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Five Ways to Support Survivors Through the Holidays

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How your support can help sexual trauma survivors through a difficult time

Written by Amanda Briggs | *Originally published on Medium on November 20, 2021, now updated and archived here for ongoing access*

It's the season of gratitude and joy. Unfortunately, this traditionally happy time of the year can make the suffering of sexual assault and rape survivors more pronounced as they watch the world move on in festivities and happiness while they are still experiencing grief, pain, and emotional numbness from the assault.

Here are five ways you can support survivors of sex crimes through the holiday season and beyond.

1. Protect the Survivor from the Perpetrator

Eight out of 10 rapes are committed by someone the survivor knows.^[1] In the case of juvenile survivor, 93% know the perpetrator — 59% are acquaintances and 34% are family members.^[2] **Sadly, this means there's a high likelihood your loved one was sexually assaulted or raped by someone in your circle.**

I was sexually assaulted and raped by my older brother throughout my childhood. Over time, my immediate family then extended family found out. I reported my



brother to law enforcement in 2014, so anyone who did not yet know found out then. **In a terrible but unfortunately typical reaction, my family — both immediate and extended — wanted me to forgive and forget.** They wanted me to show up at holidays and weddings and stand in group pictures with the person who raped me. They wanted me to write a book with my rapist, go on Oprah with him, and talk about how we overcame him raping me and restored our relationship. (Fun fact: I did write a book, but not with the brother who raped me.)

If you decide to remain in contact with the perpetrator, **make a firm commitment to prioritize the survivor and protect them from interactions with the perpetrator.** For instance, do not invite the perpetrator and the survivor to the same Thanksgiving celebration. Instead, invite the survivor, tell them you are not inviting the perpetrator so they can feel safe, and explain to the perpetrator that you will not allow them to be

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Someone they love commits a sex crime against another loved one. It's OK to struggle and experience profound hurt and shock as you come to terms with the knowledge. Get help and support for yourself, and ensure you stand firmly between the survivor and the perpetrator this holiday season.

2. Let Go of the Ideal

The most important and healthy response anyone can have to sexual assault or rape is to let go of hopes for the ideal. **Nothing about sexual assault or rape is ideal.** If you let go of hopes for the ideal, you let go of unrealistic expectations.

It is common to wish for the ideal when you hear a loved one's story of sexual assault or rape. It's easy to wish things had gone differently, that the survivor wasn't still in pain and turmoil, that the perpetrator wasn't someone you know or love, or that the whole situation would resolve itself and go away quickly.

But that is not how sexual assault and rape work. I wholeheartedly believe that survivors of sex crimes can recover and go on to live a beautiful, happy, peaceful life post-assault. I wholeheartedly believe survivors of sex crimes can experience post-traumatic growth and live a better life than they ever thought possible. I wholeheartedly believe survivors of sex crimes can fully heal from the assault and without pain and fear. But that can be a long road and it is never your place to put

timeframes or expectations on the survivor for their recovery. Provide support and let the survivor sort out their healing on their own timeline with the help of a qualified therapist.

The healthiest, most helpful thing you can do is let go of all your wishes for the ideal and meet the survivor where they are. Don't try to analyze how they handled themselves in the traumatic moments of the assault. Don't question how they went about surviving that experience (fighting, fleeing, or freezing). Don't expect the survivor to snap back to who they were pre-assault just because it is the holiday season.

Instead, step into reality with the survivor and support them in whatever phase of healing they're in. Invite them to holiday gatherings. Show them love and empathy.

Allow them to sit quietly if that's what they need to do. **Small acts of love and**

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3. Don't Minimize the Survivor's Pain

It is normal to want your loved one to be happy and healed post-assault. However, the journey to healing requires significant work and energy, and every survivor will go on that journey at their own pace. The festivities of the holiday season might make you want to push the survivor to jump ahead in their healing process, but remember that **there is no timeframe for healing and you cannot expect the survivor to push through their pain to make others feel more comfortable.**

4. Talk About It

Avoiding the topic of sexual assault or rape increases awkwardness around it. It is healthy and OK to directly ask the survivor how they are doing regarding the assault. Find a way to do so without others overhearing, but ask the question in a calm, kind, straightforward manner. Survivors of sexual assault and rape are accustomed to people being squeamish about sex crimes, so **your willingness to address it openly will demonstrate to the survivor that you care about them and are a safe space for support.**

If the survivor does open up to you and give you an update on how they are doing, follow up. Take a moment the next day to text or call them and let them know you appreciate their trust and that you will keep the conversation between the two of you.

(**The only exception to confidentiality is if this is new information to you and the survivor is a minor** — in that case you should report the crime to law enforcement immediately. Don't try to protect the person who committed the crime, don't overthink the fallout, just report it and let the professionals take responsibility for sorting things out. It is the right thing to do.)

5. Believe the Survivor

The greatest gift you can give a survivor of sexual assault or rape is believing them. They are the expert on their experience, so allow their truth to stand and stand in it with them. And yes, it is safe to believe survivors because only 2–8% of sexual crime reports are false, a statistic that is identical to other felonies.^[3]

Believing survivors empowers them and saves their precious mental, emotional,

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In fourteen years of talking to sexual assault and rape survivors, researching response to sex crimes, and living through rape and assault myself, I have seen a common trend: **The downfall of many friends and family members of sexual assault and rape survivors is that they cannot give up the truth they want for the truth that is real.** Be willing to reshape your worldview with the truth that is real, even if it is painful. Even if it means coming to terms with the fact that someone you know or love committed a crime.

Never Underestimate the Power of Your Response

Your healthy, helpful response to sexual assault or rape is more powerful than you know. Many survivors of sex crimes wrongly blame themselves for what was done to them. Or, they experience severe numbness and shutdown; they struggle to have healthy feelings in the aftermath of assault. **Personally, I learned how to have a healthy emotional reaction to rape and sexual assault by watching healthy people who eventually came into my life and modeled it for me.** They showed me how to direct my anger at the perpetrator instead of at myself. They showed me how to love myself instead of blaming myself. They showed me it is OK to grieve instead of suppressing my pain. In time, I fully healed and it is largely due to watching others

model healthy response. **Never underestimate the power of your response to sexual trauma.**

More Resources

If you want more resources for supporting a survivor through sexual assault or rape recovery, I wrote a book specifically for people who know someone who has experience assault. It is short and to the point so you can read it quickly and walk away with key points. It is available as an e-book through [Amazon](#) and [Barnes & Noble](#).

[1] *Perpetrators of Sexual Violence: Statistics*. (n.d.). Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network. <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence>

[2] *Perpetrators of Sexual Violence: Statistics*. (n.d.). Rape, Abuse & Incest National

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