

Chapter 2

CARING FOR OURSELVES & EACH OTHER



Advocates are an important resource for survivors and our communities. Being present, listening, and validating are some of the most helpful skills advocates have.¹

Advocates provide a safe place and information for survivors during their healing process. Advocates believe survivors and believe survivors are experts on their own healing and safety.

Advocates know that survivors are whole, healthy, capable human beings responding to trauma. Advocacy training provides participants with the opportunity to learn the skills needed to support survivors with resources and active listening.

Legal standing or “privileged communication” is often connected with the successful completion of the training. This enables survivors’ communication with advocates to be privileged, meaning that by law the communication between survivors and advocates cannot be required to be disclosed except in rare circumstances. Maine law outlines it here:²

Privileged communications. Except with regard to reporting, cooperating in an investigation or giving evidence pursuant to Title 22, chapter 958-A or 1071, or except at the request, or with the consent of, the victim of sexual assault, a sexual assault counselor may not be required to testify in any civil or criminal action, suit or proceeding at law or in equity about any information that the sexual assault counselor may have acquired in providing sexual assault counseling services. A sexual assault counselor or a rape crisis center may not be required to disclose to the court any records, notes, memoranda or documents containing confidential communications.

In addition to legal standing, advocate training will give you the core skills and knowledge to provide advocacy to survivors of sexual violence, and those who support and love them.

The key components of your role as an advocate are:

- Believing the experiences that survivors share with you, no matter how unbelievable it may sound. It is not your role to determine whether it is fact or fiction – it is their truth.



- Supporting and listening to survivors and what they say their needs are. Provide them with resources, referrals, and when necessary, in person accompaniment services.
- Empowering survivors by assisting them as they develop ways to re-establish control in their lives.
- Being open to exploring strong feelings and being willing to offer deep understanding to survivors. This is empathy.

While it is important to always remember the needs of survivors, it is just as important to remember your own personal needs. It is critically important that as an advocate you practice self care and remain physically, emotionally, and spiritually healthy so you can approach this work with a clear perspective. Remember that advocates work together in this journey, and you are supported by your centers and fellow advocates.



MECASA staff and member centers offer our heartfelt thanks to you for your personal investments of time and energy to provide this vital service in our community. Your compassion and understanding of the importance of this work is greatly appreciated. We look forward to working with you to provide help, hope, and healing as we join together to end sexual violence. May you find great rewards in the work as you move forward.

Common Terms³

Many people are drawn to advocacy work as a way to help others through difficult experiences. It is important to remember that it is normal to be affected by the care you offer others and the suffering you bear witness to. As we begin to discuss caring for others and caring for ourselves as advocates, please familiarize yourself with the common terms below.

Self Care

Self care is a sustained and intentional practice in one's life to preserve wellness and maintain wholeness.

Community Care

Community organizer and researcher Nakita Valerio defines community care as "People committed to leveraging their privilege to be there for one another in various ways." Community care consists of both small- and large-scale actions that we can take to show our support for another person, or group of people.⁴

Vicarious Trauma

Vicarious trauma is "a process of change that unfolds over time. It is not just your responses to one person, one story, or one situation. It is the cumulative effect of contact with...people who are struggling."⁵ Vicarious trauma can manifest in difficulties related to one's holistic wellbeing, because it can affect our hearts, bodies, and minds.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to identify with another person, to understand and feel another person's pain and joy. Empathy doesn't mean feeling exactly what someone else is feeling. Everyone is unique. Everyone has their own personal history, personality, and life circumstances. You cannot ever feel exactly what someone else is feeling.

Generally empathy is when you care and can relate to other people's experiences, reactions, and feelings.⁶ Sometimes this may come easily to you and sometimes it may not.

Resilience

Resilience in the context of advocacy work is the capacity to sustain strength, hope, and purpose over the long-term, while extending love and care to those we serve. It allows us to honor and attend to our own concerns and needs, while simultaneously connecting to, and being present with, the concerns of others.⁷ This is sometimes also known as compassion resilience or vicarious resilience.

Burnout

The experience of long-term exhaustion and diminished interest in one's work. Burnout often manifests itself as irritability, difficulty focusing on work, decreased productivity, unexplained changes in medical health, irregular sleep patterns, and constantly feeling discouraged in the work.



Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue is "a state experienced by those helping people or animals in distress; it is an extreme state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped to the degree that it can create a secondary traumatic stress for the helper."⁸



Taking Care of Yourself

Being an advocate, while rewarding, may not always be uplifting. The acts of sexual violence that advocates hear about may leave them feeling sad, angry, frustrated, and fearful. Not every call will have this effect, although eventually every advocate will take a call that is emotionally difficult.

As advocates provide support and show empathy to survivors, they must never let their own feelings become the focus of the call. It is helpful for advocates to think ahead about what types of scenarios might be difficult to handle and speak with a supervisor about what they will do when they receive these types of calls.

It is important for advocates to talk about their feelings. Backup support is always available, and advocates are encouraged to seek support according to their center's practice and protocol. It may also be helpful for an advocate to plan ahead for dealing with the stress of crisis work. It may be beneficial to explore ways to unwind after responding to a caller or being on call in general.

While maintaining confidentiality, advocates might consider ways in which the people in their lives can be supportive. It is necessary for advocates to think about individual self care needs. Self care is essential to well-being and is often overlooked. Creating balance between the many roles and responsibilities in one's life takes insight and planning. The following list is offered to encourage exploration of the various areas of self care: ⁹



Physical

- Eat regularly.
- Get enough rest and sleep.
- Engage in enjoyable physical activity.
- Take time off when sick.

Psychological

- Take time away from phones and screens.
- Read literature and consume media that is unrelated to sexual violence.
- Say no to extra responsibilities sometimes.
- Listen to personal thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings.

Emotional

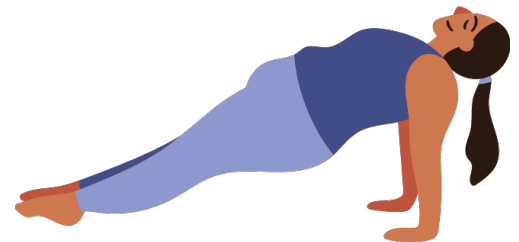
- Identify comforting activities, objects, people, relationships, and places. Seek them out.
- Allow personal time to process emotions.
- Find things that make you laugh.
- Play.

Spiritual

- Be open to inspiration.
- Make time for reflection.
- Spend time with nature.
- Meditate/pray.

Professional

- Set boundaries and limits.
- Arrange call space so it is comfortable and comforting.
- Seek support from a supervisor.
- Attend advocate meetings for peer support.



Vicarious Trauma¹⁰

Vicarious trauma refers to ways a person is negatively affected by their empathic response to individuals who have experienced trauma. An empathic response means that an advocate connects with deep feelings while listening to accounts of pain and violence.

Vicarious trauma can also be thought of as the cumulative impact of trauma exposure that causes a shift in the perspective or worldview of the person helping. While vicarious trauma is distinct from secondary trauma or compassion fatigue, sometimes these terms are used interchangeably. Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder is a term used to describe the collection of symptoms that arise in people, such as advocates, who experience trauma second-hand.

One of the most striking similarities between primary and secondary trauma survivors is the tendency to minimize the impact of the event and to interpret normal reactions as signs of psychological problems or instability.

Vicarious trauma happens over time. The signs and symptoms vary because what may be hard for one person may be less difficult for another. Vicarious trauma includes both strong feelings and defenses against those feelings. It shows up as strong reactions of grief, rage, and outrage.

These reactions increase as advocates repeatedly hear about and see people's pain and loss and are forced

to recognize the human potential for cruelty and indifference.

At the same time, vicarious trauma is also evident when advocates feel numb or want to be protected against knowing that such cruelty exists. While vicarious trauma occurs from working with survivors and facing the impact the violence creates, it is not something a particular person or system does to advocates, or causes advocates to feel or experience. Individual reactions to the work of advocacy are never the fault of those who seek support.¹¹

Advocates can reduce the possibility of experiencing vicarious trauma by:¹²

- Protecting yourself by arranging things ahead of time in anticipation of the stress of the work and its impact. This could look like having snacks ready on long days or if you have an overnight helpline shift, making sure the following day doesn't have lots of meetings. You might also ask for help with child or pet care, or make sure you can get to the gym before a long day.
- Addressing the effects of doing the work by intentionally making space for self care, self-nurturing, or escaping.
- Reframing the focus on difficult qualities of advocacy. You might think about shifting thoughts of pain and violence to positive experiences such as witnessing and supporting survivors' growth, personal and spiritual development through doing the work, and helping people through difficult times in life.



In addition, the following are strategies to help advocates to let go of the work:

- Draw, paint, or write for five or ten minutes to release the impact of the work.
- Sit quietly for one to five minutes and breathe deeply through your diaphragm to create a changed physical state before leaving the room where the call was taken, when in transit from accompanying a survivor, or when arriving home.
- Close the door (metaphorically locking away the worries and stress of the work) or use other containment visualizations to distance yourself from the situation.
- Make a list of positive, hopeful events of the day.
- Imagine a setting where you feel secure, including all of the sensory components of that place.



Rewards of the Work

The rewards of the work can sustain advocates and counteract vicarious trauma. Working with survivors can and does bring remarkable rewards. Survivors of sexual violence heal and grow and find their voices to speak out against injustice. They succeed in breaking the cycle of abuse. While advocates witness pain, they also witness healing too. People who survive trauma have great inner strengths and wisdom that can be used on their own behalf. Through this work, advocates witness resilience and psychological resourcefulness. Advocates also see first-hand that people's capacity for love, kindness, and generosity is as real as the capacity for cruelty and selfishness.¹³

Survivor Healing

Healing from any type of sexual violence is a personal journey and varies for each person. How a survivor chooses to begin and continue on their healing path will depend on a variety of factors. Gender identity, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, cultural identification, support systems, and life history are just a few of the factors that will have an impact on how a person navigates their individual healing process.

Although there are many factors that will contribute to the healing process, there are some steps that will apply to many survivors. The steps below highlight some of the widely recognized phases a person may go through on their individual journey. That journey will look different for every survivor. Much of the following information has been adapted from two books by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis: *The Courage to Heal* and *Beginning to Heal*,^{15,16} and from Judith Herman's book *Trauma and Recovery*.¹⁷

Human beings are capable of being highly resilient. While resiliency does not erase pain and suffering, it can equip survivors with an innate strength and motivation to conquer obstacles in front of them. According to the Suicide Prevention Center, "A resilient person demonstrates the ability and ways to manage stressors that are both effective at the time, and also help strengthen them against future adversity."¹⁸

Common Themes in Healing

Healing can include a conscious decision and commitment on the part of the survivor, but it is not necessary. There is no one way to heal. People find their own healing path, and may change directions or try many approaches throughout their journeys. Some people go into therapy, some join support groups, some use massage or art therapy, and some read self-help books and rely on family and friends for support. This

list is not exhaustive. There are as many ways to heal as there are humans healing. Survivors can draw from many different parts of their lives to inspire and direct their healing.



Taking Stock

Much of a survivor's energy may be spent on day-to-day survival. A first step toward healing often involves taking stock of one's present situation, acknowledging that violence has happened, and recognizing the impact that it has on the survivor's life.

Deciding to Heal

Making the decision to heal is a powerful, positive choice. Facing the pain and moving through it, rather than around it, has been described by survivors of sexual violence as providing a tremendous sense of relief.

Deciding to heal can also come from a place of resolve or overwhelm. Facing and integrating trauma can be scary and avoided for a long time. But when the impacts of trauma become too big to ignore or the price too great, intentional steps to address that might begin.

Talking

Speaking with at least one person about sexual violence experience(s) can be a powerful step in healing. Breaking the silence and reaching out for support are significant steps in the healing process. It may be helpful to talk with survivors about how the act of giving voice to their experiences has remarkable healing qualities in itself.

Acknowledging Survival & the Process of Healing

It can be powerful for survivors to acknowledge that they have made it this far by using whatever internal and external coping mechanisms they have. Sometimes moving forward can feel so overwhelming that to keep going seems impossible, but they have survived the direct experience. It is behind them, and acknowledging this truth speaks volumes about the courage and strength within survivors. Healing often begins with the acknowledgment of survival. Healing is a process and may be life-long for some survivors.

Acknowledging any and all steps taken towards healing is important. Those steps are part of each survivor's journey.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADVOCATES



Advocates will speak and meet with survivors who have experienced different types of sexual violence. They will also meet with people who are in different places in their healing journey, and people with different beliefs about healing and wellness. As advocates become more familiar with the healing process, it may become clear that survival itself is healing.

Observing Self Blame

Survivors may become aware of feelings of guilt or regret as they take steps toward healing. The reality that survivors are not responsible for the violations that happened to them may be difficult for some survivors to integrate. For some survivors, blaming themselves gives them a sense that they can then “fix” things, giving them a sense of control that has helped them to cope.

Helping survivors understand the biological responses that are often out of their control when faced with traumatic situations can also help them release a sense of self-blame. This is discussed later in this manual.

Considering Confrontation & Forgiveness

Many survivors and their loved ones may struggle with the idea that confrontation and forgiveness are necessary steps in the healing process. Loved ones and survivors may have different ideas about the role of forgiveness. However, survivors have the right to define

and decide the steps they take toward their own healing. Confronting and forgiving the person that harmed the survivor are not the same. Confrontation may be a positive step in the healing process for some. It is important to remember that confrontation is not always possible, and that when it is, it may not go as the survivor hopes it will.

Forgiveness is also a personal choice and may have a spiritual component for some survivors. Forgiving the person that caused sexual violence, or others involved, may happen for some survivors after they work on their healing for a considerable amount of time.

Others may explore the possibility of forgiveness when they feel safe from being harmed again. Some survivors may explore forgiveness as a start to their healing. Some may feel that forgiveness is not necessary to their healing, and may be comfortable with choosing not to forgive.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADVOCATES



It may be helpful for callers to discuss what they hope to get out of confronting someone and what might happen if it doesn't go as planned. An advocate can help them create a safety plan related to the confrontation and identify potential supports and self care strategies.

Reclaiming One's Power

Empowerment is the process of transforming the pain and powerlessness created by sexual violence into the realization that one can live their life beyond their experience of sexual violence. Judith Herman describes this process:¹⁹

The survivor no longer feels possessed by [their] traumatic past, [they have ownership over themselves]. [They have] some understanding of the person [they] used to be and of the [harm] done to that person by the traumatic event. [Their] task now is to become the person [they want] to be.... Survivors may focus their energies on helping others who have been similarly victimized, on educational, legal, or political efforts to prevent others from being victimized in the future, or on attempts to bring offenders to justice.

Advocates have an opportunity to contribute to a survivor's sense of empowerment by listening and trusting the survivor's ability to know what is best.

Exploring Spirituality

Spirituality, a sense of being connected with something larger than the physical self, has helped many trauma survivors stay on the healing path and lift their burdens. Nature, meditation, an inspiring piece of music, religions, ritual, and a belief in a higher power can all become entry points to spirituality. For some survivors, the comfort that may come with spirituality is a welcome and safe haven, and one that is always accessible.





CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADVOCATES



Survivors make spiritual connections in many ways, which may or may not involve formalized religion. Advocates need to be sensitive when exploring spirituality with callers who may have experienced sexual abuse within a religious institution or in a ritualistic setting.

Reconnection

Finally, reconnection involves the survivor getting back to some or all of the people, places, and activities they enjoy. Life before sexual violence and the demands of the healing process may have included professional, social, and community networks. These relationships may have understandably been put on hold while the survivor focused on healing. Reconnection can also include discovering what the survivor enjoys doing and who they enjoy being with. For some, the main task up to this point has been surviving and making it through each day. This may be the first time a survivor has explored connecting with others and taken steps toward finding peace, joy, and pleasure in their lives.

Considering Confrontation

The information in the material below is adapted from *The Courage to Heal* by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis²⁰ and *Victims No Longer: Men Recovering from Incest and Other Sexual Child Abuse* by Mike Lew.²¹

There is no clearly defined course of action when considering whether or not to confront someone that has caused harm through sexual violence and/or others involved. It is a personal decision for survivors. There may be many reasons to consider confrontation, including:

- Wanting validation that sexual violence took place.
- Seeking information to help piece together the survivor's memories.
- Sharing the impact the sexual violence had on the survivor.
- Breaking the silence.

There may be many reasons to avoid confrontation, including:

- The presence of ongoing danger.
- A lack of support through the process.
- Not wanting to take on additional stress.
- Not wanting to risk being disregarded.

It is important to consider what might be gained or lost by confrontation. What does the survivor hope to get out of the confrontation? What are the possible consequences? It is also important to think ahead of time about the range of possible responses from the person(s) being confronted.

Responses can range from denial, an ambiguous response such as "I don't remember," to acknowledgment of the survivor's experiences, to an apology.

There are different ways to go about confrontation. A survivor could do this in person, over the telephone, in a letter, or through someone else.

If a survivor chooses an in-person confrontation, advocates can help them carefully consider their comfort and safety, including time and location. It may be helpful to practice what the survivor hopes to say. It is important for survivors to say what they want to say and to ask what they need to ask. Survivors may not be heard in the way they had hoped, or get the answers they hoped to get, but confrontation can provide the satisfaction of knowing that they spoke up and said what they needed to say.

At a planned or unplanned confrontation, people may expect the survivor to listen to the story of the person that caused harm, or to hear others' reactions. If a survivor wants to have this type of a dialogue, it may be helpful to think of doing it at another time, rather than at an initial confrontation.

If the person or people to confront are unavailable for some reason, perhaps because they live far away or are deceased, there are symbolic ways that a survivor can consider facing an offender:

- Write a letter and do not mail it.
- Write a poem or create artwork and consider publishing it.
- Donate to an organization that supports survivors.
- Simulate confrontation in a controlled therapeutic environment.

It is important that survivors be clear about their motivations and expectations when considering confrontation. In addition, survivors will benefit from having support at all stages in the process should they decide to go forward with a confrontation.



We have also seen the growth of restorative justice work in Maine. Depending on a survivor's circumstances, it may be a resource for exploring resolution and confrontation.

Introduction to Grounding¹⁴

What is Grounding?

Grounding techniques are tools, or simple strategies, used to help find stabilization in the midst of intense panic, anxiety, fear, stress, and concern. Grounding



techniques can be a way for people to detach or distract from emotional pain, flashbacks, or dissociation, and may help people feel more centered and present in the moment.

Advocates use grounding techniques with survivors and concerned others, and for their own self care. As an advocate, it is helpful to get familiar with lots of different grounding techniques to know how they work and have options available for survivors (and you!).

Why Do Grounding?

When you are overwhelmed with emotional pain, you need a way to gain control over your feelings and stay

safe. Grounding “anchors” you to the present and to reality by focusing outward on the external world, rather than inward towards the self.

Many people who struggle with overwhelming emotions and memories, or those who may feel numb and disconnected, benefit from grounding. In grounding, you attain a balance between being conscious of reality and being able to tolerate it. Remember that pain is a feeling; it is not who you are. When you get caught up in it, it can feel like you are your pain, and that is all that exists. But your pain is only one part of your experience. The others are just hidden and can be found again through grounding.

Grounding can be done any time, anywhere. Use grounding when you are triggered, enraged, dissociating, or having a craving. Grounding puts healthy distance between you and negative feelings.

A few tips include:

- Keep your eyes open, scan the room, and turn the light on to stay in touch with the present.
- Stay neutral. Avoid judgments of “good” and “bad.” For example, instead of “The walls are blue; I dislike blue because it reminds me of depression,” simply say, “The walls are blue,” and move on.
- Focus on the present, not the past or future.
- Active focus on distraction strategies is meant to help lessen negative feelings.

✓ KEY POINTS

Chapter 2

Advocate Training is designed to give you the core skills and knowledge for you to provide advocacy to survivors of sexual violence, and those who support and love them. After this 40-hour training, participants (staff and volunteers) will have legally protected “privileged communication” status.

Advocates will be impacted by the feelings and needs of survivors. Being aware of and getting support for those impacts are critical to advocate sustainability and reliable services for survivors.

It's essential that advocates have awareness of their own personal practices to support wellbeing and resilience. However, an agency has the responsibility to prioritize resources that demonstrate a commitment to staff wellness and reduce all organizational barriers for staff to practice self care.²¹

Healing from any type of sexual violence is a personal journey and will vary for each individual. There is no one way to heal. People find their own healing path, and may change directions or try many approaches throughout the process.



Endnotes

- ¹ Adapted from: National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (n.d.) *Foundations of advocacy training manual*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nsvrc.org/foundations-advocacy-training-manual>. p. 141.
- ² Retrieved from: <https://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/statutes/16/title16ch1.pdf>
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- ⁹ Adapted from Saakvitne, K. W., Gamble, S., Pearlman, L., & Lev, B. (2000). *Risking connection: A training curriculum for working with survivors of childhood abuse*. Lutherville, MD: Sidran Press.
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- ¹¹ Adapted from Saakvitne et al, 2000.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Adapted from: Rigoni, M. (n.d.) *Grounding techniques explained*. Retrieved from: www.slideshare.net/ShannonCayer/grounding-techniques-explained
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- ¹⁸ Suicide Prevention Center, 2000.
- ¹⁹ Herman, J. (1992).
- ²⁰ Bass, E. & Davis, L. (1992).
- ²¹ Lew, M. (1990). *Victims no longer: Men recovering from incest and other sexual child abuse*. New York: Harper & Row.

