

## Self-Care for Secondary Survivors

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By: Jes

First of all, for the survivor in your life, thank you for looking for more information. It means that you care enough to put forth effort to help. You can find hints and tips about how to be supportive to her\* here:

<http://pandys.org/forums/index.php?showtopic=49460>

Whether it is your spouse, girlfriend, boyfriend, relative or close friend who has been sexually assaulted, you can expect to experience profound emotions as a secondary survivor. You will probably experience feelings that are similar to the survivor, like shock, anger, and sadness. It can be hard to handle all of your very painful emotions while you are supporting someone else, so it is important that you focus on your own self care while you also try to help your loved one.

Listening to a survivor and truly being present for her is the most valuable thing you can do to help her healing, but it also can be very consuming for you, especially as you sort through the emotions you are being presented with. Make sure that you take time for yourself, even if you want to be there for her all the time. This will help in two ways: you will not become burnt out as a supporter and she will not become dependent on you to meet all of her healing needs. Taking time for yourself can mean many things. Take a break by going out with friends once in a while. Keep up with your hobbies. If you become overwhelmed, it can really help to immerse yourself in a project. Also, get a good workout in. Not only is exercise one of the healthiest forms of self-care, it is a great way to get your anger out!

You will probably need to spend time processing your emotions, too. As you experience different feelings, try to sit with them for awhile and then try to deal with them. If you are sad, don't be afraid to cry. If you are angry, throw eggs at a tree (when you know it will rain soon!) or hit your pillow. You'll probably develop half a dozen of your own tricks to face challenging emotions. It is fine to tell the survivor how you are feeling, too. It can be very

validating for her to hear that you are so angry and sad over what happened. At the same time, avoid showing very strong emotion when you tell her so that she doesn't feel responsible for your emotions. And try not to rely on the survivor for emotional support.

You may find that you do need extra help to process your feelings. Many rape crisis centers offer support groups for secondary survivors. Sitting down to talk with people who are experiencing many of the same emotions provides support and a sense of companionship. Some rape crisis centers also offer counseling for secondary survivors. If not, think about calling a therapist. You don't need to commit to long-term therapy. Many therapists would be willing to see you for only one or two sessions.

Again, thank you for helping the survivor in your life. Your support is an amazing gift and will help her through a very painful time. Don't forget to offer yourself the same compassion as you help her to heal.

**Note: Although I recognize that men are survivors of sexual violence, for the sake of simplicity, I have used the pronoun "her" when referring to the survivor in your life.**

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