

HOW TO SHARE A SURVIVOR STORY

Sharing about Sexual Trauma
in a Healing & Helpful Way

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WHY I WROTE THIS

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ello, my name is Ashley Baxter. In 2013, at the age of 34, I was raped.

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.

Through my story and through working with other survivors, I learned how powerful and healing it is when we share our story.

I have also seen the damage done when a survivor doesn't share their story, or when they share but it isn't received well.

The choice to share, or not to share are both hard, and each come with their own difficulties. But only the choice to share leads to more healing.

By sharing you acknowledge what happened to you was wrong, you give your pain air to breathe, you encourage other survivors to share, and you deepen the healthy relationships in your life.

There are many elements to the healing process, but if I had to pick the most important one, it would be sharing your story.

I have learned a lot about what to consider when sharing. Such as the importance of caring for yourself, preparing for the different range of reactions, carefully choosing who you tell, and more.

I put this guidebook together because you have already been through so much, and if I can help the part of sharing be easier, then I want to help. I hope you find it helpful, encouraging, & healing.



Ashley

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P.S. Although sharing is the most healing step you can take for yourself, I encourage you to also seek additional steps of healing such as seeing a counselor, joining a support group, and/or reading books about healing from sexual trauma.

THOUGHTS BEFORE BEGINNING

When I first shared my story with friends and family, I kept trying to find the "perfect" way to tell them. The "perfect" words to deliver the message gently - words that wouldn't shock them.

But over time I learned the "perfect" way doesn't exist. This news will always be difficult to give and to receive. Although sharing is never easy, this guidebook is here to help make the process a little easier.

How to Use this Guidebook

This guidebook is filled with exercises, tools, and mindsets to help you navigate telling your story. You will find helpful suggestions for before, during, and after sharing.

Action Steps

Many of the pages have "Action Steps" you can fill in as you go through the guidebook.

Sharing Worksheet

All of the "Action Steps" are then pulled together in the Sharing Worksheet on Page 14. Fill out the Sharing Worksheet again each time you share with someone new.

Sharing Publicly

Although this guidebook is mainly geared towards sharing privately with one or a few people at a time, there are many similarities if you choose to share your story publicly to a larger number of people (such as on social media or a podcast). Page 15 has helpful information if you ever decide to share in that way.

The Supporters Guide PDF

Included with this download was an additional pdf called "Supporting a Survivor: Learn Truths about Sexual Trauma & How to Help Survivors in Your Life." That pdf is for you to distribute to people you confide in, if you want. It will help them understand more of the truths and effects of sexual trauma.

Most Important Takeaways

In the midst of all you will read in this guidebook, the most important takeaways are . . .

- Share until you find supportive people who believe you
- Know that sharing is an important part of your healing
- Share in whatever ways are the most caring for yourself

WHY SHARE YOUR STORY

Sharing your story is the most healing & empowering thing you can do with your trauma because it . . .

- Allows the pain to lighten
- Lets people support you
- Makes you feel less alone
- Helps you process through thoughts & emotions
- Acknowledges your trauma is a big deal
- Encourages others survivors to share their story

To find out what happens when we don't share, read the list above again, but before each item say "doesn't." (i.e. "Doesn't let people support you.")

Sharing your story is the most healing & empowering thing you can do with your trauma

There are so many thoughts and feelings you carry from what happened to you. A common thread in all stages of healing is working with your thoughts and feelings. Sharing your story helps you do that.

Strengthens Relationships

Not sharing your story prevents you from being seen & from connecting more fully with the closest people in your life.

Sexual trauma can sometimes bring physical and emotional intimacy struggles into a relationship. If your partner doesn't know about your trauma, only the symptoms can be addressed, not the real source.

The "Supporting a Survivor: Learn Truths about Sexual Trauma & How to Help Survivors in Your Life" pdf helps partners be more educated on the effects of sexual trauma.

"When I learned of my partner's sexual trauma, many of the hurdles in our relationship made sense. I now see more clearly, and am learning how to be a better partner."

Action Step: In the space below, list reasons why you want to share your story.

WHAT YOU CAN & CAN'T CONTROL

Getting clear on what you can and can't control is very important before starting. This guidebook helps you prepare to share in ways best for you. This part of the process you have control over.

However, no matter how much we prepare, we can't control how the other person will receive the information in the moment, nor how they will respond afterwards. Page 11 goes further over common responses. Below is a breakdown of what you can control and what you can't.

What You Can Control

- Who you share with
- The details you share with that person
- The communication method used to share (email, phone, in person, etc.)

What You Can't Control

- How the person reacts
- How the person treats you afterwards
- What the person does with the information you shared

Although you can't control every aspect,
this guidebook is here to help you navigate
through the parts within your control,
and prepare for the ones outside of your control.

WHO TO SHARE WITH

Choosing who to share with is difficult because some people respond in ways we would expect, and others surprise us. (On page 11 we take a deeper look at common responses.) My best advice is choose people who have already proven in your life that they love you, support you, and are trustworthy.

*If the first person you tell doesn't respond well, don't give up.
Share until you find people who believe and support you.*

Share with More than One

Sharing with more than one person is very important because:

- Each time you share it is healing
- Allows the support you need not just to be fully expected from one person
- Creates a community of supportive people to help you feel seen and to be supported by

For example, if you become upset at a gathering, tell a friend who knows your story. This person can then be a shoulder to cry on, provide an excuse if you need to leave, or be a reminder you aren't alone.

In upsetting moments in a big group, it was comforting for me to know someone else was aware I was having a difficult time underneath my exterior smile. It made me feel seen, supported, and not alone.

I encourage you to share until you have at least 3 supportive people. A counselor or survivors in a support group can count, but I also strongly suggest sharing with trusted people in your everyday life.

Action Step: In the space below, list the names of people you want to share with.

The Definition of "Supportive"

What is meant by a "supportive" person is unique and specific to you. You may need someone to occasionally talk to about what happened, or someone who knows but doesn't press you to talk. It may mean someone who will stand by you if you decide to tell the police.

The next page discusses further your expectations for each person you decide to confide in. Most likely you will have different expectations for each person.

KNOW YOUR EXPECTATIONS

What and how you share will vary with each person. You may give a few details to one person, and all the details to another. You may want some people to only be aware of your story, but others to be people you actively lean on.

Your expectations for each person will help determine WHAT and HOW you want to share each time. Knowing your expectations also helps prepare you mentally and emotionally.

Being clear on your expectations each time you share, is the most important step in this guidebook.

Examples of reasons why you may want to share with a specific person:

- You want them to know why certain situations are difficult for you
- You want them to know you more fully
- You can't keep it bottled up any longer
- You need a friend to lean on

Examples of actions you may ask a specific person to please take moving forward:

- Read the "Supporting a Survivor" pdf
- Nothing, you just needed them to know
- Be available to listen when you have a difficult day
- Go to counseling with you (this may be more so for a romantic partner)
- Not share your story without permission (this should be a request of every person)

Action Step #1: List some of your expectations. (FYI, the Sharing Worksheet will have space for you to write specific expectations for each person.)

Action Step #2: In th box above, put a + beside the expectations you listed that represent the top level of support you need from a few people. Then below list the people you hope will meet those top level expectations.

WHAT & HOW TO SHARE

Consent was stolen from you in the trauma, so it is important to recognize you are in control of what and how you share. Even if people have further questions, it is up to you if you answer those questions.

Share What You Want

You may want to only share, "I am a #metoo survivor," or every detail. You may want to only share the aftermath affects. If you have experienced multiple traumas, it is your choice which time(s) you share about.

What you share with one person you don't have to also share with another person. The details shared are completely up to you.

Share How You Want

It is also up to you how you share. You choose when, where, and the communication method best for you.

The main decision is, do you want to share in a way the person can immediately respond, or not.

Methods in which you will have an immediate response is by sharing either in person or on the phone. Other methods (such as via text, email, letter, etc.) will have a delayed response.

Each of those methods have advantages and disadvantages. Sharing in person or on the phone can be emotionally harder, but you get an instant response. Written communication may be emotionally easier, but wondering if they got the message and waiting for a response can be very difficult.

If you decide to share in person, then you will need to also make these additional decisions:

- WHERE: Choose a location where you are very comfortable
- WHEN: Pick a time when responsibilities (i.e. work, school, family) aren't overly stressful

Share Your Expectations

It is very important to clearly state action(s) you want each person to take. Most people are unsure how to support a survivor, and without guidance they likely will do or say unintentionally hurtful things. You communicating your expectations & sharing the "Supporting a Survivor" pdf with them will be very helpful.

Not everyone will meet your expectations, and some of your expectations for some people will need to shift - and that's okay. We'll talk more about that on the next two pages.

COMMON REACTIONS

There are several different ways people can react when a survivor shares their story. However, the vast majority of responses fall under the 3 categories listed below.

Support & Care

This is when a person listens to your story, believes you, and wants to know how to help you. In the midst of their support they still can respond in ways that aren't the best, but these are people who are open to you educating them so they know how best to help you.

An additional response often received by supportive people is pushing you to take legal action. The "Supporting a Survivor" pdf contains an entire page about respecting a survivor's legal decisions.

Disbelief, Denial, or Silencing

These responses typically involve the person implying either that you are lying, or that you are confused and misunderstand what happened to you. These types of responses often stem from the person wanting to believe the trauma didn't happen because that would mean:

- You weren't hurt in that horrible way
- They didn't fail to protect you (if applicable)
- They can pretend they don't live in a world where someone could harm another in that way
- If they know the person who harmed you, then they are also wrestling with those thoughts
- They may be a survivor too who has tried to block out what happened to them, and fears if they acknowledge your trauma then they will have to acknowledge their own too

None of those reasons make harmful responses okay, but it has been helpful for me to understand why some people respond in those ways.

Victim Blaming

This is when the response contains victim blaming questions (such as "what were you wearing," "why didn't you . . . ," etc.). This response is often due to a mix of some reasons bulleted above, plus not being aware of the horribly wrong and harmful misconceptions about sexual trauma. The "Supporting a Survivor" pdf goes over several of the top misconceptions of sexual trauma.

Hearing about trauma can be shocking. Thus, someone's initial response may not be their final response. They are also dealing with their own emotional responses to learning about your trauma.

People often need help learning about the misconceptions and truths of sexual trauma. On the next page we go over how, and if, you should help educate them.

PROCESSING RESPONSES

Some responses will be close to what you will expect, and others will be unexpected. These unexpected responses could be hurtful or helpful. For example, I didn't expect friends to cry when I told them, but some did. Seeing that automatic emotional response helped remind me that my trauma is a big deal.

Since the people you confide in care for you, they most likely will be deeply impacted by what happened to you. They will have their own thoughts and feelings to deal with too. This is one of the reasons I encourage you to share until you have a few supportive people. Doing so allows the support to be distributed amongst them, rather than one person carrying it all and potentially overextending their self.

Helping People Understand

The main two areas of helping people understand is educating them on the misconception of sexual trauma, and informing them what specifically you need and don't need.

The later especially needs to be an open and continued dialogue because what you need in one season of life, may be different in another. Be extremely clear in communicating what you do and don't need because that will help people know how to support you. This is uncharted territory for most people.

When someone believes many misconceptions, educating them can be very emotionally and mentally difficult because it can feel as if you are having to prove why this was wrong, why you aren't to blame, etc. But helping them understand is one of the most important things you can do to be better cared for by them, and to help other survivors who cross paths with them.

I created the "Supporting a Survivor" pdf to help alleviate some of the pressure to educate others. Share it with whomever you confide in to help them understand more. You can even point out certain parts of that pdf that you really want them to understand because of how it applies to you.

How Much Should You Help?

This may surprise you but, in my opinion, there are some people you should help until they understand enough for you to feel supported by them, and then there are others that you shouldn't try as much.

Since helping people understand can be very draining, you may reach a point where it becomes too much, and you need to either stop for now, or not view that person as someone in your supportive circle.

I had to do both. There were a couple people who responded either poorly in the moment, or as time went on. With one person I realized the friendship wasn't worth continuing to be let down by, so I decided to no longer view that friend as someone to lean on.

Another relationship meant more to me, and I needed that person to understand. So I invested a lot of energy at different times until they understood. I even printed resources about sexual trauma and highlighted parts that detailed what I was feeling. Which is why I created the "Supporting a Survivor" pdf; to help you with any situations where you need the people around you to understand more.

SELF-CARE IN SHARING

Sharing can be emotionally, mentally, and physically draining. This is true even if the person receives it well, but even more so if not received well. Thus, self-care is very important during all parts of the process. The Sharing Worksheet contains spaces for you to fill in self-care activities for each time you share.

Plan Ahead

By using the steps in this guidebook, you are already practicing self-care that will greatly benefit you. Now let's pick out some additional specific self-care acts to have prepared for before, during, and after sharing.

Before

Calm Yourself & Prepare Your Mind

- Do something calming (i.e. have a cup of tea, yoga, listening to calm music)
- Review your completed Sharing Worksheet for the person you are telling
- Recite truths to be mindful of in case the person responds poorly. Some examples are:
 - I am telling the truth. No matter what anyone else says or thinks, I know the truth.
 - It is not my fault. There is nothing I can do to compel someone to hurt me.
 - Who, when, and what parts of my story I share are my decision.

During

Include anything that would bring you extra comfort and strength while sharing

- Perhaps wearing comfortable clothing, having a favorite coffee drink, or holding a stress ball.

After (Most Important!)

Have a self-care activity already prepared

Pick an activity that brings you a lot of comfort and makes you feel grounded. This could be sitting in nature, taking a nap, enjoying a movie or music, etc. Whatever it is, set it up beforehand so you can start it as soon as possible. To best care for yourself, select an activity that would be consoling if the person's response is hurtful.

Action Step: List self-care activities that are deeply consoling to you

Have trusted people on stand-by (if possible)

If there is already someone you have confided in who is supportive, ask if you can contact them afterwards for comfort if the person you share with doesn't respond well. Being around supportive people is one of the best forms of self-care in those situations.

SHARING WORKSHEET

This worksheet is for you to fill out each time you plan to share with someone. Filling out this sheet based on all the suggestions in this guidebook will help prepare you for sharing your story each time. Page numbers are listed beside each question if you want to refer back to the information about each step of the process.

- Who are you sharing with? (p.8)
- How do you want to share (in person, email, phone, etc.)? (p.10)
 - If sharing in person, where do you want to share?
- Why do you want to share with this person? (p.9)

- What action(s) would like from them moving forward? (p.9-10) (Clearly state them when sharing)

- What do you want to share about what happened, and about how it is affecting you? (p.10)

- What self-care you can practice before sharing? (p.13)
- What self-care you can practice during sharing? (p.13)
- What self-care activity will you have in place for after you share? (p.13)

THOUGHTS WHEN SHARING PUBLICLY

Some people decide to only share with people close to them, others choose to also share more publicly (such as through a social media post or being a guest on a podcast). The best choice is what is right for you.

Although most of the suggestions in this guidebook have been geared towards confiding in select people in your personal life, a lot of the same methods apply when sharing publicly. In addition to using the Sharing Worksheet when sharing publicly, also read the words below for guidance.

When to Share Publicly

In my opinion, sharing publicly isn't for when you need healing support in return. Instead, my suggestion is to only share privately to individuals until you are in a stronger emotional and mental state with your trauma. Here are a few reasons why you will want to be in a stronger condition before sharing publicly:

Far Less Control

You have no control over what viewers will do with the information when you share publicly. You also don't know if they believe a lot of the misconceptions around sexual trauma, and thus need correction.

"Vulnerability Hangover"

Sharing incredibly personal information publicly typically leaves you with, what I call, a "Vulnerability Hangover." Meaning that after sharing, you are filled with thoughts such as, "What did I just do?" "Was that the right decision?" "What will people think?" "Will they treat me differently?" and so on. It can also be awkward when you see some people the next day - such as fellow classmates, co-workers, etc.

Ready to Hear from Survivors

When you share publicly, other survivors will reach out to you in response. Some will just say #metoo, and others will reach out wanting someone to talk to. Since sharing my story publicly, almost 100 people in my life have told me they are survivors too. You'll want to be in a healthy state and have the energy for those interactions. P.S. Although it is heartbreaking to learn of other survivors in your life, it will also be humbling to hear how your story gave them comfort and courage. There is power when we share our story.

When in a stronger emotional & mental state with your trauma, here are some reasons to share publicly:

- You have a strong desire to share publicly
- You want to bring awareness
- You want to let other survivors know they are not alone
- You want to support and encourage other survivors to share their story

Final Tips for Sharing Publicly

• Complete the Sharing Worksheet

For the "How," decide if you want to share with a video, audio, or a written post, blog, etc.

• After the information is ready to be shared, wait at least 24 hours

For the next 24 hours pretend you already posted it. See what thoughts and emotions you would likely have when seeing co-workers, classmates, etc. This will help you prepare, as well as decide if you want to make any adjustments to the information, and/or wait to share further in the future.

• If currently pursuing justice options (or considering it), ask legal advice if sharing publicly is okay

Ask a lawyer, detective, police, etc. if there are any concerns with you sharing your story publicly before all legal proceedings have been completed.

FINAL WORDS BEFORE SHARING

Hopefully, the information in this guidebook has helped you see the importance of sharing and has been helpful in preparing for it. Through all of the thoughts and suggestions, I hope you most remember to . . .

- **Share until you find supportive people who believe you**
- **Know that sharing is an important part of your healing**
- **Share in whatever ways are the most caring for yourself**

There is never an easy way to deliver difficult information, but telling your story to supportive people is one of the most powerful and healing things you can do. Also, the relationships you have with the people who prove to be supportive, will become even more treasured than they already are.

No matter what happens, know that myself and a sea of survivors are saying . . . we believe you, it is not your fault, you are not alone, and you are worthy of finding as much healing in your life as possible.

Fellow Survivor,

Ashley

   @TheAshleyBaxter

A PERSONAL NOTE

If this guidebook has been helpful, I would love to hear about it. You can email me at ashley@theashleybaxter.com or you can tag me on social media. On all social media platforms, my "handle" is @theashleybaxter .

If you seek more advice on sharing or healing, 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 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 self-worth. I believe the world is a better place when we learn how to value ourself and others.

My work ranges from gaining body confidence, overall confidence, and learning how to be undeniably you. If interested, you can check out my coaching and programs at www.theashleybaxter.com .

I know we may not have met directly, but know that I am so very proud of you reading through this guidebook. Sharing your story is so important, powerful, and healing. You are not alone. I believe you.