

# TIPS FOR FRIENDS AND FAMILY OF SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

It can be hard to know what to do to help a friend or family member who has been sexually victimized. Keep in mind that sexual victimization is a crime and that your friend or family member will be impacted by this horrendous crime.

**Here are some tips on what to do (and what not to do) and how to cope yourself.**

## **WHAT TO SAY TO A SURVIVOR:**

I'm sorry this happened to you.

It wasn't your fault.

You survived; obviously you did the right things.

Thank you for telling me.

I'm always here if you want to talk.

Can I do anything for you?

## **DO's**

**DO** respect them enough to not pity them. They are a victim of a crime and have survived!

**DO** comfort them. Bring a cup of tea and a blanket. Play soft music. Make the environment comfortable.

**DO** offer to accompany them to their first therapy session.

**DO** allow them to tell you as much or as little as they need to.

**DO** tell them that you are sorry for what happened and that you want to understand and help them.

## **WHAT NEVER TO SAY TO A SURVIVOR:**

It was your fault.

You could have avoided it had you \_\_\_\_\_.

It's been so long! Get over it!

You wanted it.

It's not that big of a deal; it happens to lots of people.

I don't believe you. (that's the very worst thing to say)

## **DONT's**

**DON'T** assume they do or don't want to be touched. Some people can't stand a hug at this point; others can't make it without one. Ask!

**DON'T** try to solve all the problems for them. The crime has taken control from them and they need to take back control by making choices for themselves.

**DON'T** offer blaming or judging advice --like try to avoid doing that again.

**DON'T** demand to know every detail of the sexual victimization.

**DON'T** feel bad if they want to be alone sometimes. Don't pay attention to their anger. It is a normal part of trauma.

**DON'T** tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse", or that they should "forget it and pull themselves together". This does not make them feel better about things.

## Further Suggestions...

*Review facts and myths about sexual abuse and assault:*

It is crucial to understand the basic facts, and for secondary survivors (partner, friend, support person) to examine their own attitudes and feelings in order to be a positive support. Don't allow the myths to affect how you perceive the survivor.

### ***As a secondary survivor, you are also affected***

- Helping yourself helps the survivor! There is no reason to feel guilty or selfish for taking care of yourself and your many emotions.
- It is normal to feel the following and more: helplessness – guilt – shame – loss of intimacy – loss of routine – frustration – need for retaliation – overprotection – anger–find healthy ways to deal with these feelings. Talk to a professional if necessary.
- Aim to find the difference between being supportive and overbearing. The supportive friend is there when they need to talk, is open to hearing what they have to say, and doesn't always press for more. The overbearing friend is constantly checking up on them, forces them to talk, and tries to solve their problems.
- Don't be afraid of silence. If you don't know what to say, that's okay. The most powerful statement a friend can make is by simply being there; not trying to fix everything or pretending it's okay. Silence often says more than words.

## Trauma and its impact

Experiencing trauma can make a person stronger and help to cope with the stresses of everyday life. The experience can also help you see things differently in a more positive way. It might help you to know that:

Trauma is different for everybody. Some react right away, some after a time, some strongly, some hardly at all.

Many people are left feeling very helpless. This is scary for them and can be scary for you.

Some might feel tense and appear snappy and angry for some time after the incident and you might need to be patient with them.

Ask them how you can be most helpful to them.

Many people just need extra understanding and comfort and someone to just be there. You might feel there is nothing you can do. Being there is doing a lot.

Feeling stressed is a normal response to trauma.

It takes time to get back a feeling of control.

It helps to talk about the incident, so you can help by listening. It can be hard to listen so if you don't feel you can handle it, say so gently and help the other person to find someone else to talk to.



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# Tips for friends and family

## IF YOU WITNESS STRONG REACTIONS:

Depending on your relationship with the survivor and the trust they have in you, they may experience a flashback or panic attack in your presence. It can be frightening and difficult to know what to do during a situation like this, but here are a few suggestions:

### **Flashbacks:**

Remember that during flashbacks, the survivor is often actually reliving the sexual victimization. Be cautious in your actions and get to know the survivor as well as what they need before you do anything at all. Here are a few suggestions.

- Name it. Not everyone realizes that what they are suffering is a flashback.
- Tell the survivor that you know it feels real to them, but that it is not really happening.
- Turn a soft light on.
- Turn triggering music or television shows off.
- Get to know the survivor's triggers as well as you can.
- Help to ground the survivor. Encourage them to take slow, gentle breaths. Tell them they are remembering. Talk softly to the survivor. Remind them of where they are. Ask them to describe their surroundings to you. Point out the fact that the abuser is not present. Remember that they may not be able to respond to you, but often is aware of your voice.
- Consider placing your hand on their hand or arm (\*not\* on the stomach, thigh, etc.). This may trigger them further but may also remind them of where they are and that they are safe.
- Inform the survivor of the importance of flashbacks. They are an opportunity to learn and understand. They are often seen as an indication that the person is ready to remember; that the body has information to share. Many people are very frustrated by lack of a complete memory; flashbacks can validate a survivor's experience.

### **Panic Attacks:**

- Remind the survivor of where they are. Ask them to sit down and place their feet on the floor.
- Describe their surroundings to them and ask them to do the same.
- Remind the survivor to take deep breaths.

Most important is to get to know the survivor and what works and what doesn't. There is not a lot you can do during situations like this, which can be frustrating. Just be there for them during and after the flashback. Don't press them to talk about it, and avoid triggering them further. If they want to discuss what just happened, be open to that, while at the same time being aware that many of the emotions they felt during the sexual victimization may be present now.



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### What survivors want you to know...

- We often take a lot of responsibility for the abuse. Telling us it is not our fault may help to lessen the guilt of shame, but it can't take it away.
- We deal with a lot of shame. Please don't shame a survivor. It is the pattern we are trying to break.
- The healing process for a survivor may take some time. We may be in and out of therapy several times. New memories may surface, and new experiences may trigger us.
- People who are survivors are often caretakers. It is a survival technique. It takes a long time to unlearn that behaviour.
- Survivors often resent being judged. We have judged and punished ourselves for years. We are usually harder on ourselves than anyone else can be.
- People who are survivors don't want your pity.
- Don't try to excuse the abuser's behaviour.
- Don't categorize survivors. Each case of sexual victimization, although it may be similar, is a unique case. We do not all follow the same pattern of healing or behaviour.
- Not all survivors have clear images of the sexual victimization. We may need to deal with that lack of memories on a regular basis.
- Even if we are safe now, we still may be fearful of our attacker or abuser.
- Talking about it means "breaking the secret." Many of us are faced with the terror "breaking the secret" every time we talk about the abuse.
- If a survivor chooses to talk to you about the sexual victimization, and you are uncomfortable about it, please say so. Let the survivor know you aren't uncomfortable with them, only the issue. Then offer to find someone who is comfortable with the issue.
- Please don't ask a survivor to forgive and forget. There is nothing we would rather do than be able to forget. But we can't--we have to learn how to deal with it.
- Please don't ask a survivor if they are done dealing with it yet. That is a shaming question. The process of healing may take several steps in a lifetime.

RESEARCH shows that people who have been through trauma get better faster and more easily when they have the support of family and friends and counsellors who can help them move forward.

*The above was adapted from a list by Cedar A. Morrigan/Paula, from the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault/Training Manual.*



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