

SECTION 1

Building a Foundation: What You Need to Tell Your Story, On Your Terms

Writing and sharing your story about your experience(s) of sexual violence or any form of gender-based violence can have a profound impact on you and others. Your insight into your recovery from the violence and the challenges you have faced—and may still face—send a powerful message that surviving and healing from sexual and gender-based violence is possible.

This section will enable you to build your own personalized toolkit of resources and support that you can turn to as you move through the process of thinking about, writing, and possibly sharing your story with others. Every survivor's experience and path to healing is unique. The resources found here can provide a strong foundation for anyone seeking to explore difficult or possibly traumatizing experiences more deeply.

Before we begin, it is important to note that while writing your story on your terms can be a healing experience, this workbook is not a replacement for seeking professional help. If you need support, you can speak with a counselor or an advocate, by calling these helplines:

- * National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-HOPE (4673);
- * National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-SAFE (7233);
- * National Victim of Crime Hotline 1-855-4-VICTIM (855-484-2846).

NOW, LET'S GET STARTED! To prepare yourself to write and tell your story on your own terms, review the steps below:

Check-in with yourself emotionally. Where are you today?

Sharing your story can provide many benefits when you follow certain guidelines to protect your safety and well-being. Trauma experts have found that survivors sharing their stories of sexual or gender-based violence can become an important part of their healing process and strengthen their resiliency. You are the only person who can determine your readiness to begin writing and sharing your story, on your own terms.

Writing down or sharing your story of sexual violence or abuse publicly can also be a challenging experience. Survivors can experience a wide variety of emotions, and every person has their own way of dealing with emotions. Allow yourself to feel a full range of emotions. Some survivors have remained silent for a multitude of reasons, such as shame, guilt, or fear that people will not believe them.

Here are some questions to consider when determining if you're ready. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers. It is up to you to gauge your readiness. This workbook will still be here for you if you want to come back to this later. Your mental health and safety are the priority.

- * Are you able to state that something happened to you that was not your fault?
- * Can you talk about the experience, and have you begun to spend time with your feelings?
- * Have you given the responsibility for the violence to the person who committed the act and accepted that the responsibility is not yours to accept?
- * Do you recognize that you can get back power and control in your life?

If you answered “no” to any of these questions, these are aspects of your experience that you may want to think more about and work on either prior to starting this workbook or while completing this workbook. While it is common for survivors to blame themselves for their experience, your assault is not your fault. Use these questions as a personal gauge to see how you are feeling. Once you feel ready, developing an emotional safety plan can help you stay emotionally safe while you write your story on your terms. Emotional safety can look different for each survivor. The main idea is to develop a personalized plan that helps you feel accepting and aware of your emotions.

Build your emotional safety plan

Review the five steps below and respond by completing the My Resources for Resilience page at the end of section one. You can refer to that page throughout your journey for support.

STEP 1

Create a peaceful space for yourself.

Consider designating a physical space where you can use this workbook. It could be a room in your home, a comfy chair in the library, or a spot in your favorite park. Be sure it is a place where your mind can relax and feel safe. You may want to incorporate certain elements to enhance your peacefulness, like plants or fresh flowers, a scented candle, or some calming music. Complete “My Peaceful Spaces.”

STEP 2

Identify your support network.

A support system is a network of people who can help you make it through times in your healing process that can be scary or bewildering. These are people who believe you were abused and that the abuser hurt you. These are also the people who believe you have the ability to heal. They care for you and respect you. Don't include people who may minimize your abuse, downplay your feelings, tell you to hurry and get over the abuse, ridicule you when you are struggling with the trauma, or blame you for the abuse. Complete “My Support Network.”

STEP 3

Understand your emotions.

You may want to keep track of your emotions as you start the process of writing your story on your terms. An emotions tracker helps you keep track of how you're feeling throughout your writing or during any reflection activity. You can do this by checking in

with yourself regularly while you work and at least one time for each activity you do. Be sure to take note of what you are doing in that moment: are you remembering an aspect of your experience, writing a part of your story, or reflecting on a specific question or writing prompt? Then, note your mood and write down any associated physical sensations. Complete “My Emotion Tracker.”

STEP 4

Have a self-care practice in place.

Developing your story on your terms and sharing it can be very empowering, but it can also be emotionally draining. Your emotional well-being as a survivor is always the first priority, but especially so as you begin this workbook. Self-care practices are any simple things we do for ourselves to maintain and improve our emotional, mental, and physical well-being. We’ve all heard about how to live a healthy life by eating right, exercising, and getting plenty of rest, but it is just as important to put things into place that may ease any pain and help you as you heal, write, and tell your story on your terms. Preventing undue stress and emotional overload must be your top priority. Complete “My Self-Care Menu.”

STEP 5

Make sure you’re realistic about your goals and expectations.

Setting goals can be very helpful, by giving us a sense of motivation and direction. However, sometimes we expect too much of ourselves and set unrealistic goals. This can cause unnecessary stress and self-criticism. Complete “My Goals.”

What to do if you get stuck

The Challenge:

It may be difficult for some survivors to begin the exercises in the workbook. You may feel as though you have “writer’s block.” Don’t force yourself to do an activity. Be gentle with yourself, especially if you are doing things that you’ve never done before, like expressive writing and storytelling, or reflecting that exists outside of your comfort zones like writing about certain aspects of your experience for the first time.

What To Do:

Set realistic expectations. For example, commit to write for 15 minutes per day for four consecutive days before you stop and reassess if you want to continue.

The Challenge:

Some stressful experiences are so traumatic that the memories can’t be consciously accessed. This can be very frustrating to some survivors whose stories of sexual violence don’t fit into a neat and clear narrative structure. Your story may not be “linear” or “complete” and that is okay.

What To Do:

Understand that it is completely normal to have fragmented and incomplete memories of what has happened to you. A realistic expectation is that you can begin to accept that having challenges with memories is the nature of trauma and its impact on the brain. It is not a shortcoming on your part.

The Challenge:

For some survivors, they may be able to start writing about their experience right at the start, but arrive at a certain detail and become stuck. It is common for there to be aspects of your experience that are too difficult to write about and share because of the flooding of feelings that can occur. The trauma of being raped or sexually assaulted can be shattering; leaving a person feeling scared, ashamed, blamed, guilty, alone or plagued by nightmares, flashbacks, and other unpleasant memories. These feelings can surface immediately following the assault or arise years later.

What To Do:

Give yourself permission to skip over aspects of your experience that are too painful to write and share about right now. There is no need to push yourself to write about all aspects of your experience(s).

How to use My Resources for Resilience

If you are feeling stressed, anxious, or emotionally unsafe, or if you are experiencing upsetting memories - turn to the “My Resources for Resilience” page that you have completed for a reminder on how to reach out, recharge, and take care of yourself. We will also discuss some of the warning signs and challenges you may face and how you can manage them.

Know the signs of feeling emotionally unsafe

By monitoring your emotions, you can recognize when you start to feel scared, ashamed, or alone while you are writing, remembering, or sharing your story. Monitoring your emotions can help you identify parts of your story that make you feel emotionally unsafe.

The Give an Hour* campaign identified five signs to look for that may signal you are in emotional pain and might need to take a break from writing, remembering, or sharing your story:

- * You notice sudden or gradual changes to your personality.
- * You begin to notice feeling angry, anxious, agitated, or moody.
- * You begin to pull away from family and friends, and/or stop taking part in activities you enjoy.
- * You may begin to neglect your self-care and engage in risky behavior.
- * You may notice you are feeling overcome with hopelessness and overwhelmed by the circumstances you are writing, remembering, or sharing about.

Whether or not you notice these signs or just recognize that you feel badly and are experiencing any form of emotional pain then take a break, reach out to your support network, or consider using any of the self-care resources you put together in this section.

Trigger warning: Be prepared for the possibility of flashbacks and upsetting memories. Flashbacks, nightmares, and intrusive memories are extremely common for survivors, especially in the first few months following the assault. However, it is not uncommon for survivors to experience these things for much longer. There are specific things that you can do to reduce the stress and upsetting memories that may arise as you are completing the workbook:

*You can learn more about Give an Hour and the five signs to obtain more tools about wellness by visiting the Campaign to Change Direction at www.changedirection.org.

- * Try to anticipate when they are likely to occur by understanding what your triggers may be. Some common triggers can include anniversary dates; people or places associated with the rape; and certain sights, sounds, or smells. If you are aware of what triggers may cause an upsetting reaction, you'll be in a better position to understand what's happening and take steps to calm yourself down.
- * Be aware of your body's danger signals. Your body and emotions give you clues when you're starting to feel stressed and unsafe. These clues include feeling tense, holding your breath, racing thoughts, shortness of breath, hot flashes, dizziness, and nausea.
- * Take immediate steps to calm and soothe yourself. If you notice any of the above symptoms, it's important to quickly act to calm yourself down before they spiral out of control. One of the quickest and most effective ways to calm anxiety and panic is to slow down your breathing.

It is not always possible to prevent flashbacks, but there are specific things you can do to deal with flashbacks. If you find yourself losing touch with the present and feeling like the sexual violence is happening all over again, there are actions you can take:

- * Accept that it is happening and reassure yourself that this is a flashback, NOT reality. The goal is to tell yourself that the traumatic event is over and you survived. Here's a simple script that can help: *"I am feeling [panicked, frightened, overwhelmed, etc.] because I am remembering the sexual violence (rape, molestation, assault), but as I look around I can see that the violence isn't happening right now and I'm NOT in actual danger."*
- * Do a grounding exercise to ground yourself in the present. Grounding techniques can help you direct your attention away from the flashback and back to your present environment. For example, try tapping or touching your arms or describing your actual environment and what you see when look around—name the place where you are, the current date, 3 things you see when you look around, and identify what sounds you hear.

Find Additional Tools & Resources online at WomensJusticeNOW.org/MyStoryWorkbook.

Explore

- * *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* by Davis, Eschelman, McKay, and Fanning
- * *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion: Freeing Yourself from Destructive Thoughts and Emotions* by C.K. Gremer
- * *Psychological Trauma and Adult Survivor* by McCann and Pearlman
- * *Taking the sense of safety beyond the therapy setting* by M. B. Williams
- * *The Body Keeps Score* by Dr. van der Kolk
- * *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness* by Peter A. Levine.
- * *Start Where You Are: A Journal for Self-Exploration* by Meera Lee Patel
- * *Made Out of Stars: A Journal for Self-Realization* by Meera Lee Patel
- * Gift from Within, giftfromwithin.org, aims to help rekindle hope and restore dignity to trauma survivors.
- * Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, rainn.org, supports sexual assault survivors and offers resources