



# **Sexual Assault Response Services** *of Southern Maine*

P.O. Box 1371  
Portland, ME 04104

P.O. Box 1605  
Sanford, ME 04073

**24-Hour Hotline: 1-800-313-9900**

infosars@sarsonline.org  
www.sarsonline.org

## **TRUST AND INTIMACY**

One of the most frustrating stages of healing for many survivors is learning to trust again. Whether we were abused as children or as adults, sexual abuse or assault erodes some vital elements of our sense of ourselves and the world we live in. Trust is often one of the most difficult elements to relearn. Being sexually assaulted or abused may not only diminish or eliminate the victim's trust in the perpetrator (particularly in cases of incest and acquaintance rape), but also one's trust in the safety of the world (particularly in cases of stranger assault or abuse). In many instances, if victims are blamed or held responsible (by themselves, family and friends, or society) for the assault or abuse, they may also lose trust in themselves.

Issues with trust become apparent in the variety of coping strategies used by survivors to maintain a sense of control and safety within their lives. Some survivors isolate themselves from family, friends and all of society. They may not want to leave their house, which may be the only place they feel is safe. Others surround themselves with more superficial friends or relationships, not revealing their true selves, but not being asked or expected to either. Many survivors report feeling scared by the feelings of being in a committed and close relationship. Others feel invaded or suffocated or equate intimacy with giving up control. Some survivors become dependent and clinging, or may be so absorbed in their own healing that they are unable to pay attention to another person. Many incest survivors do not know how to give or receive nurturing or may feel threatened by physical closeness. Still others have a small, close circle of friends, which often includes only other survivors, and the basis of the friendships is often abuse or sexual assault. Survivors often have been taught to equate sex with love, and may have a long history of unfulfilling relationships.

Although the common coping strategies mentioned above do not represent all the possibilities or choices a survivor has, the common thread of these strategies is echoed over and over again by survivors: lack of intimacy.

Intimacy is a bonding of two people based on trust, respect, love and the ability to share deeply. Many survivors struggle with all of those elements of intimacy and it is not surprising that many survivors feel alone, alienated or trapped in unfulfilling relationships.

Learning to trust other people is a skill based on learning to trust our instincts and ourselves. Survivors, despite the vast difference in stories and situations, do have one important thing in common: all were violated by another person. That sense of violation often effects all the other relationships in their lives until they learn to trust again.

Relationships are not always sexual. Close, intimate friendships may be equally, or some survivors say, even more fulfilling than those with sexual elements.

There are risks involved in learning to trust again: the most obvious is a repeated assault. Other risks involve the possibility of rejection, blame, losing control, not being accepted...the list could probably go on forever. When each survivor comes to a place of feeling ready to trust another person, there are some important questions to ask when evaluating the trust and intimacy that exist.

These important questions are:

***Help, Hope, and Healing***

- ✓ Do I respect this person?
- ✓ Does this person respect me?
- ✓ Can I communicate with this person?
- ✓ Do I feel safe having disagreements/conflicts with this person?
- ✓ Are we both willing to compromise?
- ✓ Does it feel safe for me to be honest? To show my true feelings?
- ✓ Do we both take responsibility for the relationship's successes and difficulties?
- ✓ Do I feel safe talking to this person about the effect the abuse/assault is having on my life? On this relationship?
- ✓ Am I able to reach my goals?
- ✓ Is this person supportive and willing to help?
- ✓ Do I feel safe with this person?
- ✓ Do I listen to and respect how I am really feeling?

Obviously, we'd all like to have relationships where we answered unquestionably **YES** to all of these questions. Learning to trust and have intimate relationships takes time and practice. Before we can learn to trust another person, *it is vital that we learn to trust ourselves.*