

A Toolkit for Survivors During COVID-19

Survivors of sexual assault are experiencing the deep impact of this moment in ways we could have never imagined. Those of us in abusive situations and those who are seeking therapy are struggling to get the support they need. Conditions that were already challenging are now exacerbated, and the needs of sexual assault survivors are being left out of the national dialogue in more ways than one.



We've compiled the following tips and practices to help articulate some things you might be feeling, ground you, and give you the tools to help take care of yourself while you navigate the effects of this pandemic.

Six Tips for Survivors during COVID-19

1. It is okay to feel how you feel.

This moment of uncertainty is bringing up many feelings for survivors. You may be feeling unsafe. Or you are feeling extra cautious or careful. Other feelings you may be having initially seem contradictory or feel like they are opposites. You can both feel anxiety and joy, excitement and sadness, or even anger and hope. All feelings are welcome at this time. Many of these feelings that seem good or bad will surface and that is okay. Remember your feelings deserve to be recognized, acknowledged and respected.

2. Give yourself permission to grieve.

For many of us, we are grieving what was and what could have been if we were not living or trying to survive a pandemic. You may be grieving the many lives of those known and unknown to you that have been impacted by COVID-19. Or the celebrations, vacations, parties, or holidays that you planned to celebrate with your community that have all been put on hold or cancelled altogether.



Make space for the feelings of grief you may have. It is okay to shed tears, to process the loss, and to wonder what could have been. Grief comes in many forms, please welcome them all.

3. Practice self-care.

Self-care is the ability to prioritize your mental, emotional, physical and spiritual needs. For example, developing a regular sleep routine, journaling, setting up a daily meditation or breathwork practice, and/or connecting with friends or loved ones virtually.

4. Rest.

It is important to take the time to rest when your body calls for it. This time is stress-enhancing and anxiety producing. Being in a state of hypervigilance is exhausting. Be sure to get enough sleep and if naps throughout your day are needed do that as well.

5. Create a plan that keeps you safe.

You may be feeling triggered or activated at this time. Consider the ways that you can keep yourself safe. One way is to make a list or a plan of activities and/or tasks that feel grounding, nourishing, and calming. Some examples of activities you can add to your list: Listening to your favorite song, going for a walk, calling a friend or trusted support, taking a shower/bath, diffusing essential oils, etc. You can write or type up this list and keep it in a place you can turn to at any time (i.e. computer, on a notepad beside the night table).

6. Reach out, maintain social connections.

As you probably heard already, we are being asked to dedicate this time to physical distancing (aka social distancing) but we can remain in communication to those we love, to those who see us, and to those who make us feel safe. Physical distancing should not mean that we sever our social connections. Staying connected and in community with those who love and support us is critical during this time.

Stay safe. Stay connected.

(Biany Pérez, LSW, M.Ed.)

What is a trigger?

A "trigger" is a trauma reminder. It can be a feeling, smell, place, topic, or anything that engages our nervous system and causes a survival response. It is a surprise emotion, a memory that our body holds, one that may feel like it comes out of nowhere....

A trigger tells our body that danger—or something we perceive as dangerous—is close or here. Sometimes it actually is; however, we can also be triggered when we are perfectly safe. Our body just may not know that, even if we cognitively know that nothing bad is happening. Our body often reacts to stimuli first, and then we process what's going on with our brain. When we are triggered, it can be really helpful to identify why, knitting a story together for ourselves so that we feel more in control, and also to foster compassion for the part of us that is triggered....



Getting triggered could mean going into a fight or flight response (heart racing, tons of stress hormones being released into the body) which can also bring up feelings of anger, or the sudden feeling that you need to leave where you are....

A trigger can also take us into dissociation or freeze, the nervous system drops into engaging the parasympathetic nervous system. We feel disconnected, "not here," checked out. Physically we may feel nothing, or like we're existing outside of ourselves....

All of these reactions are our bodies trying to protect us. Any reminder of something bad that has happened to us calls our nervous system into action. The nervous system is literally programmed to keep us safe. Framing it in this way can help us feel less shame (which just triggers more survival responses) and helps us understand why our bodies are reacting how they are, which ultimately helps us feel more in control.

(Andrea Glik, LMSW)

Coping with Triggers

How to tell your brain you're safe again:

During a trigger or traumatic moment, the prefrontal cortex (PFC) of our brains (which is the area where we do our critical thinking) shuts down. That's another reason why it's super hard to determine your level of safety during a trigger or "choose" what kind of reaction you have. Something we can do in the moment or directly after a trigger, especially once we have re-established safety, is to re-engage the PFC.

Say the current date and locate yourself within this moment, including people you are with or places. For example: It is August 19th, 2019. I am in my home where I feel secure. I am with a loving partner who helps keep me safe and isn't abusive.

This helps our brain connect back with the present moment. Hearing this, once, twice, 30 times can ground us in the present and reassure every part of us we are no longer back when the trauma happened.

Name five things you see, four things you feel (sensory not emotional), three things you hear, two things you smell, one thing you taste.

Again, this grounds us in the present moment. It also reconnects us to our senses, which can get overwhelmed during trauma reminders. It forces us to count which is a more critical thinking action, inviting the PFC gently back online.

Read, write, do work that feels fulfilling or engaging.

Any mental action asks our PFC to come back online. Feel out what is possible in these moments, maybe trying some of the above first to stabilize, and then experimenting with asking your brain to do a little more. Reading an engaging book or working on a project can bring us back to other parts of our lives that may not include our trauma. Here, we can feel our other identities, other than survivor, come back to us. "I am also a reader!" "I am also a programmer!" "I am also a writer!"

How to tell your nervous system you're safe again.

When our nervous system kicks into action during a trauma reminder it either goes into the sympathetic state of fight or flight or drops us into the parasympathetic response of freeze/submit. Our nervous system interprets information first, before our thinking brain can make a story or remind us that what we have been through isn't happening again. We may have to calm or reactivate ourselves depending on where our nervous system takes us to protect us. It's really important to keep in mind with all of this that the purpose of these survival responses is to keep us safe. When we can be in awe of our bodies instead of judgmental and ashamed, we invite more opportunity for healing and feeling powerful.

Complete your stress response cycle.

As described in Emily & Amelia Nagoski's book *Burnout* (which is an incredible resource) when we are triggered, our body begins a stress response cycle. This means that our nervous system has jumped into action and released stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. To go back to the example of being cat called, this can happen on your way to work, and then instead of getting to process what has happened—not only emotionally, but physically—we have to just keep on going, onto the next thing. When we create time and space for our bodies to release the stress energy and hormones, it tells our body we don't need to be in a survival response anymore. We can complete the cycle with any action that feels releasing. This is different for everyone, but below are some suggestions.

-Physical movement to release stress hormones.

People often suggest exercise to survivors as a way to heal. However, exercise culture comes with so much body shaming and expectations. People also go through the motions of exercise without understanding what's happening inside of them or why they should be utilizing that coping technique. Physical movement releases stress hormones. When we feel like we have extra stress hormones in our body, or feel super checked out from them, movement can be a helpful tool. It moves some of those stress hormones through our bodies and brings us back into ourselves. Finding the movement that works best for you is a process. It is highly recommended that you choose something that makes you feel good about yourself in the process and not something that will add on top of everything else feelings of not being good enough.

-Tapping

EFT Tapping is a therapeutic technique that invites the calming (not frozen) part of our parasympathetic nervous system to kick back in. Taking your pointer and middle finger and tapping rhythmically under the collarbone is a movement to complete our stress response cycle we can always utilize. Often, we aren't able to get to a movement class or center at any time in the day, so to have movement with us that feels releasing and grounding is useful. Experiment with tapping different patterns, different areas of the body, and with different intensities. Here we connect with our internal sense of what we need or feels good through listening for what our body is asking for.

-Breath

Our breath is another coping tool we always have with us. Experiment with what kinds of breath feel releasing or grounding during or after a trigger. There is "box breath" where you inhale for 5 seconds,

hold for 5 seconds (when we hold our breath, we tell our bodies we are in control), and release for 5. "Fire breath" is very releasing, which includes inhaling through the nose deeply and then exhaling through the mouth making a loud noise through the back of the throat. This is also a helpful way to experiment with taking up more space with the breath, as many marginalized people are taught to be quiet and small. Counting the breath, whatever kind of breath, invites the front of our brain to join in too, as discussed above. Having breath awareness is very grounding, just to notice how you are breathing with curiosity and not shame.

-Connection with ourselves & others

When we connect with anything inside or outside of ourselves (our friends, partners, the earth, pets, our inner child) we activate a part of our nervous system that brings us back into the safe window, where we are feeling and thinking, but not too much or too little. Feeling connected, watching people's faces respond and the loving tone of their voice, cuddling with an animal, all of these signal to our bodies that we are cared for and can come back into the present moment.

(Andrea Glik, LMSW)

Coping with PTSD

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, is a series of survival responses that can become chronic if unprocessed, often presenting through moments of intrusive memories, recurring dreams, dissociation, flashbacks, or other bodily reactions to cues related to the event. PTSD can occur after any traumatic incident, such as sexual violence, police violence, medical operations, sudden loss of someone in your life, and many more. The disorder impacts our body's ability to sense when we are safe.

Suggestions for coping and healing with PTSD:

Re-parenting yourself/getting stabilized

After trauma, or after a traumatic childhood, we have to teach our bodies to feel in control and safe. A great way to do that is through creating predictable routines. Trauma includes unpredictability, and so creating a predictable day, or close to it is really grounding. If we never had that as children, this is known as re-parenting, as in creating the routine and safety that we didn't receive as kids, in our current lives. This can be a bedtime routine of going to sleep around the same time every night, a noise machine, a teddy bear, lavender on your pillow etc. It can mean eating at the same times every day when possible and cooking food for yourself that makes you feel good. Another way is having nights of the week for self care scheduled, or if you see a therapist to go at the same time weekly. Re-parenting also means changing the way we talk to ourselves, picturing a sweet, younger self to encourage more compassionate self talk. This helps us unlearn the way we were spoken to by caregivers and/or the world.

Psychoeducation

Psychoeducation is when we learn either from therapists or therapy books about the impact of trauma and how to cope. This helps us understand what's happening inside our bodies and provides even more coping tools, which continue to help us feel more in control. The first step to healing is always understanding. I love the following books for this:



- *The Complex PTSD Workbook* by Arielle Swartz
- *Unf*ck Your Brain* by Faith G Harper
- *Waking the Tiger* by Peter Levine
- *Trauma & the Body* by Pat Ogden
- *Overcoming Trauma through Yoga: Reclaiming Your Body* by David Emerson

Therapy

Trauma informed therapy provides a space to learn more about the impact of trauma and ways of coping with it. Therapy can also provide a space to verbally or physically process trauma. Everyone needs something different from their trauma therapist. If you feel like your trauma is impacting your way of thinking, trying a more cognitive approach might be right for you, like [Cognitive Processing Therapy](#). If your trauma reactions show up physically, finding a somatic therapist who is trained in [EMDR](#), [Somatic Experiencing](#), or [Sensorimotor Psychotherapy](#) are also effective alternatives. Reading some of the books above can be helpful for determining what kind of therapy you feel like your brain and/or body is asking for. Regardless of modality, therapy should be a space to learn to feel safe again, with someone loving and affirming. When we feel connected and cared for, we heal. To find more therapy options, check out the 'metoo.' [healing resource library](#).

Trauma informed Movement

Releasing stress hormones through movement or reconnecting with the body after trauma is key to trauma healing. There are many trauma informed movement classes being offered around the world, and even if there isn't one in your area, you can always get to class early and let the teacher know some of your needs. This is most commonly found in yoga classes, but can also be available in dance, cycling, rock climbing, and much more. It can be helpful to call the studio ahead of time and ask about potential triggers (touch, language, and attitude of the teachers). Some folks find light touch healing during yoga or other practices, and others find it powerful to be able to say you don't want hands on adjustments. When we move, we process traumatic energy that may be stuck in our nervous system, and little by little, we come home to our bodies. Finding the right kind of movement, and making sure it doesn't come along with any expectations, is a process. There is no wrong way to have a body, and there is no wrong way to connect or move it as well.

You Are Your Greatest Asset

Something to hold within you during this process of self education and healing from trauma is that we have everything we need inside of us to heal. Any outsourcing we do is for more information, tools, and support. All trauma responses are adaptations to the environment and your experiences. Your brain and body have already done an amazing job of keeping you safe.

(Andrea Glik, LMSW)



What to Consider When Seeking Out Support From a Mental Health Professional

Deciding to seek out the support of mental health or wellness professionals is no small thing! It's a big, brave step in choosing to push yourself forward in your personal journey, no matter where you are in that process. That said, the task of finding the right person to fit your needs can feel like a daunting and overwhelming undertaking in and of itself. It can feel challenging to identify where to begin, and to know what to look for. Every person has unique needs and preferences. Below are some suggestions of what to consider as you start the process of seeking professional mental health support.

Where Do I Begin? 5 Tips for Getting Started.

- Consider what you're looking to get out of this process. Reasons for working with a mental health professional can range from super specific ("I want to learn tangible strategies for better navigating my anger when at work") to really open-ended ("I've been having a hard time lately and want a safe space to talk through it"). There is no right or wrong reason for seeking support, but getting clear on why you're doing it will help you get the most out of your time there.
- Ask yourself: who do I feel most comfortable talking to? Everyone moves through the world holding many intersecting identities, and it's perfectly ok to prioritize seeking out a mental health professional who shares some or all of those identities with you. Race, religion, sexual orientation, gender, and ability, for example, are all perfectly acceptable starting places to begin your search. Remember, this is about *you*. Center your needs so that your experience is as meaningful as possible.
- Date around! Finding the right fit can take time. Set up a bunch of consultation calls. It can be hard to get a real feel for someone over the phone, but it's a free and time-efficient way to learn about someone before you commit to seeing them in person and paying for a session. While having all these phone calls can be a lot of work, it will pay off in the end to find the right person with which to invest in building that strong, ongoing partnership.
- Ask the hard questions. As you schedule your consultation calls, think about what you want to ask each person about their practice and have a list of questions ready ahead of time. Again, this is about you, so ask the things that matter most! Everyone has different wonderings and specific needs, but some examples of things to ask could include:
 - What experience do you have working specifically with _____ identity/issue/experience?
 - What does a typical session look, sound, and feel like?
 - How does your analysis of systemic oppression shape your practice?
 - Are there any specific teachers or teachings that have particularly influenced your work?
 - What does "success" in therapy mean to you?
 - Are you trained in any specific modality? How does that guide your work?
 - How much do your services cost? What insurance do you take? Is there a sliding scale?



- Trust your gut. A strong relationship is foundational to any and all therapeutic interactions. If the relationship doesn't feel safe, supportive, or positively connected, it's unlikely you'll get as much out of it as you could.

You've Got This!

We all have the capacity for personal growth, healing, and change work. Choosing to proactively do that work in partnership with someone else is brave, bold, and beautiful. Remember to be patient with yourself, and with the process. Change can feel slow, but it can also fundamentally shift the trajectory of one's life. You do not need to do this alone.

(Becca Litwin)

Self Care While Supporting Survivors

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

- 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.
 - You'll need to offer what you can sustain, or the survivor may feel like they are too much/ regret they disclosed at all.
- This is a long battle.
 - Change will not happen overnight.
 - This process will take time. Be patient.

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 there are none, you can ask for help with someone you trust.
- You don't have to explain when you have flashbacks or dissociate.
- Breathe as much as you can.
- Do something that feels nourishing or good to you.

(Tarana Burke)

The Gift of Holding Space: How to support relatives, loved ones, and friends who experienced sexual assault

If you are a family member, partner, or friend of a survivor of sexual assault, it is important that you learn to hold space for your loved one. Holding space requires that we surrender the urge to fix or react to someone's story. Holding space is a practice that allows you to be with someone fully and deeply without judgement. It means to give of your time without getting anything in return. Holding space is the ability to be fully present: open heart, open ears, open eyes, and with a relaxed and calm body (hint: deep cleansing breaths). Holding space is having the ability to express unconditional positive regard—no matter the challenge or difficulty....

Here are tips to support your relative, friend or loved one:

1. **Practice active listening.** Active listening is about being fully present with the survivor. It is about concentrating fully on what is being said rather than just passively hearing the message of the survivor. Consider these statements to say to a loved one: "I am so sorry this happened to you. Thank you for trusting me with your story. It means a lot to me that you shared with me."
2. **Believe the survivor.** Affirm their story and truth. Many times survivors can question or doubt whether the assault occurred or if it could have been prevented. It is common for some survivors to self-blame or wish they could have done something differently. It is important that you make it clear to them that you believe that the assault happened and that it was not their fault.
3. **Maintain confidentiality.** Let them know that you will protect their confidentiality and that it is up to them to decide who to tell about the assault.
4. **Surrender the urge or the wish to fix it.** Survivors need someone to be able to contain their emotions or reactions to what they are hearing. Survivors do not need to hear someone come up with solutions to these perceived issues. Sometimes our urge to respond or try to fix things comes from the discomfort we feel as to what we are hearing.
5. **Pay attention to your internal responses and reactions.** Notice the sensations in your body. Where do you notice any tension in your body? Breathe deep and through it. Send yourself loving warmth and support. What thoughts come to mind? What feelings begin to surface? Don't judge them, just allow them to rise (they will float on by) silently and do not share with your friend.
6. **Allow them to feel and express the full range of their emotions.** Encourage them to speak openly and just allow them to share even if it may feel uncomfortable to you. It is important that survivors are urged to share all the feelings that are emerging for them. It is normal for feelings to be varied (or what is often perceived as contradictory), and it is of critical importance that they get to say what they feel aloud. Survivors will likely cry, express anger or rage, confusion, fear and other emotions. You can say something like: "Feel free to share what comes up for you. All parts of you are welcome here."
7. **Sit with them, offer compassion and loving support.** The concept of unconditional positive regard is the idea that we accept and support a person regardless of what they say and do. Remember that



oftentimes words are not required to offer support to someone. The practice of utilizing non-verbal contact and connection (maintaining your full attention, direct eye contact, and touch with active consent), giving your full presence, sitting with them, and sitting in it can be a transformative and supportive experience for a survivor.

Here are some questions or statements to consider when holding space for a loved one/survivor:

- Ask before offering physical support: "Can I give you a hug? Can I hold your hand? Or would something else be helpful at this time/moment?"
- "I believe you. I see you. I hear you. I am so grateful that you trusted me with your story. I admire the courage that it took to share your story."
- "It is not your fault. You did nothing to deserve this."
- "I am sorry that this happened to you."
- "I want you to know that you are not alone. I care about you and I am here to listen or support you in whatever way feels good or appropriate to you."
- "You are not alone. I am here for you."
- Recommend that they seek counseling or utilize resources that are available to them. Such as the National Sexual Assault Hotline 800.656.HOPE (4673), ['metoo.' healing resource library](#), or online. rainn.org.

Here are some questions or reactions to avoid:

- Avoid making threats against the perpetrator. This will not help the survivor feel safe about you, your livelihood, or their own.
- Check in on a regular basis with the survivor. Sometimes it is hard for us to support survivors when we may feel helpless or unsure of what to do next. But it is important to commit to regular check-ins to remind them that someone still cares about them and their wellbeing.
- Avoid using language that enforces the gender binary. Instead use inclusive language that affirms the survivor's gender identity and sexual orientation. It is important not to assume someone's gender identity or sexual orientation, it is best to use neutral language like "partner" or "date." Also, it is best not to assume what someone's preferred pronouns are. Let them tell you or you can ask what they prefer. And if you are unsure you can use "they."
- Set aside your curiosity about the events of the assault. Simply put, do not ask details about the sexual assault. Even if you feel that you want to (or need to) fully understand it, avoid asking any questions about the traumatic incident. Allow them to share their story on their time. Remember to listen actively, with compassion and non-judgment.

It is an honor to be able to hold space for survivors. Allow yourself to soak in the sacredness of this practice of holding and containing with love and compassion the voices and stories of survivors who embody courage and strength in the face of trauma.

(Biany Pérez, LSW, M.Ed.)

Healing Activity from "Getting Back Up: Surviving Violence and Healing A Guide For Transgender and GNC People"

Activity: Five Ideas Worksheet

This activity provides survivors with an opportunity to work through the trauma of survival through five key areas. From physical activities to divert pent up energy to being of service to others as a way of creating new and positive memories, this exercise is an exploration in healing and moving forward. This is great for an individual or a group project where people can collaborate, check-in on each others' goals and hold each other accountable.

1. *Distraction Ideas:* For most people, it is nearly impossible not to think about something after it has come into your awareness. You can, however, busy your mind with something else to think about. Distractions need to be very mentally involved. If you get carried away watching movies and do not think about other things while you are involved in the story, that is one option. Another option is getting involved in a mentally engaging task (such as building a model ship or helping a child with homework) or a physically taxing task (such as building a garden wall or vigorously cleaning the garage). It is important to not choose a task that is repetitive, since these tasks can easily allow your mind to wander to other places once it has established the routine.
2. *Create New Memories Ideas:* You can create compelling memories by visiting a museum or other place you have long wanted to see, by indulging in something adrenaline-producing like going to a major amusement park or adventure movie, or holding a game night with friends.
3. *Grieving Ideas:* Maybe you will want to journal about what happened, what your losses were, and what you have learned from it. It might appeal to you to create a ritual to honor your survival. Perhaps you could write a letter you will never send to your perpetrator(s). Some people tap into below-the-surface feelings by watching a sad movie or listening to melancholy music. Remember that tears can be very cathartic
4. *Serving Others Ideas:* Many, many people feel most whole and human when they are helping someone else. Offering to drive your neighbor to the store, helping a family member with a household repair project, calling an ill friend and offering to cook them a meal or clean their bathroom can be highly rewarding. Just the process of thinking about how you can help someone can be useful!
5. *Self-Care Ideas:* Trauma survivors frequently have trouble taking time to care for themselves. An anniversary date is a good time to plan a period of time (or even a whole day if you are able) for self-care. You might find that it feels good to cook your favorite meals, or take yourself out to a restaurant. Watch your favorite movie, take a long hot bath, indulge in a re-read of your favorite book. If touch is something that feels good to you, see if you can arrange for a massage (either by a friend, partner, or professional who feels safe). Pretend that you are charged with making a "special day" for your favorite person—even if your favorite person is not yourself—and plan as indulgent of a day as your creativity will allow.

(Tiq Milan)