



## Making Steps Toward Healing

Here are some of the key steps toward healing after sexual assault or harassment:

### 1. Create Safety

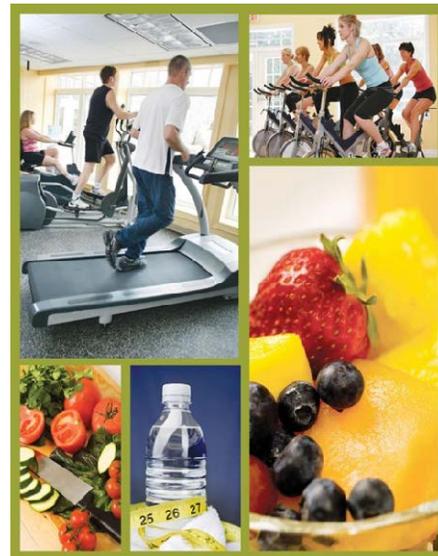
Creating safety means making sure you have a safe place to live, work, and sleep. It also means addressing any health concerns. If you feel like hurting yourself or someone else, being safe means seeking support and counseling to deal with those feelings. Safety also means avoiding dangerous behaviors like alcohol abuse, drug use, unsafe sex and reckless driving.

Creating safety can be difficult if you live or work with your attacker. In these cases, you can seek the support of a Sexual Assault Response Coordinator (SARC), who can help you identify options for increasing your safety. Sexual violence survivors who choose to file a report may request a protective order or transfer. Some may even decide to leave their jobs when contact with their attacker is unavoidable. By seeking medical care and mental health counseling, you will have the support and healthy coping skills you need to help you through this difficult time.

### 2. Self-Care

To heal and recover after sexual violence, you must take care of yourself. Basic self-care includes:

- Getting enough sleep
- Eating healthy foods in healthy amounts
- Seeking medical care for any physical problems
- Finding behavioral health care for emotional and behavioral health problems
- Avoiding the overuse of alcohol
- Avoiding illicit drug use and overuse of prescription drugs
- Avoiding risky behavior, like unsafe sex, gambling, and reckless driving
- Getting support from friends, family and/or professionals
- Exercising regularly
- Quitting smoking
- Doing the everyday things that you enjoy to maintain a sense of normalcy
- Remembering your strengths



If self-care feels overwhelming, focus on changing behaviors that are most unsafe, like excessive alcohol use and drug use. Once you've dealt with those behaviors, move on to things like eating healthy and exercising. Support from others can help you develop better self-care, too. For example, you may find it easier to cut down on drinking with the support of your friends and loved ones.



### 3. Get Support

Getting support from friends, family, and professionals is an important part of self-care. Survivors often isolate themselves, which makes them feel more alone. Those who seek support and reach out to others do better than those who try to “go it alone.”

### 4. Set Boundaries

Find ways to reach out and get support that feels safe and comfortable. For example, if you are avoiding contact because you don't like people touching you physically, set boundaries with people and ask them to respect those boundaries.



Setting boundaries can feel awkward. But there are ways to protect your privacy *and* respect others. You don't need to explain or justify your boundaries.

### 5. Develop Effective Coping Skills

Everyone has different ways of coping with stress and upsetting events. These coping skills can help you manage stress:

#### For Relaxation:

- [Deep breathing.](#)
- [Progressive muscle relaxation.](#)

#### For Better Relationships:

- [Conflict resolution.](#)
- [Reducing isolation.](#)

#### For Managing Difficult Situations:

- [Problem-solving.](#)
- [Time-management.](#)

#### For Managing Upsetting Emotions:

- [Mindfulness.](#)
- [Distress tolerance.](#)



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### 5. Develop Effective Coping Skills (cont.)

During and immediately following a sexual assault, survivors may find ways to respond to the trauma that seem to help in the short-term, but are not effective or healthy in the long-term. You may want to seek help if you are struggling with any of these behaviors:

- **Emotional numbing:** Blocking the anger, fear, or other distressing feelings to avoid the emotional pain following sexual violence may seem to help. But blocking these emotions may also block positive feelings like joy and love.
- **Dissociation:** Dissociation (“spacing out,” “checking out,” or even having gaps in memory for periods of time) can become a habit-forming way to deal with stress or intense feelings. Ultimately, dissociation does not help survivors deal with the stresses of life in a healthy way.
- **Controlling behavior:** Some survivors attempt to regain a sense of security, power or control in their lives by using obsessive thoughts or compulsive cleaning, counting or checking. These obsessions and compulsions end up controlling the survivor.
- **Alcohol or other substance abuse:** Alcohol and drug use to escape from upsetting memories and emotions may seem to help. However, these substances create health problems and introduce additional stresses to relationships. They make the survivor’s life worse.
- **Eating changes:** Survivors may try to gain control by eating too much, purging, or not eating at all. Unfortunately, these unhealthy eating habits all carry serious health risks.

### 6. Revisit the experience and its effects

This process includes acknowledging the impact of the sexual violation, and expressing some of the feelings associated with it. This process may also include exploring your thoughts and beliefs about the trauma. You may process your self-blaming thoughts, assess the reasons behind the trauma, and dissect your beliefs about who was responsible.



For some, telling the story of what happened, or using therapies like Prolonged Exposure Therapy and Cognitive Processing Therapy can ease intense feelings and fear. These approaches can help survivors rethink their beliefs about the trauma.

### 7. Reach out to help others

For some survivors, healing comes through helping others. Trauma leaves some survivors feeling helpless, powerless, and unsafe. Survivors may reclaim a feeling of healthy power by advocating for themselves or other survivors, or by doing something to support those in need. Supporting a cause that matters to you can be empowering and enlivening. It may help you feel less like a *victim* and more like a *survivor*.



**Resources that provide medical, legal, spiritual, relationship and job-related support include:**

- Department of Defense Safe Helpline **877-995-5247** provides confidential sexual assault support and help locating a SARC representative.
- Defense Centers of Excellence (DCoE) Outreach Center **866-966-1020** provides health resource consultants for free confidential help 24/7.
- Your local **Medical Treatment Facility** can be located at [www.tricare.mil/mtf/](http://www.tricare.mil/mtf/).
- Your trusted commander, supervisor, or First Sergeant can provide support.
- Chaplains can provide trusted support and confidentiality.
- Military social services, including SARCs, family advocacy and social work services, information and legal referral services are available (the Safe Helpline can help put you in touch with these services).
- Veterans can find information about services and options for accessing care at <http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp> or by calling 800-827-1000.
- Veterans can get services through their community-based Vet Centers; find locations at [www.va.gov/directory/guide/vetcenter.asp](http://www.va.gov/directory/guide/vetcenter.asp).

**A Final Note: Seeking Revenge**

Some survivors feel upset about how others respond to their situation. They may feel justice is not being done. Some may seek revenge for their pain and suffering. It's normal to think and feel this way. But you should not act on these thoughts and feelings. If you are thinking about revenge, talk with someone you trust. If you feel you won't be able to stop yourself from acting on those thoughts you need to **call 9-1-1 or the SafeHelpline 877-995-5247**.

