

A woman wearing a dark poncho with a wide brim is looking upwards with her eyes closed. She is standing in a field of tall, dry grass. The background shows rolling hills under a soft, hazy sky. The overall mood is peaceful and hopeful.

caring for survivors
OF SEX TRAFFICKING



SAFE HOUSE
PROJECT



THE EFFECTS OF SEX TRAFFICKING

- > There are an estimated **6.3 million victims** of sex trafficking globally at any time.
- > Of all the individuals trafficked for sexual exploitation in the United States, **only 1% will ever be identified**.
- > **98% of survivors** have at least one severe psychological condition. On average, survivors report having **more than a dozen**.
- > **88.7% of survivors** have depression, **76.4%** have anxiety, and **41.5%** have attempted suicide.
- > **54.7% of survivors** suffer from PTSD.
- > **92% of survivors** say they suffered physical abuse during their trafficking experience.
- > Girls are **2.52 times more likely** to be trafficked with a history of sexual abuse. Boys are **8.21 times more likely**.

It is difficult to overstate the effect that being trafficked for sexual exploitation has on a person. As more research is conducted and shared, it becomes increasingly clear that this experience can impact nearly every part of a survivor's life, often for many years in the future.

It is almost a universal experience for survivors to suffer from serious mental health challenges, such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, or other severe psychological conditions. In addition, the emotional trauma of trafficking can affect a survivor's relationships in every aspect of their life, from friends to family to romantic partners. While there is a deficit of research on the subject, the combination of mental, emotional, and physical abuse common in trafficking situations can lead to a myriad of physical health conditions. Many medical problems a survivor may experience can be directly linked to their trafficking experience.

If you have a loved one that has experienced sex trafficking, you may feel overwhelmed and unsure how to help them embrace freedom and hope. It is important to first remember that, as much as you may want to help, it is impossible for you to understand how they feel and what they went through. You can be an important part of their healing journey, but you cannot be equipped to support them alone.

It can be difficult to know how to best care for the survivor in your life. Depending on the extent of their healing and how long they have been free from exploitation, the needs of a survivor may look very different. The goal of this guide is to help you understand where to start and learn how to listen to what your loved one needs from you.

DEFINITIONS

Sex trafficking refers to the use of force, fraud, or coercion to induce a person to participate in commercial sex acts. For minors, any commercial sex act is considered trafficking, regardless of force, fraud or coercion.

Human trafficking includes both sex trafficking and labor trafficking.



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THE STARTING POINT

If a survivor of trafficking has decided to share his or her experience with you, it is important to first understand the courage and trust that went into that decision. Telling someone about trauma is always difficult, and survivors often feel conflicted about how much to share with their loved ones.

In situations where you may not have learned about the survivor's experience directly from them, recognize that they may feel deeply uncomfortable or unsafe. It is common for survivors to struggle to trust people they had previously trusted or would otherwise trust. Be careful not to take it personally if a survivor did not choose to share about their experience, no matter how much you may want to help or wish that you had known sooner.

Once you recognize those first two points, you can begin learning how to walk alongside a survivor as they navigate their healing journey.

LEARN TO LISTEN

The best starting point when caring for the survivor in your life is often to simply listen to them. They may just need to vent, and it may not always be directly related to trafficking. When survivors deal with trauma on a daily basis, daily stressors can occasionally become overwhelming. Be patient, be gentle, and learn to listen to what they are willing to share at that moment.

Similarly, do not push for more information about their trafficking experience, particularly details about the violence or abuse they endured. Some survivors may choose to share more specific information about their experience, but it should always be shared on their terms. Remember that your role is not to investigate, but rather to

support, comfort, and listen to the survivor.

The time between a trafficking experience and a survivor's decision to talk about it can vary widely. It should always be a survivor's decision to share that information, and some may never be ready. Remember that trauma affects survivors on an individual basis, and what they are or are not open to talking about depends on the person and the situation and can vary by the day.

By learning to listen first, you can reassure the survivor in your life that you are trustworthy and safe. Doing so will help the survivor come to you when they need support and open the door for you to be a part of their healing journey.

RESPECT THEIR PRIVACY

Learning to listen builds the foundation for forming a trusting relationship with a survivor of sex trafficking. However, if you do not also respect their privacy and boundaries, that trust may be violated and the survivor may feel that you are not a safe person to talk to.

To safeguard that trust, there are a few key things to remember:

- **Tell them regularly that you believe them and be genuine when you say it.** It may seem simple, but survivors can have unexpected days where self-doubt, shame, and guilt get the better of them. You may not know how they're feeling, but take consistent opportunities to remind them that you believe them and that what they experienced was not their fault.
- **Ask what their triggers are and be proactive about avoiding them.** Survivors may not know



what all of their triggers are, but they likely have an idea of what may help them when they feel overwhelmed or triggered. Helpful things may include holding their hand, playing a certain song, or bringing a comfort item. Again, the things that may be helpful for one survivor could be triggering for another, so take the opportunity to ask beforehand. It could also be important to avoid certain movies, music, or people or places, which you can play an active role in paying attention to.

- **Do not share any information about their trafficking experience with anyone else.** This point is key, as breaking the survivor's trust in this way can make it incredibly difficult for them to trust anyone else in the future. While it is important for a survivor to build a support network, it must always be their choice to share about their trafficking experience.
- **Do not compare their experience with yours.** Even if you have experienced sexual trauma yourself, it is impossible to fully understand what another survivor has gone through. Comparing can come across as dismissive or minimizing of a survivor's story, even if there are similarities between your experiences. This is a habit, so be careful to remind yourself that they alone know what it was like and how it affects them today.

REACHING OUT

Survivors of sex trafficking need connection just like everyone else. Since they trusted you enough to share about their experience, you can be sure that you are someone they care deeply about and want a relationship with. As part of their support system, it is important for you to reach out to them and work to maintain healthy connection.

Unfortunately, this may be a difficult situation to navigate on both sides. Survivors may find it intimidating to initiate contact or to ask for help

without feeling like a burden. Regular check-ins and reassurances that you care about them and you are here to support them can go a long way, particularly if a survivor has not been free from exploitation for very long.

How often you should reach out to the survivor in your life depends on their personality and what your relationship with them looks like. General signs that more connection may be beneficial include:

- If you normally talk to them often and suddenly stop hearing from them
- If they say they are worried about bothering you
- If they seem to be struggling recently

As long as the survivor is not in crisis, reach out as often as you feel comfortable with. It can be helpful for your own understanding to have a conversation with the survivor in your life about their preferences for connecting with you. There may be times where they expect to struggle more, such as certain holidays. Be willing to adjust and be consistent with the communication you and the survivor decide on.

SETTING BOUNDARIES

Expressing and respecting boundaries is vital to the health of all relationships, and those with survivors of sex trafficking are no exception.

It is healthy and necessary to carefully consider what your boundaries need to be in this relationship. Remember, you cannot love them well if you are not caring for yourself. It may be that you simply cannot give them as much time as they might need. Your other commitments, including family and personal health, are still very important and need to be carefully balanced with the time you give to the survivor.

As with every relationship, the best approach is to have an honest conversation about what your boundaries are and what their boundaries are. Be gentle and firm, and make sure to reassure the survivor that you will be there for them as much as you are able.



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MOVING FORWARD

As tempting as it may be to hope that the survivor in your life finds healing quickly, the reality is that walking with a survivor includes a lot of time, reassurances, and care. The trauma that comes from experiencing sex trafficking affects every part of a survivor's life, and the process of learning to live with it can take years.

The aftermath of sex trafficking is often challenging and frustrating for both you and the survivor in your life. It is important to recognize that the path to healing often looks different than either of you may expect. Trauma is personal, and it does not disappear once a survivor is in a safe place. Survivors often say that their experience can feel like it was yesterday, even years afterwards.

THE THINGS LEFT UNSAID

Survivors may feel like a burden as they face trauma in their daily lives and frequently choose not to share some things with their loved ones. These things may include:

- Fear of being recognized
- Knowledge of the darkest parts of humanity
- Self-hatred
- Feeling haunted by the past
- Seeing how their story affects their loved ones
- Fear of being abandoned
- Fear of not being believed
- Being tired of dealing with the trauma

Many of these feelings never truly fade. If one of your loved ones is a survivor of sex trafficking, take care to remind yourself often that it is impossible for you to understand the complexity of the trauma and how it affects them every day. While this knowledge is heavy, a survivor's trust in you demonstrates how important you are to them.

FORMING EXPECTATIONS

It is also critical that you form realistic expectations of what a survivor's healing process looks like. Healing from this kind of trauma is not linear and will not happen on the timeline you expect. Whether a survivor has been free from exploitation for a few months or several years, the nature of trauma often brings survivors through a healing journey that plateaus, backtracks, and circles around at times.

Remember that your role in the survivor's life is to love them well and support them as they work toward healing. You must be patient. It may be frustrating at times, but you can be sure that the survivor is also frustrated. Be careful to release your frustrations through healthy avenues, such as journaling. Communicating that you think a survivor should be healing more quickly than they are will only damage your relationship. Give yourself and the survivor grace as you navigate this challenge.

BUILDING INDEPENDENCE

One of the primary goals for a survivor's healing includes learning the balance between being independent and letting people help them. As a trusted person in their life, you have an opportunity to help them develop those skills in a safe relationship. The survivor in your life may be anywhere from completely refusing your help to feeling completely incapable of caring for themselves. Wherever they fall on that spectrum, your goal should be to help them move closer to the center, where there is a healthy balance of independence and a willingness to accept help.

This process can be messy and difficult for both of you, but it is essential you learn together how to help



the survivor in your life achieve that balance. Ask yourself often if you are regularly doing things for them that they are capable of doing for themselves. If the answer is yes, the chances are high that you are enabling them.

Here are a few examples of how to help a survivor without enabling them:

- A survivor cannot afford to buy groceries. Instead of buying their groceries for them each week, you could help them apply for food stamps, go shopping with them, or help them with planning a budget.
- A survivor calls you often in a panic and you are feeling overwhelmed. Talk to them about looking for a professional to help them learn to address their anxiety, and suggest other methods of communicating, such as writing letters. If necessary, have a conversation about what constitutes an emergency and ask them not to call during specific times if it is not an emergency.
- A survivor is struggling to get to work on time and may lose their job. You could offer to help them find an alarm that consistently wakes them up, or offer to call them before their shift to make sure they are getting ready.

PLANNING FOR A CRISIS

Because trauma can affect someone differently from day to day, it is important to make a plan with the survivor in your life for the bad days. It is unlikely that you will be able to predict when a crisis may happen, so plan ahead of time so your response is helpful and timely. Making this plan will also likely make the survivor feel more secure and in control over their emotional responses.

The following questions can be helpful in forming a well-rounded crisis intervention plan:

- **What do you want me to do if you are feeling suicidal?** Honor this plan as much as you are able, but know that you must call 911 following

a suicide attempt. Communicate to the survivor that you will do your best to help them before they become dangerous to themselves, but that you will call for professional help if necessary.

- **Who can I call to be with you if you're feeling suicidal and I cannot come?** Share with the survivor several reasons why you may be unavailable, such as having kids with you or travel plans. It is important for the survivor to have supporters in addition to you, so encourage them to form strong relationships with other people as well.
- **What are some signs that you are feeling suicidal?** Many survivors deal with chronic suicidality and are familiar with how the signs present themselves. Communicating what the signs are may help the survivor understand that preventing the feelings from escalating to self-harm is possible.
- **Would you talk to your therapist if I called them for you?** Some therapists have emergency contact policies. It is unlikely that the therapist will talk to you if the survivor refuses to talk on the phone, but they may be able to help you assess how serious the crisis situation is.
- **Will you tell me if you need intervention?** Be frank and honest when having this conversation. Some survivors may feel inclined to reach out if they are feeling depressed, anxious, or suicidal, but others may naturally isolate. Make it clear that you always want to know if they think they are in danger of a crisis situation, especially if you have other boundaries on communication in place. Reassure them that you are not bothered by them and you want to be there for them.

If a survivor becomes a danger to themselves or to other people, it is always the right choice to call 911. See the next page of this guide for additional hotline resources for you and survivors in crisis. Be prepared, but recognize that some situations may require professional assistance.





RESOURCES

There is hope and healing for survivors of sex trafficking.

You can be an integral piece of their healing by learning what the journey looks like for you and the survivor in your life. Remember that, as valuable as your presence is, you cannot be the only support person in their life. It is important to keep yourself healthy as you help your loved one move towards healing. For additional resources for you and the survivor in your life, explore the links below.

CRISIS RESOURCES

National Human Trafficking Hotline

1-888-373-7888

www.humantraffickinghotline.org

National Suicide Hotline

1-800-273-8255 or 988

www.988lifeline.org

National Domestic Violence Hotline

1-800-799-7233

www.thehotline.org

Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN)

1-800-656-4673

www.rainn.org

Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services

Administration (SAMHSA)

1-800-662-4357

www.samhsa.gov

SAFE HOUSE PROJECT RESOURCES

Common Definitions & Terms

How to Care for Yourself as You Care for a Survivor

Living Life Alongside Survivors

Evaluating Your Emotional & Physical Well-Being

Choosing Trauma-Informed Words

Safe House Project Blog

Safe House Project Webinars

OnWatch Survivor Identification Training

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

National Sexual Violence Resource Center - Friends & Family

RAINN (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network) - Tips for Talking with Survivors

RAINN (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network) - Self-Care for Friends & Family

Columbia Health - Supporting a Survivor of Sexual Assault

Center for Prevention of Abuse - Helping Human Trafficking Victims

Blue Campaign - How to Talk to Youth About Human Trafficking





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