
SURVIVOR SUPPORT



A HEALTHCARE GUIDE FOR ADULT SURVIVORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

INTRODUCTION

Sexual abuse can have unexpected effects for survivors, even after the violence has stopped. If you've survived child sexual abuse or other sexual violence some everyday activities – like visiting the nurse or doctor - may be difficult.

You're not alone. Many survivors of abuse find that seeing a healthcare provider can be anxiety-provoking. This is normal! You are not weird or crazy or weak for feeling nervous about seeing a doctor or having a hard time dealing with your body. Lots of survivors go through this.

There are steps you can take to make medical visits easier and help you feel more empowered in your own healthcare. This brochure has some tips to help. An advocate at your local sexual assault survivors' advocacy program should be able to provide even more help and support.

WHY IS GOING TO MY DOCTOR OR NURSE SO HARD FOR ME?

Healthcare is hard for lots of people! Healthcare can feel scary even for people who didn't live through childhood abuse.

Those of us who are survivors of child sexual abuse carry with us some triggers and coping strategies that might make healthcare even more stressful. We may have used a variety of coping strategies to survive the emotional pain as children, and maybe still use today. These coping strategies include things like: we may distance ourselves from any pain or discomfort in our bodies, minimize the experience, avoid thinking about it, and even sometimes deny to ourselves that what we are experiencing is painful. These ways of coping sometimes made survival possible. However, they can also get in the way when we're handling difficult situations or stress in our adult lives now.

If the staff seem rushed or unaware of how vulnerable it can feel, it is difficult to connect and feel safe. Health care settings like waiting rooms and exam rooms can be stressful and hectic. Some procedures can leave us feeling vulnerable or remind us of the abuse that we've survived. Sometimes our bodies hurt or do things that we don't understand, and that can be scary. Language or other cultural differences between you and your provider may also complicate your ability to understand or connect with each other.

WHAT CAN I DO TO MAKE MY DOCTOR OR NURSE VISITS EASIER?

TALK TO THEM ABOUT BEING A SURVIVOR

If you feel comfortable with your provider, let them know that you are a survivor of sexual abuse.

Explain how you think the violence has affected your health. It's normal to have concerns or fears about how the sexual abuse affected your long-term health. It's also normal to have some coping strategies—such as using drugs/unprescribed medications/alcohol, cutting yourself, or controlling your eating too much—that are causing you harm now or that you want to move past. Some of us might have worries about untreated injuries, possible exposure to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), or unplanned pregnancies. Some of us dissociate so much that we have trouble knowing what's happening with our bodies or remembering our health histories. And a lot of us have chronic health issues that come from the physical and emotional toll of sexual abuse. Your health care provider should be able to help you consider ways to address all these concerns and support you with kindness instead of judgment in working towards your wellbeing.



Trust your instincts during meetings with healthcare providers. If you feel scolded or in other ways judged by the nurse or doctor, they may not be the health care professional for you. The relationship between you and your health care provider should have open and caring lines of communication in order for you to feel comfortable being honest with them and relying on their help.

It's also okay to not tell your healthcare provider that you are a survivor. That is your information to share or not share with whoever you choose. Some of us simply tell doctors "I have a lot of anxiety about this" without any more detail. That's fine too! It is your choice.

TAKE CHARGE OF THE VISIT

Most people feel like the healthcare provider is in charge and we have to listen to them. However, healthcare is about your body and your life. So that means your voice should be heard in every healthcare appointment. Having control over different parts of your appointment can make it feel safer and better. You can ask your nurse or doctor for some changes to your visit to give you more control. Here are some ideas to consider:

1. Plan for how to cope before, during, and after the appointment. If you need to take a whole day off work for a one-hour doctor's appointment, that's okay! Plan for it. If you feel safer when you wear boots and a coat, put them on! Even in July. If your cousin is the best at helping you cry and vent, that's wonderful! Maybe they can be "on-call" for you, ready to answer the phone as soon as you leave your appointment.
2. Meet with your doctor or nurse to talk. No exam, no tests, no touching, just talking. You can discuss the reason for future healthcare appointments and discuss how the appointment will proceed step-by-step.
3. If there are procedures that require you to take off your clothes or be in a position that is hard or scary, ask if there are alternatives or modifications. For example, people have to take their tops off for mammograms. If that's really upsetting for someone, maybe they could cover the rest of their body really well, or maybe hold onto their clothes so they can get dressed again very quickly.

4. During the exam, ask that your doctor/nurse waits for your approval before every step. For example, the doctor might say, “Now I’m going to lift your gown and push hard on your abdomen, OK?” You indicate whether or not it is OK to proceed. If the exam can’t be completed, the two of you decide whether to reschedule it and discuss ways in which the procedure might be made easier, if possible.
5. After the exam is completed, you have the option of getting dressed again before discussing possible next steps with the doctor. You don’t have to talk to them while you’re naked if you don’t want to. You also don’t have to talk to them while you’re laying down if that’s difficult for you.
6. You can ask for written follow-up information, diagnoses, and next steps. This is especially important if you know you have trouble remembering things when you are stressed or upset.
7. Change these steps or make new ones so that they feel most comfortable for you.

ASK SOMEONE TO COME WITH YOU

Have a friend, family member, or advocate go with you to your appointment. They can sit in the exam room with you, just for support, hold your hand during painful procedures, or be the designated note taker so you can remember and review the details of the appointment later. Sometimes it's important to note that many health care providers will want to meet with you alone during some part of the exam. At this point you can ask your support person to step outside but let the provider know that during the exam you would like your support person present.

AFTER YOUR MEDICAL APPOINTMENT

Take some time after your appointment to reflect on how it went. Write in a journal on your own, sit with your support person and discuss your appointment, or call a helpline. Consider how it felt and what you learned.

- Did you feel comfortable with your health care provider's approach?
- Do you understand the results of your visit and your next steps?
- Do you feel your provider listened to you and took the time to help you understand your options?

This time and thought can help you relax, plan, and stay on track when it comes to caring for yourself. Take some time to care for yourself.



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This publication was created by the Building Resilience team: Resource Sharing Project, Activating Change, Just Detention International, Minnesota Indian Women’s Sexual Assault Coalition, the North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault, and Olga Trujillo, J.D.

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