

# Supporting Survivors Who Disclose to You



Supporting someone who identifies as a survivor is both tremendously important and difficult. You might have trouble fully understanding what they're going through and feel unsure of how to best respond, or you might have personal experiences of your own that make supporting them challenging in its own right.

Remember, memories of assaults aren't linear. Regardless of how much time has elapsed since their assault, survivors can experience flashbacks that abruptly change their mood and sense of safety. It's important to always check yourself and know that when you're in a place of supporting a survivor, y'all are not on your timeline. Read on for tips on how to support a friend or loved one who has disclosed to you.

• **Language matters. Consider using phrases like:**

- "I believe you."
- \* "Thank you for telling me. That was really brave."
- \* "It's not your fault."
- \* "I'm here for you."

• **After someone has disclosed to you, don't initiate conversation about the assault.**

• **Actively listen. Respect when they want to engage, and when they don't.**

Be present in the conversation and maintain soft eye contact. Put away all electronic devices.

• **Stick with affirming language.**

Validate what they share, as they share it.

• **Be mindful of where you are when the survivor is sharing.**

Can someone overhear the conversation?

• **Maintain confidentiality at all times.**

There's a reason why you were told. If the person who discloses wants other folks to know, they will tell them.

• **Ask if there is anything they need from you.**

**Don't assume.**

If they make requests, honestly check in with yourself and let them know if you can meet them or not.

• **Don't move into savior mode.**

This isn't about you, it's about them.

• **Ask for consent before any physical touch happens.**

Respect their wishes and thank them for taking care of themselves.

• **Survivors deserve autonomy. You are there to listen not to act.**

Let them make their own decisions about what action, if any, they will take.

• **Make space for them to feel whatever emotions they are feeling and let them know that all of them are valid.**

Sometimes survivors experience regret from disclosing or fear of judgement.

• **Don't ask for details.**

Just because someone has disclosed their survivor status does not mean they want to disclose everything. You risk re-traumatizing survivors and forcing them to replay their abuse when you ask questions to things they haven't offered. They might also feel like they are being interrogated, which is not the position you want to take.

• **Don't ask them who their abuser is.**

Naming their abuser doesn't legitimize what they're saying. What they are saying is already valid. They can share that information with you if and when they want.

• **Some survivors dissociate in order to protect themselves.**

Coping mechanisms are strategies people processing trauma use to help manage their day-to-day emotions and mental well-being. Work to bring a sense of community to the survivor, not judgment.

• **Educate yourself.**

Research laws and policies that support survivors. Don't expect the survivor to do the work for you.

- **Check your language:**

Do not use terms like "should," "have to," etc.

Do not assign them a label. Let them define their experience and how they talk about it on their own. They might not be ready or in a place to identify as a survivor, or define in specific language what happened to them.

Do not make promises you can't keep. Sometimes folks just need a listening ear. That is an important role to play.

### *Additional Considerations:*

- **Do they have immediate medical needs?**

- **Are they physically safe?**

- **Is there a place they can go to get support?**

Do they need help identifying this place? Do they want to go? Do they have someone to take them?

### *Tips on how to support yourself when you are supporting a survivor:*

Taking care of yourself in the process of supporting others is monumental. It's important to continue with your regular activities and stick to a schedule. This person turned to you for a reason, and you need to take care of yourself if you're going to take on a caretaking role for others.

- **Pace yourself and maintain your boundaries.**

Say no when you need to. This supports yourself and the survivor.

- **Be mindful of what kind of support you offer.**

Offer only what you can sustain. You don't want to make the survivor feel like they are too much or regret the fact that they disclosed to you at all.

- **Healing is a long, non-linear journey.**

Patience is key. Change will not happen overnight.

### *Extra tips if you are a survivor yourself:*

- **Know that you can disclose your survivor status if you want to, but you are by no means required to.**

- **Take breaks when you need to.**

- **Return to your center by taking deep breaths.**

- **Reach out to someone who may have supported you through your hard moments with sexual assault**

If you've never disclosed, it's not too late to ask for help with someone you trust.

- **You don't have to explain when you have flashbacks or dissociate.**

### *Additional Resources:*

Everyone's healing process is unique, so be sure to honor this journey with patience, warmth, empathy, and consistent check-ins with yourself to make sure you're showing up in ways that feel good for both them and you.

For further tips and resources, check out these useful links:

- [Know Your IX: Tips for Friends and Family](#)
- [Bustle: 7 Little Ways To Support Sexual Assault Survivors](#)
- [William & Mary: Helping a Survivor of Sexual Assault](#)
- [The New York Times: How to Support a Friend or Loved One Who Has Been Sexually Abused](#)
- [Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape: A Guide for Friends and Family of Sexual Violence Survivors](#)
- [Bay Area Women's Center: How to Support a Victim of Domestic or Sexual Violence](#)