

How to Support a Friend or Loved One Who Has Been Sexually Abused

It's been a particularly difficult few months for sexual abuse survivors. If you know someone who's been abused, here are some tips to best support them and their recovery.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/27/smarter-living/sexual-abuse-assault-support-mental-health.html?login=email&auth=login-email>

By Vanessa Marin (Feb. 27, 2019)

It's an especially difficult time to be a survivor of sexual abuse or assault. On top of the daily struggle to stay safe and healthy, sexual abuse survivors also have to contend with an endlessly triggering news cycle.

If you're not a survivor yourself but you're close to one — maybe a partner, friend or family member — you may not be able to fully understand what they're going through, and you may feel confused or lost about how to best support them. Here's what you need to know, and how you can be supportive.

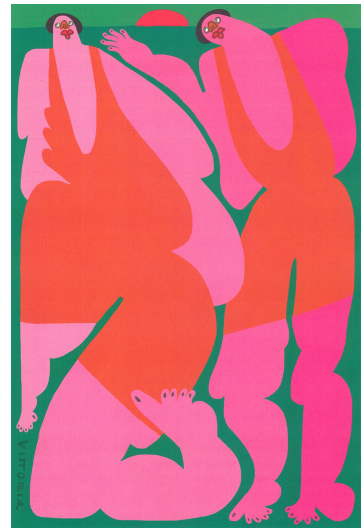
Listen to their story (if they want to talk)

If your partner or friend seems to be struggling, let them know you're available if they need to talk. If you haven't already, listen to their story, if they're ready to tell you. They may also want to express their anger, frustration, fear or sadness about recent news events. Don't pressure your friend into talking or telling you their story, but let them know you're open to listening to whatever they want to share.

In an email, Beverly Engel, psychotherapist and author of "[It Wasn't Your Fault: Freeing Yourself From the Shame of Childhood Abuse With the Power of Self-Compassion](#)" recommended you ask — especially if the person is your romantic partner — if they want physical contact (like holding hands or a hug) as they tell their story, but otherwise default to giving them physical space while they speak. Just telling their story can be emotionally daunting, and can bring back memories.

"Don't let your own feelings of anger or sadness get in the way of you being there for your partner," Ms. Engel said. Getting angry, even at the person who did this to your friend or loved one won't help, she said. In fact, it could just scare your friend into closing off. Your job isn't to "fix" your friend, make them feel better, or take their pain away. Your job is simply to listen.

It's especially important to believe your friend's story. It's sad that this has to be said, but that's the climate that we're in right now. Let them know that above all, you believe them.



Wendy Maltz, sex and relationship therapist and author of "[The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse](#)," offered this handy list of possible responses:

- "Thank you for sharing."
- "You are not to blame for what happened to you."
- "You didn't deserve what happened to you."
- "I'm sorry this happened to you."
- "You are not what was done to you."
- "That was abuse, not healthy sexuality."
- "I support you in your healing process."
- "I respect you for addressing this."
- "I love you."

Educate yourself

While every survivor and each story is unique, it's useful to educate yourself on the impacts of sexual abuse. It's not the responsibility of a survivor to educate you — especially when it's so easy to read more on your own — and being informed beforehand will make you a better partner in recovery. Books are a great place to start.

Ms. Engel recommended reading the books "Allies in Healing: When the Person You Love Was Sexually Abused as a Child" by Laura Davis and "Sexual Assault [Rape]: Moving From Victim to Survivor" by Lizzyvete Ramos. The [Rape Abuse and Incest National Network \(RAINN\)](#) also has a section on its website about [post-abuse recovery](#).

As a psychotherapist specializing in sex therapy, I work with a lot of sexual abuse survivors and their partners. The impacts of sexual abuse can be extremely difficult to understand if you haven't experienced the abuse yourself, and it may help to learn some of the common impacts that abuse can have on a loved one. Here are some common ones I see in my practice. This is by no means an exhaustive list, and remember, each survivor's experience is unique.

- **Dissociation:** A survivor's body can be physically present, but their mind can be in a completely different place, especially during intimate moments.
- **Getting triggered:** Survivors might jump or tense up when someone gets too close, even if it's someone they love and trust. Certain words, actions, sounds, gestures or even smells could send them into a heightened state of agitation. Many sexual abuse survivors can also be hypervigilant.
- **Difficulty making healthy decisions:** Some sexual abuse survivors find it tricky to make healthy decisions about their sex lives after abuse. They might have poor body image or low self esteem. They may find themselves becoming intimate with people who don't respect them, or in situations that feel unsafe.
- **Low libido or an avoidance of sex:** Many survivors don't want to revisit the specific activities that traumatized them.
- **Shame:** Many survivors feel as if they're broken or damaged goods. Male sexual abuse survivors can feel a different kind of shame, since male sexual abuse isn't discussed nearly as often, and carries a different kind of stigma.

This list shouldn't be used to diagnose your loved one, but rather, to give you a foundation if your loved one wants to discuss the ways their abuse may affect their life.

Be an ongoing source of support

Your friend or loved one is most likely going to continue having reactions to the news, family dinner conversations, intimacy or even seemingly random events. Here's what you can do in those moments:

- Keep listening. Don't try to give advice or fix the problem. Just listen.
- Let them feel their feelings. It can be extremely difficult to see someone you love in pain, but they need space to express themselves. Don't say things like, "Cheer up" or "Don't cry." Stay by their side as they work through their feelings.
- Let your loved one know you're on their team. Tell them you're happy to turn off the TV, get out of the house or leave an event with them.
- Ask if your friend or loved one needs anything from you. They may not always have an answer, but it's nice to make it clear that you want to be supportive and engaged.

Practice self-care

Encourage your loved one to get as much support as they can. This might include psychotherapy, sex therapy, support groups, crisis lines or talking to other trusted loved ones.

RAINN has a [handy tool](#) for finding resources in your area. The National Sexual Assault Hotline is available 24/7 at 800-656-HOPE (4673). You can always offer to take them to their appointments, take them out for lunch after a meeting, or even join the session.

However, it's ultimately up to your loved one to make their own decisions about their healing process. Ms. Maltz advised: "While healing is a process you can participate in, it's not something you can control or make happen. Survivors heal on their own timelines, based on their own readiness and motivation. Healing is more likely to take place when the survivor leads, and you work as a team together — both partners in a healing process."

It's also important for you to get your own support. Mike Lew, author of "[Victims No Longer: The Classic Guide for Men Recovering From Sexual Child Abuse](#)," noted, "People who love survivors go through a parallel process to that of the survivors themselves, often with less support, fewer resources, and the feeling that they don't deserve the support because it wasn't done to them." It's hard to hear the story of someone you love being abused. Understand that you may have your own reactions, and you deserve support too. Consider getting personal therapy of your own. (You can use the [RAINN locator tool](#) too.)

Honor their recovery

Recovering from sexual abuse is a long process that is never truly over. The path to recovery can also look different for each survivor, but Ms. Maltz noted that the most common steps include "recognizing what happened, identifying repercussions, resolving feelings about the past abuse and the perpetrator (or perpetrators), stopping negative behaviors, reclaiming personal power, relearning touch, addressing sex and intimacy concerns, and more."

"Be patient," Ms. Maltz said. "That's probably the biggest gift you can give." Along the way, it's important for you and your loved one to acknowledge and honor your hard work. You can do an activity together after every therapy session, like cooking a special meal, or going on a walk. Or get away for a weekend when the news cycle becomes too much to bear. The healing process can feel like two steps forward, one step back, but any sort of progress deserves recognition.

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