

Understanding Disclosure Over Time: Insights from a Systematic Review

Aim

This fact sheet is designed to inform policy, program design, and system-level responses, by presenting findings from a systematic literature review examining disclosure of child sexual abuse across the life course. It highlights how disclosure evolves over time, the factors that shape disclosure experiences, and the critical role of responses in influencing wellbeing, future disclosure, and recovery.

Key Findings

- Disclosure is a process which takes shape and evolves across a victim/survivor's life, with past disclosure experiences influencing future disclosure thoughts and behaviours.
- There was an inverse relationship between themes for facilitators and barriers and positive and negative disclosure experiences.
- Themes associated with disclosure/non-disclosure and more positive/negative disclosure experiences could be categorised into five domains: (i) internal motivators/barriers; (ii) external facilitators/barriers; (iii) positive/negative responses experienced to a past disclosure; (iv) positive/negative internal outcomes of disclosure; and (v) positive/negative external response following disclosure.
- Past positive disclosure experiences, a safe and trusting relationship, being believed, and being supported constitutes a helpful disclosure process for all ages and genders. Negative and unsupportive responses can cause harm.
- Fear and shame were dominant factors inhibiting disclosure among all ages and genders.
- The dynamics of believability, instances and prevalence of being believed, and the subsequent effects of being or not being believed were central to the experience of disclosure.
- Motivations for disclosure, disclosure recipients and positive and negative disclosure experiences varied by life stage (childhood, adolescence, adulthood).
- Evidence of disclosure as a process is largely implicit within the literature, with only a few recent articles comprising an explicit life course perspective.
- Findings suggest specific attributes of disclosure for men and women, however male and female victim/survivors are subject to negative responses to disclosure stemming from gendered societal stereotypes.
- There is a gap in the literature relating to the experience of disclosure for people who identify as non-binary and gender diverse.

Strategies for Action

- **Recognise disclosure as a lifelong, evolving process**
Embed a life course approach across policy and practice, acknowledging that disclosure may occur multiple times and is shaped by past experiences, life stage, and context.
- **Strengthen responses across all life stages**
Ensure responses to disclosure are safe, believing, and supportive, particularly in childhood and adolescence, where negative experiences are most common and most harmful.
- **Build capability beyond formal systems**
Invest in resources and education for parents, peers, and communities, recognising their critical role as trusted disclosure recipients, especially for children and young people.
- **Expand support for adult victim-survivors**
Address gaps in guidance and practice by strengthening responses to adult disclosure, including ongoing support beyond the initial disclosure.
- **Challenge stigma and gendered myths**
Tackle harmful stereotypes that shape disclosure experiences by building community awareness and practitioner understanding, including responses that are sensitive to gender and identity.
- **Strengthen the evidence base for underserved groups**
Prioritise research and practice development to better understand and support LGBTQIA+ and gender diverse victim-survivors, where significant gaps remain.
- **Improve how evidence informs change over time**
Strengthen research and data collection to better capture when disclosures occur and how responses are changing, ensuring policy and practice can respond to emerging trends.