A Survivor Guide to Mastering Media
Understanding Reactions & Caring for Self

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Thank you

We are so very grateful to those survivors of sexual abuse by religious and institutional authorities and dedicated professionals who helped us create this guide. Your willingness to share your experiences and lend your expertise made this guide what it is, and we could not have done it without you.

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Welcome!

This resource is here to help survivors of sexual abuse understand and respond to their reactions to media content.

It’s designed to help those who were abused by religious and institutional authorities, but any survivor of sexual abuse may find it useful. We hope every survivor can find something here to support them when they see stories about sexual abuse in the media. We will give you some ideas and encourage you to adjust them to fit your needs. Our goal is to help you stay calm and feel comfortable while reading this resource. You can read it from start to finish, one page at a time, or just pick the sections that interest you. Trust your thoughts, emotions, and gut feelings. Feel free to share this with other survivors or people you trust who might benefit from it.

Sexual abuse by religious and institutional authorities is a term used to describe sexual abuse by people in positions of power in religious or other organized groups. This can include priests, ministers, teachers, coaches, or leaders in youth groups.
Seeing news about sexual abuse, especially by religious and institutional authorities, can be very upsetting for survivors. It’s important to know what triggers you and how to manage these feelings to stay emotionally healthy. By understanding how media stories affect you, you can better handle your reactions and feel more in control. Managing your triggers when you see these stories is essential for your well-being. The tips and strategies in this resource will help you cope with the impact of media content, making sure your mental and emotional health come first. Take your time with this resource, take breaks if needed, and go at your own pace.

Trauma looks and feels different for everyone. Its impact on each survivor’s life looks different, too. In putting this resource together, we’ve spoken to survivors of sexual abuse by religious and institutional authorities and the professionals who help them – people of different races, ethnicities, faith groups, and gender. We wanted to understand as many experiences related to sexual abuse and its media coverage as we could. We hope that this resource will help you understand your feelings and reactions and see them as important, valuable, and okay.
Understanding Your Brain & Your Feelings

Our brains have different parts that work together to help us think, feel, and respond to things around us. Understanding these parts can help us understand and manage our reactions better.

Imagine your brain is like a house with two floors. The downstairs is where your feelings and instincts live, and the upstairs is where you think and make decisions.

*Upstairs = Responsive*

*Downstairs = Reactive*
When everything is okay, both floors work together smoothly.

This is when you're in your **window of tolerance**, feeling calm and able to handle things.
But when something stressful happens, your downstairs brain can take over, making you feel scared or upset, and pushing you out of your window of tolerance. This is like your brain going into a "fight, flight, freeze, or shutdown" mode.

- Anxious
- Angry
- Overwhelmed
- Out of Control

Feeling "too much"

- Zoned out
- Numb
- Frozen
- Shutdown

Feeling "too little"
| **Flight** | Feeling restless and constantly moving, like a caged bird. |
| **Fight** | Having a tight jaw and feeling the urge to punch or hit, like a raging dragon. |
| **Freeze** | Feeling stuck and unable to move, like being trapped in ice. |
| **Shutdown** | Heart rate and blood pressure drop, making it hard to talk, like collapsing into a puddle on the floor. |

Stressful situations, like a big project at work, a fight with a friend, or having a lot of things on our mind can push us out of our window of tolerance. So, too, can reminders of scary, painful, or traumatic experiences, like noises, smells, words, or people. Your upstairs brain, which helps you think clearly, might have trouble controlling these strong feelings and body reactions.

When stressful situations or ones that remind us of past experiences happen, we might feel:

- **Anxious or panicky.** Our heart might beat fast, or we might have trouble concentrating.
- **Fearful or Full of Terror.** We might start shaking, feel like we can’t breathe, or feel disconnected from our bodies.
- **Angry or Frustrated.** Our body might tense up, or we might want to yell or run away.
- **Overwhelmed.** We might feel unable to handle things, we may want to hide or cry, or we may feel detached or disconnected from our thoughts, feelings, or surroundings.
Along with these feelings, our brains, both the downstairs and upstairs parts, have ways to protect us when we feel scared or threatened:

- **Memory**: Sometimes, our downstairs brain might make us forget memories to shield us from feeling bad about them, while our upstairs brain reminds us to be kind to ourselves.
- **Being around others**: Our downstairs brain may try to help us save energy and avoid more stress, so we may not feel like doing much or hanging out with people. Meanwhile, our upstairs brain may be helping us come up with good ways to take care of ourselves.
- **Watching out for danger**: Our downstairs brain may try to keep us safe by constantly watching out for danger like we experienced before, while our upstairs brain can help us focus on what is different and safer in the present.

Each of these stress and protective responses are signals from our body and brain that we need to take care of ourselves. All these responses are normal, even if they feel uncomfortable or scary. Understanding these ways that our brain communicates with us can help us take care of ourselves better and deal with difficult thoughts, feelings, and situations. This might mean taking a break, talking to someone you trust, doing something you enjoy, or practicing some of the skills you’re learning here or in therapy. When we pay attention to these signs and listen to them, we can start to feel calmer and get back into our window of tolerance.
Staying Calm & Taking Care of Yourself

Grounding techniques can help you feel calm and focused, especially when things feel too much. These techniques use your senses, like sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch, as well as balance, body awareness, and how your body feels inside. The next page has some examples of things you can do for each sense.

When your downstairs brain is starting to take over and push you out of your window of tolerance, you can use your senses to feel calmer and more in control. Use this 5-4-3-2-1 activity to pay attention to give your brain something to focus on:

- Find and name **five things you can see** around you. Look for objects, colors, shapes, and textures.
- Listen carefully and name **four things you can hear**. Pay attention to sounds near and far, whether it’s the hum of appliances, birds chirping outside, or the rustling of leaves.
- Use your sense of touch to identify and name **three things you can feel**. Touch objects nearby, noticing their textures, temperatures, and sensations against your skin.
- Focus on your sense of balance. Name and practice **two sensations you feel related to balance**. This could be the sensation of standing firmly on the ground, the feeling of shifting your weight, or the sensation of swaying gently.
- Take a deep breath and name **one thing you can smell**. Notice any scents in the air, whether it’s the aroma of food cooking, the fragrance of flowers, or any other smells.
- Take your time with each step and allow yourself to fully experience each sensation. Try it with the other senses too!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensory System</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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| Visual (sight)                 | • Drawing or coloring pictures  
                                 | • Watching TV shows or movies  
                                 | • Playing games like "I Spy" |
| Auditory (sound)               | • Listening to music or stories  
                                 | • Paying attention to sounds  
                                 | • Talking with friends or family |
| Gustatory (taste)              | • Trying different foods  
                                 | • Cooking/baking new recipes  
                                 | • Blindfolded taste tests with friends |
| Olfactory (smell)              | • Smelling scented candles  
                                 | • Cooking with strong smelling spices  
                                 | • Using scented markers for art |
| Tactile (touch)                | • Playing with sand or playdough  
                                 | • Exploring sensory bins with rice or beans  
                                 | • Finger painting/clay sculpting |
| Vestibular (balance & movement)| • Swinging on swings or hammocks  
                                 | • Balancing on one foot  
                                 | • Spinning slowly in circles with arms outstretched |
| Proprioception (body awareness)| • Pushing or pulling heavy objects  
                                 | • Using a weighted blanket  
                                 | • Practicing yoga poses |
| Introception (feeling what is happening inside) | • Practicing deep breathing  
                                 | • Focusing on feelings in different parts of the body  
                                 | • Noticing how your body feels while stretching |
It can be helpful to **create a space**, either in your mind or in real life, that helps you feel calmer or more relaxed.

This can be a real place, like your bedroom or a corner of a quiet park, or it can be a place you imagine in your mind, like a faraway beach or a cozy, imaginary room. This space should make you feel peaceful and calm.

If you have access to this place in real life:
- Consider a place where you feel comfortable and can spend time.
- Fill your space with things that make you feel comfortable, such as:
  - Soft pillows and blankets
  - A cozy chair
  - Stuffed animals or a favorite item
  - Pictures or posters that make you happy
  - Items that you can fidget or play with
  - Scented candles, oils, or lotions with pleasant smells
  - A bottle of water
  - Favorite magazines, books, or art supplies
  - Music or a sound machine

If you’d like to imagine this place:
- Think of a place where you feel completely safe and relaxed.
- Picture all the details of this place – what it looks like, sounds like, and feels like. The weather should be just the way you like it. All the items should be ones that you like.
- Imagine whether some of the items you use for calming in real life can exist in this space in your mind.
- If you’d like, you can create a symbol of what you have imagined (a drawing, painting, collage, etc.)
People use all different terms to describe the places they create to help them feel calm or relaxed. Some use phrases such as, “Safe Space”, “Calm Space”, “Brave Space”, “Relaxation Corner”, “Peace Garden”, “Safe Haven”, and so on.

When you name your space, choose a name that reminds you of feeling calm, relaxed, and if possible, safe, and peaceful. This name will help you quickly access your space whenever you need it.

Here are some other ways to feel calmer:

- Do simple math problems or count backwards from 100 by 7.
- Pick a category (e.g., musical instruments or ice cream flavors) and list as many things from that category in your mind.
- Spell your full name backwards and the names of three other people.
- Describe the steps in doing something you’re good at (e.g., driving a car or making your favorite meal).
- Say kind things to yourself. Tell yourself things like, "It’s okay to feel how I feel," "I'm doing my best," "I'm strong," or "I can handle this."

Remember, your feelings are okay. Taking care of yourself and making sure you are safe is very important. Practice these strategies regularly to help manage stress and stay calm.
Handling Media Safely

Deciding Whether to Read, Watch, or Listen

There are many ways that people receive news, including television news channels, newspapers, radio stations, online news websites, social media, magazines, podcasts, and blogs. It can be hard to turn off, delete, or avoid media coverage. However, if media makes you feel bad, doing this can be one of the best ways to take care of yourself.

In this section, we have provided some ways to help you in your reading, viewing, and listening to media content that might bring up big feelings for you.

Before you decide to read, watch, or listen to something online, it's good to think about how it might affect you. We made a simple tool to help you with these choices. You can write down these questions or keep them on your phone to help you be careful about what you see or hear online.

How Grounded Do You Feel?

As you sit down to read a website or news source, do a mental check as to how grounded, calm, or anxious you feel. Listen and respect those feelings. If you aren’t feeling okay, you can choose to turn away from the resource and come back to it later.
Making the Decision to Watch, Read, or Listen

1. **How am I feeling today?**
   - Okay
   - Not okay
     - Consider avoiding the content for now.

2. **Is this from a reliable source?**
   - Yes
   - No
     - Consider finding a different source.

3. **Is the resource respectful and sensitive to survivors?**
   - Yes
   - No

4. **Are there warnings about potentially difficult content?**
   - Yes
   - No

5. **Does this content relate to my life?**
   - Yes
   - No
     - Consider if it's interesting to you.

6. **Consider whether you feel in a place to read or hear potentially difficult content.**
How does this headline make me feel?

- Safe
- Okay
- Calm
- Unsafe
- Stressed
- Uncomfortable
- Reactive
- Comfortable

Consider if it's worth reading further.

Does this content feel okay for me?

- Yes
- Help
- Abuse
- Assault
- Victim
- Perpetrator
- Rape
- No
- Make me feel worse

Consider reading, watching, or listening to the content.

Will this content help me or make me feel worse?

- Help
- Yes
- No
- Make me feel worse

Proceed carefully, using your resources, skills, and supports as needed.

Do I have the resources ready if I become overwhelmed?

- Yes
- Consider reading, watching, or listening to the content.
- No
- Consider gathering those resources, writing down your skills as reminders, or reaching out your trusted supports.
Turning Away from Content that Brings Up Intense Feelings

After you have decided to watch, read, or listen to media, pay attention to your feelings. These feelings can act like a traffic light. When the media content feels okay, and we feel okay, these could be seen as “green” feelings, and a sign that it is okay to continue with the content. Sometimes, as we get into the content, it stops feeling okay and may start to feel a little anxious or uneasy. These are “yellow” feelings and are a sign to slow down and consider if you’d like to continue with the content and if so, how. This might include taking a break from the content, practicing some grounding activities before returning, or reaching out to a support to talk about your experiences. When content makes us feel scared, overwhelmed, or disconnected from the present, these “red” feelings are signs to stop viewing, reading, or listening to the content and taking steps to get and/or stay safe.
To help yourself feel and stay safe, it’s important to filter out media content that might bring up intense and difficult feelings. Here’s how:

### Use Content Filters

- Many websites and apps have content filters to block certain words or topics.
- Adjust your settings to filter out triggering content.

### Create Custom Filters

Use browser extensions to create custom filters that block specific words or phrases.

### Examples for Three Popular Media Platforms

- Go to Settings > News Feed Preferences > Unfollow people and pages that post triggering content.
- Use the "Snooze" feature to temporarily hide posts from certain friends or pages.

- Go to Settings > Privacy and Safety > Mute words.
- Add words or phrases that you find triggering to the list.

- Go to Settings > Privacy > Comments.
- Use the "Hide Offensive Comments" feature to filter out triggering comments.
If media stories often bring up intense feelings, consider creating a statement you can tell yourself to remember that you are okay and that your feelings are okay. You can also make a list of trusted support people you can talk to, such as a support group, friends, family, or a therapist if you have one.

If you read, listen to, or see something that bothers you in the media, don't be afraid to talk about it with someone you trust.

Remember, it's also okay to take a break from media if you need. Your feelings matter most. Turn off the TV, stay away from social media, and spend that time doing things that make you feel okay, good, and safe. Find a cozy spot, surround yourself with things that calm you, like pleasant smells or enjoyable music, spend time with a pet, take a walk, or consider anything else that helps you take care of yourself that is both safe and legal.
Finding the Right Help

Everyone's journey of healing is different. It’s important to find support that respects and understands your personal and cultural experiences.

This section gives suggestions on how to find and ask for the right support that is fair and understands different cultures and values. Whether you’re looking for a therapist, other helpful resources, or just want to feel understood, we hope you find the information here helpful.

Finding the Right Therapist

It's important to feel empowered when seeking therapy. While the therapist may be a professional who specializes in mental health, he/she is not “in charge”. It is your therapy and your healing journey. There are several ways you can advocate for yourself.
Finding the Right Therapist

It’s important to feel empowered when seeking therapy. While the therapist may be a professional who specializes in mental health, he/she is not “in charge”. It is your therapy and your healing journey. Here’s how you can advocate for yourself:

Know Your Needs.

Decide what you want from therapy. Even if you feel scared or anxious, remember that your feelings are important. Don’t ignore your emotions, strong reactions, or gut feelings. You get to decide what you want from therapy, and it is okay if that changes over time.

Share Your Culture and Values.

Your cultural background is an important part of who you are. Sharing this with your therapist or support network can help them better understand and support you. Consider telling them about:

- Cultural Practices: Traditions or practices, words or phrases that are important to you.
- Values: Core values that guide your life and decisions.
- Community: The role of community and family in your life.

Set Boundaries.

Don’t be afraid to say what makes you uncomfortable. It is ok, and even important, to advocate for yourself through the therapy process and relationship with the therapist.
You need a therapist who is a good fit and who respects your cultural and personal experiences.

A qualified professional should:
- Have proper credentials and licenses (e.g., LCSW, LCSW-C, LCPC, LMFT, PsyD, PhD).
- Specialize in trauma and have experience working with survivors.
- Be respectful, understanding, and open to learning about you, your cultural background, and your experiences.

When meeting a potential therapist, consider asking:
- What is your professional experience working with trauma and sexual abuse survivors?
- What is your approach to therapy, and how do you handle sensitive topics?
- How do you make sure to include and respect different cultures in your work?
- Can you give examples of how you have helped clients from different backgrounds?

Trauma therapy can be hard and can sometimes lead to you feeling overwhelmed, hurt, or scared again, especially when something reminds you of your past experiences. It’s important not to give up and to talk about it with your therapist. Here are some ways to start the conversation:

- “I felt really overwhelmed after our last session. Can we talk about what happened?”
- “When we discussed [specific topic], it brought up some strong feelings for me. Can we talk about it in a different way?”
- “I need to feel safer during our sessions. Can we talk about some ways to make that happen?”
Finding Other Ways to Heal

Therapy with the right therapist can be helpful, but other resources can also help you heal. Other ways to feel better might include things like yoga, meditation, or reiki.

Here are some recommendations of books, podcasts, and other resources that some survivors have found helpful. Take good care when exploring new resources. Use the tips in this guide to help you choose the right resources and pay attention to how they make you feel.

Podcasts

- **The Verywell Mind Podcast**: This podcast shares helpful tips and advice to feel better in your mind and build your mental strength.
- **The Positive Psychology Podcast**: This podcast focuses on positive parts of life, such as happiness and well-being.
- **Meditation Minis**: This podcast offers short, guided meditations for anxiety, stress, sleep, and confidence.
- **The Trauma Therapist Project**: This podcast helps people understand and heal from difficult experiences.
- **Trauma Chat**: This podcast helps people learn about trauma and understand how it impacts ourselves and the people in our lives.
Books

- **The Body Keeps the Score**: This book explains how our bodies and minds are connected when dealing with difficult experiences.
- **The Deepest Well**: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Trauma and Adversity: This book talks about how to heal from difficult times in childhood.
- **What Happened To You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing**: This book talks about how trauma affects people and how they can heal from difficult experiences.
- **What My Bones Know**: A Memoir of Healing from Complex Trauma: This book shares one person’s journey of healing from trauma.
- **Finding Solid Ground Program Workbook**: This workbook helps trauma survivors learn skills to feel safer and more grounded.
- **Transforming the Living Legacy of Trauma**: This workbook gives easy-to-understand advice and tools to help people heal from the long-term effects of trauma.

Support Groups & Resources

- **Reclamation Collective**: Provides support groups and resource hub for trauma survivors.
- **RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network)**: Offers support and information for survivors.
- **Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests (SNAP)**: Provides lists of support groups and resources; advocates for legislative change.
- **Religious Trauma Institute**: Provides discussions, training, and resources related to religious trauma.
Remembering to Take Care of Yourself

Reading, listening to, and watching news about sexual abuse can be difficult. We have shared some important suggestions and ideas in this guide. Work towards recognizing your emotions and symptoms as signs that you need to take good care of yourself. Use some of the skills shared here to feel calmer, such as deep breathing or focusing on what you can see and hear around you. Limit your time on media and use tools to block upsetting content. Take breaks when you need to and come back to media if and only if you feel ready.

Your emotional health matters and should always come first. If media content makes you feel anxious, sad, scared, or angry, it’s okay to stop watching, listening, or reading. Do activities that help you relax and feel safe. Share this resource with other survivors or trusted people who might find it helpful.
If you are feeling unsafe, reach out to your trusted supports, such as family, friends, or a therapist. You can also reach out to crisis support services, such as the 988 Hotline. This hotline connects people in the United States to crisis resources in their area.

For example, in Baltimore, Maryland, where Change the Conversation is located, calling or texting 988 will connect you with the Baltimore Crisis Response (BCRI).

Dialing 988 anywhere in the United States will get you connected to someone who can help.

Take care of yourself and revisit this resource as often as you need.
Extras
Important Terms

**Content Filters**
Tool on websites or apps that block certain words or topics to avoid upsetting content.

**Downstairs Brain**
The part of the brain that handles feelings and instincts; it works with the upstairs brain to help you stay calm and handle things.

**Fight, Flight, Freeze, Shutdown**
Different ways people’s downstairs brains react to stress or danger.

**Grounding Skills**
Ways to help people stay calm and focused by using their senses.

**Triggers**
Things that remind survivors of bad experiences, making them feel scared or overwhelmed.

**Upstairs Brain**
The part of the brain that helps you think and make decisions; it works with the downstairs brain to help you stay calm and handle things.

**Sexual Abuse by Religious or Institutional Authorities**
Sexual abuse by people in positions of power within religious or other organized groups (e.g., priests, ministers, teachers, coaches, youth group leaders)
Advice for Therapists

Therapists working with survivors of sexual abuse and other traumas, this section is for you!

Therapists need a specialized set of skills to provide effective, sensitive, and culturally competent care to survivors of sexual abuse by religious and institutional authorities.

The “Guidelines on Trauma Competencies for Education and Training” were developed through a national consensus conference of 60 experts held at the Yale School of Medicine*. These guidelines emphasize understanding the complexities of trauma and providing care tailored to the needs of diverse individuals.

The competencies in the pages that follow are considered foundational knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for working with survivors of trauma.

Before working with trauma survivors, take time and seek training to:

Understand trauma prevalence, cultural context, and how trauma affects health outcomes and disparities.

This includes understanding the widespread prevalence of trauma and its profound impacts on physical, mental, social, and occupational health.

Learn how trauma can impact interpersonal dynamics, relationships, and attachment.

Trauma often disrupts an individual’s ability to trust others, form secure attachments, and maintain healthy relationships, leading to feelings of isolation and vulnerability. Therapists who understand these dynamics can help clients rebuild their relational capacities by fostering a therapeutic alliance based on trust, empathy, and consistency. This knowledge also enables therapists to avoid relational pitfalls and create a safe space where survivors feel understood and supported.

Investing in comprehensive training before working with trauma survivors is essential for delivering effective care.
Recognize and respond to dissociative symptoms.

- Dissociative symptoms often serve as coping mechanisms for overwhelming trauma and allow individuals to disconnect from distressing experiences. They can significantly interfere with a survivor’s ability to function and engage in therapy by creating barriers to processing trauma and achieving therapeutic progress. Therapists trained to identify these symptoms can tailor their interventions to help survivors safely explore and integrate traumatic memories without becoming overwhelmed and re-traumatized. Understanding the nature of dissociation also helps therapists to normalize these experiences for clients, reducing shame and confusion, and fostering a sense of safety and stability in the therapeutic environment.

Manage high-risk and unsafe behaviors effectively.

- Effectively managing high-risk and unsafe behaviors, such as self-harm, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and aggression, is an important aspect of working with survivors of trauma. These behaviors can emerge as maladaptive coping mechanisms in response to overwhelming emotional pain and trauma, and therapists must be equipped with strategies to assess and mitigate these risks to ensure both the client's and their own safety. This involves conducting thorough risk assessments, developing safety plans, managing crises – both in the moment and by other resources and supports – engaging in de-escalation and grounding techniques, and prioritizing the development of a strong therapeutic alliance to facilitate open communication and timely intervention.
Master research-supported therapies for trauma- and dissociation-related symptoms.

Evidence-based therapies, such as Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT), Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), and Prolonged Exposure (PE) therapy, have been shown to significantly reduce trauma-related symptoms and improve overall functioning among survivors with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) without dissociative symptoms. These therapies are designed to help clients process traumatic memories, reduce avoidance behaviors, and decrease the emotional intensity of traumatic recollections. Additionally, therapies like Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) and Internal Family Systems (IFS) can be particularly effective for clients with complex trauma and dissociation, helping them develop coping strategies, improve emotional regulation, and integrate fragmented aspects of their identity.

- Learning and mastering these therapies involve comprehensive training, supervision, and ongoing professional development. It is also essential to stay updated with the latest research and advancements in trauma therapy to incorporate new evidence-based practices into treatment.

- It is important to understand the role of dissociative symptoms, when present. Such symptoms can complicate the therapeutic process and may make some treatments contraindicated. For instance, therapies like EMDR and PE, which involve direct confrontation with traumatic memories, can sometimes exacerbate dissociation and unsafe behaviors if not carefully managed. In such cases, stabilization and grounding techniques must be prioritized to ensure the client's safety and ability to stay present. Therapists should be trained to recognize signs of dissociation, understand its impact on treatment approaches, and adjust their interventions accordingly, possibly incorporating more gradual exposure and integrating techniques aimed at enhancing self-awareness and present-moment focus.
Conduct comprehensive, tailored trauma assessments.

Thoughtful and comprehensive assessment is essential for accurately understanding the complex and unique needs of survivors. The assessment process should include information from various sources whenever possible, including self-reports, clinical interviews, and validated measures and should consider the survivor’s cultural background, developmental stage, co-occurring mental health conditions while gathering a detailed history of trauma exposure, symptoms, and impact on daily functioning. Assessment, like treatment, should be carefully paced and tailored to meet the survivor’s needs and leverage their strengths.

Refer if you do not have enough training to competently treat a survivor of trauma.

As therapists, your main goal is to provide the best care for your clients. If you feel that you don’t have enough training to help a trauma victim, it’s important to step back and refer them to a more experienced therapist.
When working with survivors of trauma:

Create an environment that feels comfortable for the survivor.

This involves creating a physical space that is calm, private, and considerate of potential triggers. The therapeutic environment should be predictable and consistent to foster a sense of safety and stability. Therapists can ask about and consider the survivor’s needs and preferences related to environmental factors such as their comfort with the seating arrangement, lighting, and noise levels. Additionally, demonstrating empathy, patience, and non-judgmental listening can create an emotional space where the survivor can, in time, build trust and feel respected, understood, and able to stay calm and grounded.

Questions to ask early & often in treatment

- What are some topics or words that you find especially upsetting?
- (If client has been in therapy before) What has helped you feel comfortable and calm in a therapy setting?
- Do you have any specific needs or preferences for our sessions?
when working with survivors; therapists should be careful not to go too deep too fast, recognize signs and symptoms that the survivor may be overwhelmed or unable to regulate his/her emotions, and work carefully in therapy to help the survivor begin to recognize those signs and symptoms in themselves. This involves assessing the survivor’s readiness for different types of interventions and being mindful of their current emotional and psychological state. Therapists should start with stabilization and grounding techniques before delving into more intensive trauma processing. Monitor the survivor’s physical, emotional, and verbal responses, discuss reactions openly, and adjust the pace accordingly.

Normalize reactions and provide clear explanations about trauma and related symptoms.
Survivors of trauma often experience a range of intense and sometimes confusing emotions and symptoms, such as anxiety, flashbacks, and dissociation. It is important for therapists to normalize these reactions and provide clear, simple explanations about how trauma affects the brain and body. Relatable analogies can also help make this information more accessible (see the Upstairs/Downstairs Brain explanation in this resource). Taking the time to normalize, explain, and demonstrate compassion around symptoms can help survivors demystify their experiences and work towards reduced shame and self-blame.

Pace treatment carefully to avoid overwhelming the survivor.
Trauma therapy must be paced carefully to prevent re-traumatization and ensure that the survivor can process their experiences at a manageable rate. Pacing is incredibly important when working with survivors; therapists should be careful not to go too deep too fast, recognize signs and symptoms that the survivor may be overwhelmed or unable to regulate his/her emotions, and work carefully in therapy to help the survivor begin to recognize those signs and symptoms in themselves. This involves assessing the survivor’s readiness for different types of interventions and being mindful of their current emotional and psychological state. Therapists should start with stabilization and grounding techniques before delving into more intensive trauma processing. Monitor the survivor’s physical, emotional, and verbal responses, discuss reactions openly, and adjust the pace accordingly.
Cultural backgrounds significantly influence how survivors perceive and cope with trauma. Take time to learn about the survivor’s beliefs, values, and traditions. This understanding can inform the therapeutic approach and ensure that it is respectful and relevant. Integrating cultural practices and customs into the treatment plan can enhance its effectiveness and resonance for the survivor. Additionally, being aware of cultural stigmas related to mental health can help therapists navigate sensitive topics more thoughtfully and provide culturally appropriate support.

Questions to ask early & often in treatment

- What practices and values are most important to you?
- Are there any cultural or religious beliefs that are important for me to know?
- What types of traditions and practices help you feel calm and comfortable?
Recognize and incorporate survivors’ strengths.

Incorporating survivors’ strengths into the treatment plan helps shift the focus from victimization to resilience and recovery and can enhance both self-esteem and sense of agency. Strength-based approaches can also involve setting achievable goals that leverage the survivor’s existing capabilities and fostering a sense of empowerment and progress.

Work collaboratively to develop treatment plans.

Collaborative approaches involve actively listening to the survivor’s goals, concerns, and feedback, and incorporating their input into the planning process. It also means being transparent about therapeutic options and decisions and respecting the survivor’s autonomy in their healing journey. Collaboration fosters a sense of partnership and mutual respect, which can enhance the therapeutic alliance and increase the survivor’s engagement and commitment to the treatment process.
As a professional working with survivors of trauma, be sure to seek training, consultation, & support around:

### Setting clear, ethical, and professional boundaries with clients.

Establish clear, ethical, and professional boundaries to maintain a safe and effective therapeutic environment for both the survivor and therapist. Boundaries help define the professional relationship and ensure that interactions remain appropriate and focused on the client’s healing. This includes setting limits on self-disclosure, maintaining confidentiality, and avoiding dual relationships that could impair objectivity or exploit the client’s vulnerability. Ongoing training, regular supervision, and consultation can help therapists navigate complex situations, provide additional support and guidance, and reinforce best practices.

### Practicing self-care and maintaining ethical standards.

Working with trauma survivors can be deeply rewarding but also emotionally demanding. Engage in regular self-care practices, such as mindfulness, physical activity, and hobbies. Stay informed about ethical guidelines, seek supervision when faced with ethical dilemmas, and prioritize personal well-being.
Transference, where clients project feelings about significant others onto the therapist, and countertransference, where therapists project their own unresolved feelings onto the client, can significantly impact the therapeutic relationship and therapy. Additionally, understanding and managing transference and countertransference reactions are crucial for maintaining therapeutic effectiveness and personal resilience. Proper management of both involves continuous self-reflection, ongoing supervision and/or peer consultation, and maintaining clear professional boundaries.

This includes collaborating with medical doctors, social workers, legal advocates, and other mental health professionals to address the multifaceted needs of survivors, ensure continuity of care, build relationships, and stay updated on best practices across different fields.

- International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS)
- International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation (ISSTD)
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)
Guidelines for Therapists when Survivors are Triggered by Media Content

Media stories about sexual abuse can evoke strong emotional reactions in survivors of sexual abuse by religious and institutional authorities, including feelings of being overwhelmed, scared, or even retraumatized. Therapists must be prepared to help clients navigate these triggers by using strategies that promote safety, grounding, and emotional regulation.

The following guidelines offer practical suggestions for supporting clients through these challenging experiences, helping them to manage their reactions and continue their healing process.
Provide information about how trauma and triggers work to help the survivor understand their reactions and develop effective coping strategies.

Reassure the survivor that it is common to feel triggered or overwhelmed by media content related to their trauma and explain that such reactions are a natural part of their trauma response.

Teach, encourage the use of, and even guide the survivor through grounding exercises such as deep breathing, mindfulness, and sensory activities to help them stay present and reduce the intensity of their emotions.

Support the survivor in setting boundaries around media consumption, including limiting time watching or listening to the news, using filters to block triggering content, or taking breaks from social media.

Work with the survivor to create a personalized plan for managing reactions to media, which can include identifying safe people to talk to, places to go, or activities that help them feel calm and grounded.

When the survivor is ready, help them process their experience by discussing what specifically about the media content was triggering and exploring any memories or emotions it brought up.

Use cognitive behavioral techniques to help the client challenge and reframe distressing thoughts related to the trigger.