private group designed to be a safe space for domestic abuse victims, survivors, advocates and others affected by abuse to support one another through meaningful dialogue and helpful insight.

Fort Refuge is a clever grassroots site run by survivors for fellow survivors as a safe place to come together and discuss their struggles and victories in healing from various types of abuse. Though the forum and chat do not boast the same numbers as some of the larger organizations, they are one of the more active conversation places on the internet currently. They also add new content to their site regularly.

Love is Respect - National Teen Dating Helpline focuses on teen relationships and can be accessed by phone, text or live chat. It offers real-time, one-on-one support by trained peer advocates who offer information and advocacy to those involved in dating abuse. They also offer support to parents, teachers, clergy, law enforcement, and service providers.

National Domestic Violence Hotline offers confidential, private, one-on-one chats with advocates every day 24/7.

OnYourMind.net is a safe and anonymous place for teens to get information and support from other teens in an online chat room, covering topics such as relationships, school, depression, stress, suicide, parents, cutting, identity and health.

Pandora's Aquarium is an online forum with around 2 million posts and over 70,000 members, and is run by Pandora's Project, which provides information, support and resources to rape and sexual abuse survivors and their friends and family.

When accessing hotlines, chats or forums from a computer, tablet, or smartphone, please remember to take the necessary precautions to keep your activities confidential from your abuser. Learn more about how to stay safe online [here](#).

Also, keep in mind that local shelters may offer in-person or virtual support groups. You can find shelters in your area at [DomesticShelters.org](https://www.DomesticShelters.org).



Another way to determine if you're experiencing abuse is to contact a trained domestic violence advocate near you or through a national service.

To search for domestic violence program staffed with trained advocates, visit [DomesticShelters.org](https://www.DomesticShelters.org) and type either your city and state, or ZIP code, into the search bar at the top of the page. A list of organizations and contact numbers near you will be displayed. To reach an advocate, reach out directly by calling the phone number listed. Most are open 24/7.

To speak to an advocate at the National Domestic Violence Hotline, also 24 hours a day, seven days a week, call 800-799-SAFE (7233) or visit [thehotline.org](https://www.thehotline.org) to chat online.

It's important to know that your call is confidential and you can choose to remain anonymous when speaking with an advocate. To know what to expect when calling, read [this article](#).