

Friends and Family of Exposed Individuals

A Guide for Support



Some of the most heinous crimes we face in our society today are crimes involving the manufacturing, distribution, and use of child exploitation and abuse material. Our criminal justice professionals who work to eradicate these crimes are faced with increasing obstacles, including lack of funding, inadequate manpower and the ever-progressing technological advances that assist offenders in concealing their crimes. In addition, individuals who view these materials as a regular part of their job face unique stressors associated with their exposure to images or videos depicting child sexual abuse. For the most part, these stressors can be managed if the exposed individual is able to recognize the signs of trauma, has the tools to develop healthy responses and resiliency and has the proper support mechanisms to assist him or her in coping with the trauma.

The support of friends and family is essential in assisting exposed individuals deal with trauma. In fact, 90% of the Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) task forces surveyed reported that a strong family and friend base contributed to staying healthy.

The Innocent Justice Foundation has developed this guide to provide advice and support to family and friends of exposed individuals as part of a program designed to address the negative effects of such exposure to traumatic material entitled “Supporting Heroes in mental health Foundational Training” (SHIFT), funded by a grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP).

This guide is designed as a primer for family and friends of exposed individuals. It addresses a spectrum of issues related to child sexual exploitation and abuse material, the possible negative effects of exposure to such material on individuals, how to recognize warning signs associated with trauma and suggests tools available to help exposed individuals mitigate trauma.

Foremost, this guide will assist and encourage family and friends of the exposed individual to strengthen support networks that exposed individuals rely on for resiliency and good mental health.

“A wife called after her husband viewed child pornography related to a case, and said. ‘He came home ... very upset and wouldn’t hug either of his two daughters and was very distant.’”

--Law enforcement supervisor

“(The) employee was crying uncontrollably after viewing multiple images of [child pornography] the day he found out his wife was pregnant with their first child.”

--Law enforcement supervisor

“Sometimes, if I were especially tired, I would just close my eyes, and see the images. It became disruptive to not only my sense of emotional wellness, but it began to pervade my personal relationships.”

--Analyst, NCMEC, Exploited Child Unit

“It’s not only child porn. It’s the talking to sex offenders almost every week and then trying to lead a normal and healthy sexual experience in marriage.”

--ICAC Task Force Member

The Purpose of this Guide is to:

- Educate family and friends on nature and scope of child sexual exploitation and abuse material
- Educate family and friends on possible negative effects of exposure to child sexual exploitation and abuse material
- Help family and friends to recognize signs and symptoms of trauma in their loved one
- Understand the impact of trauma on the entire family
- Answer questions about personal reactions of family and friends
- Provide self-care suggestions for friends and family
- Enable family and friends to learn how to establish networks
- Provide additional resources for assistance

People often think child pornography is just nude images of children in the bathtub or playing on the beach. In reality, however, child sexual exploitation and abuse material consists of actual crime scene photos or films of children being sexually abused and exploited. Law enforcement officers regularly seize hundreds or thousands of images and videos that depict sexual assaults of very young children.

In fact, a study¹ published in 2005 of child sexual exploitation and abuse material collections seized by law enforcement showed that:

83% had images of children between the ages of 6 and 12

39% had images of children ages 3 to 6

19% had images of children under the age of 3

80% had images depicting sexual penetration

21% had images depicting rape or torture

In response to this overwhelming problem, the federal government created Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Forces. The ICAC Task Forces are multi-agency networks of state, local and federal law enforcement personnel whose mission is to:

- Apprehend and bring to justice Internet sexual predators and child sexual exploitation and abuse material offenders.
- Conduct investigations on the crimes of sexual exploitation of a minor and the luring of minors for sexual exploitation

Law Enforcement Says:

Victims are getting younger

Many are babies or toddlers

Abuse is getting more violent and sadistic

Live webcam and streaming video is used more regularly

¹Janis Wolak, David Finkelhor, and Kimberly J. Mitchell, "Child-Pornography Possessors Arrested in Internet- Related Crimes: Findings From the National Juvenile Online Victimization Study", 2005.

- Investigate cases involving child prostitution and obscenity directed towards minors where the Internet was used as an integral part of the crime.

ICAC task forces and their affiliates face many challenges with these investigations, including dealing with a lack of resources that make it difficult to identify victims and apprehend more than a fraction of suspects. In addition to law enforcement, forensic analysts, prosecutors, judges, and others may also be exposed to images in the course of a criminal investigation or trial. Those who are exposed to these materials may feel distress from exposure to traumatic materials, and additional stressors from the scope of the problem facing them.

"I have only been doing this for a couple months. What I saw made me sick to my stomach and affected me outside of work."

--ICAC Task Force Member

"Do they (society) have a clue? Do they know the VOLUME and DEGREE of inhumanity that is out there? Do they want to understand?"

--LAPD Photographer

Who Are Exposed Individuals?

- *Investigators*
- *Prosecutors*
- *Analysts*
- *Judges*
- *Court Officials Jurors*
- *Victim Advocates*
- *Child Protection Professionals*
- *Professionals who provide mental health treatment to children*

Anyone who is exposed child sexual abuse materials

Prolonged exposure to the trauma of viewing child sexual abuse materials (CSAM) can lead to negative effects for the exposed individual, however responses can vary widely. For some individuals, exposure appears to cause minimal distress, while others may struggle with debilitating traumatic stress.

The way individuals respond to the images may change and can be dependent on a variety of factors including:

Personal relationships: the support of a partner, being a parent, starting a family.

Professional relationships: work overload, if and how valued an individual feels at work.

Physical and mental well-being: how fatigued, or physically or emotionally well an individual feels.

“Burnout” tends to happen to givers -- people who are the bright, perfectionist, idealistic high achievers in our culture.”

- Luban (1996)

The negative effects of exposure can include:

Burnout- feeling overwhelmed, interpersonal problems at work or home, sudden health problems, substance abuse, feeling unmotivated

Compassion Fatigue- the gradual lessening of compassion for co-workers, family members, even victims

Vicarious Trauma- can be thought of as the negative changes that happen to exposed individuals over time as they witness other people’s suffering and need. Vicarious trauma happens not only because one cares about people who have been hurt, but because one feels committed or responsible to help. Over a prolonged period of time the exposed individual may find that coping mechanisms that worked previously no longer work.

As the friend or a family member of an exposed individual, it is important that you be able to recognize the negative effects that may manifest in the exposed individual. When friends and family better understand what an exposed individual is experiencing, they can offer greater support. Understanding the warning signs of more severe traumatic stress and what to do about it can be of enormous benefit to your loved one.

Listed below are some of the more common negative effects an exposed individual in a romantic relationship may exhibit. He or she may:

- Become temporarily withdrawn from normal sexual relations
- Become irritable and/or withdrawn
- Display an unusual level of emotionality
- Engage in risky behavior
- Experience sleep loss

Some common negative effects may occur in other family relationships. He or she may:

- Try to overprotect his or her children
- Withdraw from his or her children
- Become reluctant to bathe, or change diapers, on young children
- Vocalize what he or she considers to be poor parenting by other members of the family
- Failure to trust others to babysit or care for their children

“The support of partners, family and friends, is vital as they are often the first to pick up on the signs that something is wrong”

- Jane Stevenson, Occupational Health Consultant

Warning signs in the exposed individual that may be cause for serious concern if not traced to other sources:

Emotional Reactions - strong emotional responses to minor provocations, indifference, depression, hopelessness, despair, loss of interest in life.

Behavioral Reactions - Working at home, waking up thinking about victims and not falling back to sleep, fighting with spouse, yelling at children.

Trauma Reactions- flashbacks, loss of sexual desire/ ability, unable to identify emotions in typically emotional situations.

As a family member or friend of an exposed individual who may be exhibiting gradual or sudden change in behavior, it is important to understand your own reactions to their behavior, and to remain calm and supportive.

Partners and family members, in particular, may feel resentful at the impact this work is having on the exposed individual. This in turn can lead to feelings of guilt for 'daring' to feeling resentful when your partner is 'doing such a wonderful job'.

Common behaviors friends and family may start to exhibit:

- Isolation of the exposed individual
- Lashing out at the exposed individual
- Minimizing communication

"I understand this is a difficult job, but I just sometimes wish she wasn't always quite so intense about it.....and then I feel bad for feeling that way"
- Partner of Investigator

Adjusting to accommodate someone who is experiencing negative effects can be a difficult task for friends and family. However, there are steps you can take to help you retain a balanced outlook and assist the exposed individual:

- Try not to take the responses personally, realizing it may be negative effects of exposure that are causing the symptoms
- Plan some relaxing activities with your exposed loved one or friend
- Show patience if the exposed individual is withdrawn
- Talk to your exposed loved one or friend about ways that you can lend support
- Find effective ways to communicate and listen to the exposed individual
- Try to minimize your reactions to any negative behavior they might exhibit such as anger or isolation (This does not include physical violence which is NEVER acceptable)
- Encourage your loved one or friend to seek support from a professional BEFORE symptoms start interfering regularly with daily activities.
- In a safe and controlled environment, communicate how the exposed individuals' behavior is impacting you and communicate your needs.

The effects of trauma can affect everyone in the family, including children. Failure to address their feelings may lead to feelings of self-doubt, helplessness or confusion. Helping them through their feelings will help them cope with their experiences. You may help them by:

- Encouraging discussion of feelings
- Providing extra attention and consideration
- Addressing any “acting out” behaviors
- Encouraging physical activities
- Encouraging social activities

Exposed individuals who are also parents can become overly protective by restricting the activities of the child as a means of protecting them. Try to ensure that both parent and child discuss any constraints to activities *before* the activity commences to reduce the potential of a reasoned discussion becoming an argument.

If appropriate to your child’s age, explain that the role of the exposed individual is a stressful one, while also acknowledging the importance of the role being carried out.

It is important to remember that you do not have to “fix” how your child feels. Instead, focus on helping your child understand and deal with his or her experiences. Healing is an evolving state for most children, but some may need professional help.

If signs of stress do not subside after a few weeks, or if they get worse, consider consulting a mental health professional who has special training in working with children.

It is vital that family and friends of exposed individuals build networks in which they feel comfortable discussing the work carried out by their loved one or friend. These networks allow friends and family to express their concerns, share the experience of others and find solutions they may not have thought of on their own. It's important to not feel alone.

You can connect by:

- Getting together with friends and family of exposed individuals to talk about experiences you may all be facing
- Seeking one-on-one support from a mental health professional
- Contacting organizations that are designed to assist individuals who are dealing with family issues or trauma
- Social networking on sites designed for spouses or family members of individuals facing trauma
- Spending more time with friends
- Attending social clubs (book clubs, gyms, arts and crafts clubs)
- Planning casual outings with other families or friends of exposed individuals

Spend positive time with your impacted partner:

- Take walks
- Schedule movie-nights or date-nights
- Cook dinner together
- Play games as a couple or family
- Use other activities you enjoy together

Learn to recognize signs of negative stress in yourself:

- Changes in sleeping pattern
- Feeling 'tense' or 'wound up'
- Excessive worrying
- Loss of interest in things which normally bring you enjoyment

Identify what reduces negative stress in you and make time for yourself:

- Take a walk in the park
- Watch a comedy film
- Indulge in a warm bath
- Exercise increases the 'feel good' factor
- A healthy diet supports wellness

Your loved one, or friend, is carrying out a vital role to protect our children, however they do not, and cannot, do this alone. Your understanding and support are paramount in the fight to keep the officers and civilian staff exposed to child abuse materials healthy.

“(After viewing images) the last thing I think about is my private (sex) life...I discussed this with my wife and she totally understands, so it’s....not a major impact”

- Senior Investigator

“Job stressors can also negatively impact law enforcement spouses and children directly...”

- White and Honig

You have a crucial role in the fight against those that would harm our children, and it is vital that you too remain well by looking after yourself. It is important to remember that the impact of the role carried out by your loved one or your friend can also impact you. By taking care of yourself, you will be better able to look after your partner, your family, and your friends.

Never be afraid to ask for support or seek help

Supporting Heroes in mental health Foundational Training (SHIFT)

SHIFT for Individuals Exposed to Child Sexual Exploitation Material: These courses, team taught by a mental health professional and a law enforcement officer, will offer professionals who are exposed to traumatic material and who may be required to interact with offenders on a regular basis, the opportunity to learn about the causes and symptoms of negative effects that may occur as a result of their duties. Participants will learn how to develop effective coping strategies. In addition, the exposed individual will be given the tools to help facilitate a supportive work environment for themselves, effectively understand and utilize mental health support, and solicit support through and for their families and their peers.

SHIFT for Mental Health Professionals: These workshops, team taught by a mental health professional and a law enforcement officer, will offer mental health professionals insight into the challenges faced by professionals exposed to child sexual exploitation and abuse materials and other operations involving offenders. The course will cover how to help these professionals avoid vicarious traumatization, burnout, and compassion fatigue. In addition, mental health professionals will learn how to gain the trust of criminal justice professionals, which techniques show promise in reducing the negative effects of exposure, and how they can help individuals build resiliency and balance in this very challenging field. This course offers not just education, but also tools that the mental health provider can immediately implement to assist frontline heroes in maintaining positive mental health.

For more information visit <https://shiftwellness.org>