

The Handbook

empathy & support
for survivors of
gun violence

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take what you need.



Hi, my name is Hannah and I'm so glad you're holding this book in your hands.

If you are using this because it's relevant to you, I am so sorry for the trauma you or a loved one has experienced. I hope this guide can help you approach the topic in a productive and empathetic way.

Introduction

No one in my life could relate.
They didn't know what to
ask or how to talk about it.
Seven years later, the PTSD
became crippling and I went to
counseling.

As helpful as that was, I began
to notice the holes in my
journey. I identified things I
wished could have been done
sooner to help me.



The main resource I was offered was counseling. As helpful as it is, it's only a few hours a week. With stats like these we need to teach communities how to support survivors for the other 166 hours of the week.

The biggest thing you can do to support people is to be open and honest in communication. No one can prepare for this situation, and the aftermath of such trauma can take the victim to dark places. Through time and healing these victims become survivors.



Survivor's Choice

The bottom line is that it is always the survivor's choice when and if they talk about it. If you'd like to discuss the subject, make sure you approach it in a way that ensures the survivor feels safe and heard. Providing them an outlet to openly discuss their experiences is the biggest way to support them.

It's helpful to find a keyword or phrase with the survivor so you can talk about it without bringing it up abruptly. I refer to it as "the event" or "when it happened." But any word that makes them feel comfortable and calm while bringing it up will work.

You may find these words naturally by listening to how they talk about it, or you may need to ask them how they would like you to refer to it.



First Steps

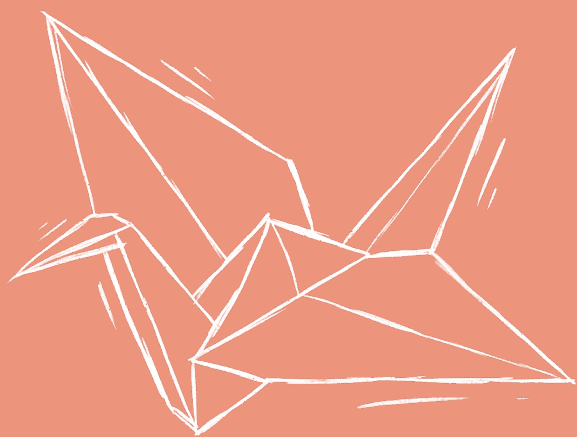
The hours and days immediately after the incident are a crucial time to come together in support for a survivor. Things will change drastically and you can help them pick up the pieces while they are grieving. One way to do this is to alert those in their close circle of the event, and remind people to not bombard them with questions about it.

Things to do:

- Supply them with food and ensure their essential needs are being met
- Let them know you are thinking of them
- Watch the news with them and monitor the amount of time they focus on the coverage
- Create a space where they can release and unwind, knowing that they are safe

Things not to do:

- Ask them about the details
- Say "it's going to be OK"
- Give them a timeline on recovery by saying things like "you'll feel better in a few weeks"
- Compare their outcome with anyone else's in the situation
- Get angry that it happened



Post-traumatic
Stress Disorder
(PTSD)

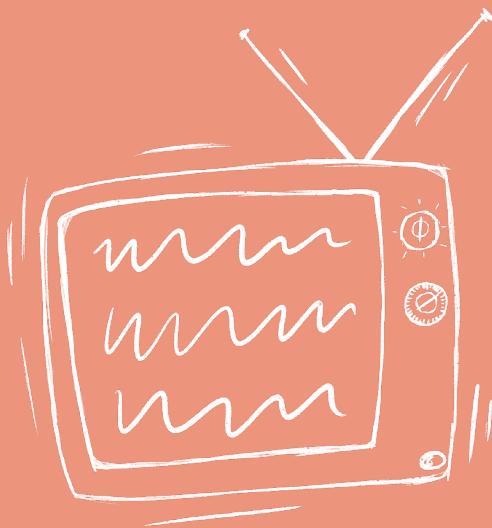
Triggers

The quickest way to bring me back to that moment is through one of my triggers. It sends me directly into fight or flight mode, and can take awhile for my adrenaline rush to die down. The intensity of them fluctuates depending on the news, the season, my mental health, and other aspects of my life.

Triggers may include: masks, large crowds, loud sounds, backpacks, depiction of shootings in movies, current news stories, and jokes about shootings.



These triggers are especially prevalent in pop culture (i.e. masks in thriller movies or news coverage) so be aware in order to help them avoid situations that may set back their healing.






Survivor's Guilt

Surviving is a blessing, but it comes with its own taxing effects. An extremely common side effect of survival is survivor's guilt. This includes feeling guilt over the fact that you have survived an event that others haven't, and can lead to severe depression or suicidal thoughts.

For a long time I struggled with the question of “why didn’t he shoot me?” and I often found myself concluding that he had made a mistake. As dark as this sounds, it’s the reality for many survivors.





Survivor's guilt for me meant coming face-to-face with death, but getting away. I questioned why he didn't shoot me, and what purpose I wanted to fill now that I was still alive. I dealt with these questions with my counselor by writing a list of every question I had from the accident, as well as what I defined as a fulfilling life.



Short-term Coping Mechanisms

Survivors are often unable to ask for help, but it can be easy to see their need through their actions. Severe unhealthy coping mechanisms are easy ways for the survivor's immediate group to tell if things are going south.

Although these may occur when processing a loss of any kind, it's important to make sure that they don't become a habit or become so intense that it risks long-lasting harm to the victim. Keep an eye on them and don't be afraid to check in when you notice a change in routine.



Things to Focus On

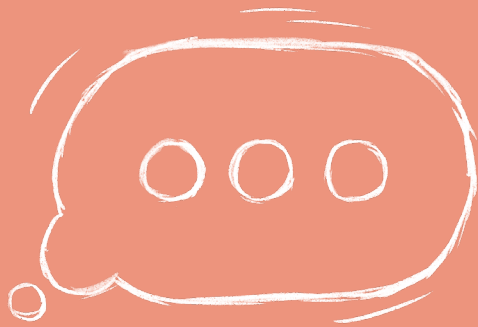


Not everything fits directly into a category. These are a few extra things to keep in mind when caring for your friend.

please,

be gentle and patient.

This issue is big and many can feel helpless when trying to support survivors because they feel like they aren't solving the problem. Every act of kindness and support is noticed and appreciated. Be gentle with yourself and be patient with the survivor.



please,
no

do more than post on
social media.

It's easy to sit behind a screen
and send your thoughts and
prayers, but the reality is this
problem is getting worse. It
requires action and avocation.

please,

educate yourself

Take the time to learn about symptoms and effects of trauma-related disorders.

Learning the steps of trauma processing can help you remain calm throughout the aftermath, making you a more reliable support system.

please,

educate others.

Many survivors don't uncover their personal experiences because of the pain it brings up. It's important to make others aware that they may encounter a victim of gun violence at some point, even if they're not aware of it. Meaning people need to be conscious of how they treat gun violence in every capacity. Teaching those around you subtle ways of discussing a shooting and etiquette around triggers will ensure we are moving in the right direction as a society.

please,

call your representatives!

Voicing your opinions on gun control and telling representatives to take action is the best way to improve policies around this issue. You can find the number to call at the end of this book.



Things
to
Avoid

please, don't

romanticize it.

Too often people would say, "I saw you on The Today Show, that's so cool!" However, placing trauma on a pedestal for attention is disrespectful and detrimental to the survivor. Instead, acknowledge that you're sorry for what happened and let them know you're thinking of them.

please, don't

have a timeline for recovery.

My counselor told me that our body often disassociates from situations until we are mentally ready to handle them. That can take years. No matter how long it has been, the scar is still there. Be tender and mindful, and never tell them how they should feel, or when they should feel it.

please, don't

get frustrated when your loved one doesn't immediately go "back to normal."

They want to recover from the trauma, but that starts with acknowledging that it happened. It changes their life and their "normal" is naturally going to adapt afterwards.

please, don't

make it about you.

It's traumatic for everyone involved: the victim, the family, the friends and the community. It affects everyone differently, and everyone should process it and get the support they need. However, when talking to the immediate survivor, allow them to open up and primarily share their experience. Too often survivors can feel like their experience isn't valid enough, and it can become isolating.

please, don't

talk about the outcome of others who were involved in the event.

The news will cover the injuries and casualties, but that doesn't need to be discussed with the survivor. Their trauma is valid and they're hurting too, even if they weren't physically hurt in the attack. Discussing the event in detail can further feelings of survivor's guilt.

please, don't

overshare someone's trauma.

A few times in my process I have heard someone I trusted sharing intimate details of my aftermath with another person, simply saying "you seem fine now." There's a line between advocacy and oversharing, but if they are opening up about their emotions or struggles be mindful that they trust you.



please, don't

let them suffer alone.

Too many people are afraid to ask "how are you?" or bring their recovery up. Realistically, the event is always on the survivor's mind and they may not want to bring it up for fear of "burdening" the listener. Be willing to check in, ask how they're doing and make sure they know you're ready to listen whenever they're ready to talk.

Advocating

Advocacy is the most important and long-lasting task. You can do this by educating people when they are insensitive about the topic, even without the victim being present. Many people don't know about my situation, and that's OK. But having friends who informing people on how to treat the topic, no matter who they're around is a huge step in the right direction.

Trauma sends you into fight or flight mode, and it's easy to slip back into that when you are triggered, or are forced to think about the event. Do your best to be an advocate for those who are suffering.



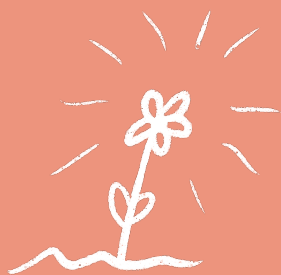
So many times friends would invite me out, but I would be suffering through a severe PTSD episode. It was nice to have someone I could tell my struggles to who could then voice it to the group without me being involved.

Advocates
also need
Self-Care

~Some
Concluding
Thoughts~

And finally,
Thank You.

Thank you for reading this and taking the time to be strong for those who can't be. For those who are still hurting and can't say thank you, I will. The work you're doing is so necessary.



Additional Resources

It's not expected that family and friends can do all of the work, and sometimes it's helpful to call a professional. There are many resources out there that want to help you and hear your story.

Helpful Numbers:

The Capitol Switchboard:
(202)-224-3121
(so you can call your
representatives!!)

National Suicide Prevention
Line:
1-800-273-8255

The Disaster Distress Helpline:
1-800-985-5990

My favorite book on learning to
grow from trials and trauma:
Tiny Beautiful Things by Cheryl
Strayed

Going

Forward
→

