

Tips for Friends and Family of Survivors

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By: Shannon

It can be hard to know what to do to help a friend or family member who has been raped. Here are some tips on what to do (and what not to do) and how to cope yourself.

What to say to a rape or sexual abuse 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?

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)

DO respect him enough to not pity him.

DON'T assume she does or doesn't want to be touched. Some people can't stand a hug at this point; others can't make it without one.

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

DON'T try to solve all the problems for him. He has had her control taken away from him; try to avoid doing that again.

DO offer to accompany her to her first therapy session.

DON'T demand to know every detail of the rape or abuse.

DO allow her to tell you as much or as little as she needs to.

Further Suggestions...

review facts and myths about sexual abuse and assault

It is crucial to understand the basic facts, and for secondary survivors 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

Crisis centers and lines are available to help you also. Call RAINN: 1-800-656-HOPE. Consider seeking therapy yourself (however, see don't see the same therapist as your friend). Pandora's Aquarium has a forum dedicated to secondary survivors, so do consider joining if you have not already.

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

aim to find the difference between being supportive and overbearing

I can't give you exact definitions. The supportive friend is there when I need to talk, is open to hearing what I have to say, and doesn't always press for more. The overbearing friend is constantly checking up on me, forces me to talk to her, and tries to solve my problems for me.

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.

Depending on your relationship with the survivor and the trust she has in you, she 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, and it's difficult for me to even try to tell you....but here are a few suggestions.

Panic Attacks

- * Remind the survivor of where she is. Ask her to sit down and place her feet on the floor. Describe her surroundings to her, and ask her to do the same.
- * Remind the survivor to take deep breaths.
- * If the survivor has medication she is prescribed to take during panic attacks, such as Xanax, remind her that if she needs it, it is available.

Flashbacks

Remember that during flashbacks, the survivor is often actually reliving the abuse or assault. Be cautious in your actions, and get to know the survivor and what she needs before you do anything at all. Here are a few suggestions.

- * Name it. Not everyone realizes that what they're 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 her of where she is. Ask her to describe her surroundings to you. Point out the fact that the abuser is not present. Remember that she may not be able to respond to you, but often is aware of your voice.
- * Consider placing your hand on her hand or arm (*not* on the stomach, thigh, etc). This may trigger her further, but may also remind her of where she is.
- * 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 memory; flashbacks can validate a survivor's experience.

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

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 years. 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 behavior.
- * 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 behavior.
- * Don't categorize survivors. Each case of abuse, although it may be similar, is a unique case. We don't all follow the same pattern of healing or behavior.
- * Not all survivors have clear images of the abuse or assault. 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 abuse or assault, and you are uncomfortable about it, please say so. Let the survivor know you aren't uncomfortable with them, only the issue. The offer to find someone who is comfortable with the issue.

* Please don't ask a survivor to forgive and forget. First of all, 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 an entire lifetime.

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