

Secondary Survivors

What Is a Secondary Survivor?

You are a secondary survivor if a friend, partner, girlfriend, boyfriend, mother, sister, child, or anyone you are very close to is a survivor of sexual assault or physical or emotional abuse. It does not matter if you knew this person when the assault or abuse happened—or even if you knew them and did not know about the assault until much later.

Survivors of rape, incest, and/or abuse will usually tell a friend or significant other with whom they feel safe and comfortable. The survivor may tell many people before feeling comfortable enough to talk to a professional. Remember—even if the assault or abuse happened a long time ago, you could be the first person they have told and your reaction can have a big impact on the rest of the recovery process.

Often secondary survivors go through many of the same feelings that survivor's experience. You can feel powerless, guilty, shocked, angry, or scared. It is natural to have these feelings when you learn that someone important to you has been assaulted or abused, but try not to let these feelings interfere with the help that the survivor needs.

"My partner is the first person I've ever dated who is a survivor of rape. She told me about it the second day we were dating and I think her honesty was a big help for me to avoid doing things that might upset her by triggering flashbacks. If your partner isn't ready or doesn't want to tell you about her/his experiences, it's always important to be attentive, especially during intimacy. And by being upfront about what you like and dislike, both emotionally and physically, you might help him/her to open up some too. But, when it's all said and done, I really think the most important thing is to be patient, loving, and aware of your partner's needs and wants."

—Jennie

What Should I AVOID Doing?

Sometimes secondary survivors react in ways that are not helpful to the survivor. Survivors are usually dealing with a lot of complicated feelings after an assault or abuse and are usually feeling bad about themselves for what happened. It does not help them to hear those thoughts echoed by others whom they trust.

Do not deny the assault/abuse—Some survivors are in denial themselves, but it is important to remember that they came to you for help. You may have a hard time believing that the assault or abuse happened. You may want to deny the extent of its impact on the survivor. You may even want to protect the perpetrator. But it is important that you do not deny the survivor. Do not urge a survivor to forget about the incident. Do not ignore the survivor's fears. Do not encourage the survivor to do nothing about the assault. And do not urge the survivor to resume regular activities prematurely.

Do not blame the survivor—Sexual assault and abuse are never the survivor's fault. Do not ask questions like "Why didn't you tell someone?" or "Why were you at that party?" Even asking questions about the specifics of the event(s) can make it seem like you do not believe them. If you find yourself

starting to ask a detailed question, think to yourself first, "Am I asking this for the survivor or for myself-do I really need to know this in order to comfort my friend?"

Do not compare situations—Every sexual assault or abuse situation is different. Even if something similar happened to you or someone else you know, do not compare situations. No two people feel the same exact way or will react in the same way. It is important to let the survivor know that she/he is not alone, but do not lessen the importance of the survivor's feelings by comparing them to others.

What Can I Do?

You can be a very positive influence on a survivor's healing process. You may not be a counselor or expert, but you are a caring friend. Just keep an open mind and remember that every experience is different. By following the tips below you can provide a safe and open environment for a survivor to disclose.

Believe, comfort and listen to the survivor—Let them tell the story at his/her own pace. Do not rush the survivor to make decisions and allow her/him to decide what steps to take. A survivor of sexual assault or abuse has had power taken away. Allowing them to make even small decisions, like where to talk to you about it or what to have for lunch, can help the survivor to reclaim that power.

Affirm the survivor—Name what happened as wrong. Affirm that it was not the survivor's fault. Just hearing this can be infinitely comforting to the survivor.

Make sure the survivor is safe—Try to reduce fear by providing a feeling of safety at home, at school, at work, etc. If you think that the survivor is in danger from the perpetrator or from her/himself, seek professional help.

Educate yourself on assault/abuse—Learn about the recovery process so that you will know what to expect. Explore the medical and legal options - these differ from place to place. Find out what local resources are available so that you can give them to the survivor if requested.

Get help for yourself—The emotions of being a secondary survivor can be overwhelming. If your feelings become too intense, the survivor may begin to comfort you. Find someone that you can talk to, without compromising the survivor's privacy. Consider joining a support group. If you are a survivor as well this may bring up latent feelings for you. It is important that you deal with these. Visit the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) to find support in your area.