

SUPPORTING A SURVIVOR

Learn Truths about Sexual Trauma
& How to Help Survivors in Your Life

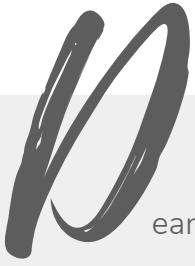
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WHY I WROTE THIS



Dear Supporter of a Survivor,

Thank you for being here and for reading this guide. A survivor having supportive people in their life makes a world of difference in their healing.

My name is Ashley Baxter, and I would not be where I am today without people who stood by me after I was raped at the age of 34 in 2013.

After investing in my healing journey, I reached a point where I wanted to help other survivors. So I began volunteer counseling and leading support groups.

From my journey and working with other survivors, I quickly learned there are two main battles survivors face after trauma. One, recovering from the emotional and mental damage. And two, dealing with the painful responses from other people. By "responses," I mean things people said or did.

Most likely this is uncharted territory for you, and you may be stressed over what to do. There are many things you can say and do that are helpful, but there also many things that are harmful.

Most of the time people don't realize how certain responses can be harmful to a survivor. That is why I put this guide together. It is to help you navigate offering support as best as you can, and to also take care of yourself in the process.

Page 11 is fully devoted to helping you practice your own self-care because learning about the trauma and supporting the survivor can be draining on multiple levels, so it is important you take care of yourself as well.

Thank you for wanting to support this survivor in your life. You have been trusted with one the most vulnerable parts of their life, and your support is very important.



Ashley

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P.S. If you are also a survivor, then supporting this survivor may be cathartic, or it may be too painful for you. It is important that you be honest with yourself and the survivor as to what you can and can't offer.

Also, if you have never pursued healing, I encourage you to share your story with trusted people and to seek help thru a counselor, support group, and/or books. It isn't easy, but in the end, it is worth it. YOU are worth it.

THOUGHTS BEFORE BEGINNING

Each Survivor is Different

What is most helpful will vary from survivor to survivor. They may want you to listen to their story one time, read this guide to be informed about trauma, but then they don't want to talk about it further. Or they may want you to know, be informed, and be someone they can talk to when having a difficult day.

I encourage survivors to be honest about their expectations, but if that hasn't been made clear, ask what their expectations are for you helping them. You may not be able to meet their expectations but having that conversation will help you reach a healthy place together as to how you can help.

Also, what a survivor who was recently traumatized needs, versus one whose trauma happened years ago, can be very different. But even if the person was traumatized decades ago, if this is their first time ever talking about it, then it may be as emotionally and mentally difficult as if it just happened.

The bottom line is, each person is unique. This guide is filled with helpful information and ways to support survivors, but the most important thing is to keep an open conversation as to what they specifically need. Keep in mind that what they need in one season, may be different in another.

Read Every Page

I see so many survivors get hurt by the words of others. Words that are mainly based on widespread misconceptions. People aren't doing so out of ill will, just out of a lack of knowledge. I can attest to that because I too believed these misconceptions before I knew the truths.

Learning the information in this guide will not only help you support the survivor in your life, but also help make this world a better place for other survivors. On behalf of myself and all survivors, I also encourage you to speak up when you hear others voicing the misconceptions you will read about in this guide.

Most Important Advice

Out of all the advice in this guide, the most important takeaways to support a survivor are these . . .

- **Believe them**
- **Ask what they need from you**
- **Learn about sexual trauma and its misconceptions**
- **Listen when they need to share**

EFFECTS OF SEXUAL TRAUMA

It helps to know common reactions of survivors during, immediately after & long after sexual trauma occurs.

Fight, Flight, or Freeze Response

A response to trauma is typically reached by the mind within seconds and without deliberate thought. It is an unconscious reaction. Therefore survivors should never be questioned WHY they responded a certain way.

We commonly hear the term "fight or flight" response, but another common response is freeze. When a survivor's automatic response was to freeze, they are frequently questioned by others in ways implying the survivor is partially to blame for the trauma. "Why didn't you run, scream, or fight back?"

Another damaging thing to say to a survivor who froze is, "if it was me, I would have . . ." (insert any fight or flight action). For starters, you don't know for sure how you would respond, and second, this statement falsely implies the survivor was weak and/or partially at fault for their trauma.

Also, if a survivor isn't aware "freezing" is a common reaction to trauma, they too can incorrectly blame themselves for what happened. Help remind them there is no right or wrong way to respond to trauma.

Immediate Shock

Shock can take many forms and last a long time. Crying uncontrollably, shaking, screaming, staring, silence, talking, numb, unphased, and even laughing. The effects of shock can be unexpected and seem illogical.

It is beneficial to know this because when survivors don't behave as we "expect" (typically as portrayed in movies) we may incorrectly doubt their story - which is one of the most harmful things we can do.

Long-Term Effects & Triggers

Below are just some of the possible long term effects of sexual trauma. All survivors will experience at least a few of these, however those who seek healing, typically reach a point eventually where they either rarely experience these effects, or experience them at a much lesser degree.



But whether a survivor pursues healing or not, most experience "triggers" occasionally throughout their life.

Triggers are words, images, experiences, etc. that produce an upsetting reaction. It could be seeing someone who looks similar to their perpetrator, hearing about a sexual assault case in the news, or walking past someone wearing the same perfume or cologne their perpetrator wore during the trauma.

Survivors often learn how to cope better to triggers over time. Having people in their life, like you, who know triggers happen, can be very comforting if you are nearby when they have been triggered.

DEFINITIONS & MISCONCEPTIONS

Thanks to movements such as #metoo, more awareness and education have spread, but so much more is needed. It is difficult to fully grasp how damaging and dangerous are the misconceptions of sexual trauma. As you will learn, these misconceptions protect perpetrators, and hurt survivors.

DEFINITIONS

There are many definitions about sexual trauma. Below are some of the most important ones to know.

Sexual Trauma, Sexual Harassment, Sexual Assault, Sexual Violence:

These terms can have different definitions based on each organization, legal entity, etc. These terms are typically used as a broad category to cover any non-consensual sexual acts (i.e. indecent exposure, rape, sexual remarks or advances, touching, and many more).

Rape:

Rape is not only forced sexual intercourse. Per the FBI in the United States, rape is defined as "penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim."

Consent:

The legal definition as to what is considered "consent" can vary based on each legal entity. The most general understanding is giving permission for something to happen to you. What is legally constituted as "permission" is defined differently across the globe. However, a person's clothing choice, being intoxicated, or being silent do not constitute as consent.

Trauma Bonding:

When a survivor displays varying degrees of loyalty to their abuser. It is very common in long-term abuse cases. If the survivor has a trauma bond, be patient with them. Although you clearly see the abuse & abuser as being wrong, the survivor is not capable of fully doing so at this time. Trauma bonds are difficult to break. Encourage the survivor to seek a counselor's help.

MISCONCEPTIONS

Most misconceptions have been ingrained in our minds over the years. Until faced with the truth, we usually don't realize we are believing (and often perpetuating) harmful misconceptions. Read the following lies and truths on this page and next. Supporting data can be found on www.rainn.org, as well as on other sexual trauma awareness sites. If you want more information, search the internet for the question listed in the header of a given topic.

What is Sexual Trauma?

Lie: Sexual trauma is only defined as unwanted and forced sexual intercourse

Truth: Sexual trauma is sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the victim. Some forms of sexual assault include: rape, attempted rape, forcing a victim to perform sexual acts, fondling or unwanted sexual touching, and indecent exposure

Dangers of the Lie: Survivors often do not realize they have experienced sexual trauma if the act does not fit the description of this misconception. Also, a survivor's words of what happened may be dismissed, or minimized, by others if the details don't fit this misconception.

DEFINITIONS & MISCONCEPTIONS

Why Does Someone Commit Sexual Trauma?

Lie: A sex offender is driven by uncontrolled sexual urges

Truth: Sexual trauma is a crime of power and control

Dangers of the Lie: People incorrectly think if we can teach people to control their sexual urges, then sexual assaults will no longer occur.

How Much is the Victim to Blame?

Lie: Sexual trauma victims may be partially to blame based on what they were doing, where they were, what they were wearing, and if partaking in alcohol or drugs, etc.

Truth: Sexual trauma victims are not at fault. Only the person sexually abusing the victim is at fault. There is NOTHING a person can do to compel another person to harm them.

Dangers of the Lie: This misconception is very damaging because it often results in survivors not sharing their story, shamed by others, not being supported, and/or believing the lie as well.

Where Does Sexual Trauma Occur?

Lie: Sexual trauma mainly occurs in dark alleys or parties.

Truth: Unfortunately, sexual trauma can occur anywhere. It could occur in your home, office, car, daycare, a store, . . . anywhere. That isn't said to create fear, but to bring awareness.

Dangers of the Lie: Survivors may not be believed as easily if the assault occurred in a place that doesn't fit this misconception.

What is the Description of a Sex Offender?

Lie: Sexual offenses are mainly committed by a stranger who looks dangerous and suspicious.

Truth: The majority are committed by someone the victim knows. Only 20% of reported rape cases are committed by a stranger. It can be a parent, care-giver, teacher, boss, doctor, friend, co-worker, masseuse, etc. Often times offenders are well-liked, charismatic people.

Dangers of the Lie: Survivors may not be believed as easily if the trauma occurred by a person who doesn't fit the misconception

How Often Do People Lie About Being a Victim?

Lie: A majority of sexual trauma accusations are false.

Truth: Per the USA's FBI, only 2% of reported sexual traumas are false. It is also estimated only 25% of cases are actually reported. Thus, if all were reported, the amount of false reports would be closer to 0.5%

Dangers of the Lie: Victims are often accused of lying, which is one of the most painful responses a victim can receive. A culture where victims are often not believed, scares many from reporting. Thus their perpetrators remain free to sexually traumatizing more people.

Are Men Victims of Sexual Trauma?

Lie: Rarely is a male sexually traumatized.

Truth: In 1 out of every 10 rapes, the victim is male. Per www.1in6.org, 1 in 6 men have experienced sexual trauma.

Dangers of the Lie: Male victims rarely speak up in fear of not being believed and/or fear of being ridiculed. Thus they often carry their pain in silence and rarely pursue healing.

WHAT TO SAY, WHAT NOT TO SAY

This guide is filled with information to help you make good choices in what to say or do in effort to support the survivor. This page has specific examples & ideas of things to say or do, and things to avoid.

What To Say or Do

- "I believe you"
- "It is not your fault"
- Thank them for confiding in you
- Be present and available for them to talk to when needed
- Encourage them to talk to a counselor, support group, etc. if they haven't done so before
- Ask how you can best support them (occasionally ask again since their needs may change)
- You can encourage them to tell the police, BUT remember it is their decision (see page 9)
- Be mindful of how certain situations, movies, etc. may be difficult for them
- Let them know you will not tell anyone else what they have shared with you
- "You are not alone"
- "Do you want to talk about it?"

**If this is the survivor's first time dealing with the trauma,
below are additional helpful things to say and do:**

- Offer to spend the night at their place, or for them to spend the night at your place
- Invite them to gatherings, but don't put pressure on them to attend
- Ask if there are situations particularly difficult for them that you can be helpful in
- Do calm activities with them such as watching an uplifting, non-triggering movie
- If they are neglecting basic needs, find ways to help (such as cooking meals)
- Send them encouraging texts, emails, or letters to let them know they aren't alone
- Make small gestures to help brighten their day (such as buying coffee or flowers)
- Check in to see how they are doing and to let them know you are there if needed. (Don't be surprised or frustrated if they don't always respond. Sometimes making it thru each hour of the day is all the energy a survivor has during hard times)

What NOT To Say or Do

- Victim blaming statements ("Why were you there?" "Why didn't you stop them?")
- "If it were me, I would have . . ." or "You should have . . ."
- Don't pressure them to give you more information than they are comfortable giving
- Dismiss the survivor's feelings or minimize their experience
- Tell others about the person's trauma. It is critical you respect the survivor's confidentiality
- Try to "fix" the problem and/or take matters into your own hands
- Suggest the survivor "move on" and forget the trauma. (They have been deeply wounded. Just as with physical wounds, these trauma wounds need to be tended to so further damage isn't done)

RESPECT THEIR LEGAL DECISIONS

Help the survivor feel empowered, but don't take action into your own hands.

The only exception is if the victim is a child, or a vulnerable adult. "Vulnerable adult" in this case means an adult who is unable to protect their self from significant harm, often due to having a mental and developmental disability. In those instances, most locations in the world require you to report the crime once you are aware or suspect it. Be familiar with laws in your area.

A Survivor's Choice

The decision to report the crime has a lot of implications for a survivor and can be painful on many levels. For example, in the USA (and in many other countries):

- The legal process from an arrest to a verdict can last months to years.
- For a criminal conviction, the judge/jury must rule "beyond a reasonable doubt"
- Telling their story in front of strangers and their perpetrator can be retraumatizing

The most important step for a survivor is healing as much as possible. For many survivors, pursuing legal justice is part of that process, for others it is too mentally, emotionally, and physically painful to do so. It is very important you support whatever legal decision they make.

My Legal Journey

My story is an example of a painful reporting experience. At first I didn't want to report, I just wanted to put everything behind me. But 3 weeks after my trauma, I learned most perpetrators don't stop assaulting people until they have been arrested, so I changed my mind and called the police.

There was no physical evidence available by that point, so the police couldn't arrest him. A detective was appointed to my case. She took my statement, obtained a statement from the owner of the business where the crime took place, and requested a statement from the man who raped me. However he wouldn't speak to her, and since there wasn't an arrest, he didn't have to. In the end there wasn't enough for a case.

I estimate 3 months would be enough time to complete those activities, paperwork, and while managing other cases. However it took 18 months until the detective told me there wasn't enough evidence for a case. During that year and a half, most of the time I wouldn't hear from her in months. Eventually I would call her for an update and she often said she had a lot of other cases and hadn't been able to look at mine.

I knew my case had a slim chance of going to court due to no physical evidence, but I didn't expect the police interactions to feel like my story didn't matter, and that I would have to fight for my case to get attention. For those 18 months, part of my life felt it was on hold while I waited to hear a decision. There was a stage of healing I couldn't move into while this part was uncertain.

I wish I could tell you my experience isn't common, but so many survivors I have worked with share how working with the justice system was one of the most painful aspects of the aftermath of their trauma.

I want justice served to ever perpetrator, but the journey isn't an easy. It's important a survivor is aware of the process so they can gather stamina and support if they decide to pursue it. A survivor needs to do what is best for them. It is important their decision is accepted and supported by those around them.

SELF - CARE

Depending on how much support a survivor needs, caring for them can be emotionally, mentally, and physically draining. This especially true when a survivor is dealing with their trauma for the first time.

Also, learning about the survivor's trauma may produce strong emotions and thoughts in you that you need to deal with as well because of how much you care for that person.

Practice self-awareness to see when you need to practice self-care.

SELF CHECK-INS

- Are you having trouble sleeping?
- Are you neglecting your basic needs?
- Are you experiencing anxiety?
- Are you neglecting responsibilities in your life?

Those are just a few questions that may indicate if you are over extending yourself. You can't help the survivor if you don't take care of yourself first, so please make self-care a priority. When needed, do things that are restorative or that bring you joy in order to help you recharge.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

It is important to support a survivor's healing, but it is also important to know you are not responsible for it. Although you may play an important role, the bulk of their healing is dependent on them. Knowing this helps you feel less pressure if you can't answer a phone call from them, or if you need a break for self-care reasons.

TALK TO SOMEONE IF NEEDED

Learning that someone you care about has been sexually traumatized can be incredibly difficult information to process. You may find it helpful to talk with a counselor who specializes in sexual trauma.

Sometimes there are additional factors that a counselor can help you navigate through. Such as if you know the person who traumatized them, if this person is a family member, if you feel like you may have been able to stop it from happening, and many more situations.

Talking to a counselor who specializes in sexual trauma can help you sort out how the trauma is affecting you and what steps to take for your well-being.

FINAL WORDS

I hope this guide has been very helpful. As mentioned at the start, the most important takeaways are:

- Believe them
- Ask what they need from you
- Learn about sexual trauma & its misconceptions
- Listen when they need to share

Some of the information in this guide will apply to things the survivor in your life desperately needs you to know and other information won't. After finishing this guide, you may want to go through it with the survivor, and ask them to help you see certain parts from their perspective and what they need from you.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

There is much more you can learn about sexual trauma, and thankfully there are tons of websites, books, and other resources to build upon what you have learned in this guide by searching on the internet.

If you are in a serious romantic relationship with the survivor, then I strongly encourage you read a book about that because trauma can affect intimacy and trust within a relationship. Reading books about it will strengthen your relationship in so many ways, and it will also be one of the most supportive things you can do for your partner. I have heard great things about the following books:

- *When a Woman You Love Was Abused: A Husband's Guide to Helping Her Overcome Childhood Sexual Molestation* by Dawn Scott Jones
- *When a Man You Love Was Abused: A Woman's Guide to Helping Him Overcome Childhood Sexual Molestation* by Dan B. Allender

Although those, and other books you find, may not exactly match your situation, that's okay. Books that helped me the most were about childhood sexual abuse, even though that wasn't my story. If you do find one that matches your scenario, that's great, but if not, then find one that matches some aspects.

A PERSONAL NOTE

If you seek further advice on how to help a survivor, reach out to a local or online counselor, support group, or the internet. www.rainn.org and www.nsvrc.org are great websites with a lot of helpful resources.

My main work is coaching people to recognize and live out of their unconditional worth. This stems from what I also learned in my healing process, which was to value myself. Although I do see the world thru the eyes of a survivor, the work I do is geared towards anyone wanting to grow in recognizing the self- and body-worth. I believe the world is a better place when we learn how to value ourselves and others.

If interested, you can check out my coaching and programs at www.theashleybaxter.com.

Thank you, thank you, thank you for reading this guidebook. Just the simple act of reading it has better equipped you to support the survivor who confided in you.

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