The Handook

for survivors of gun violence

by Hannah Baggs

This is for you, Mom.
You are my rock and
I love you.

And this is for Survivors of any trauma You are not alone.

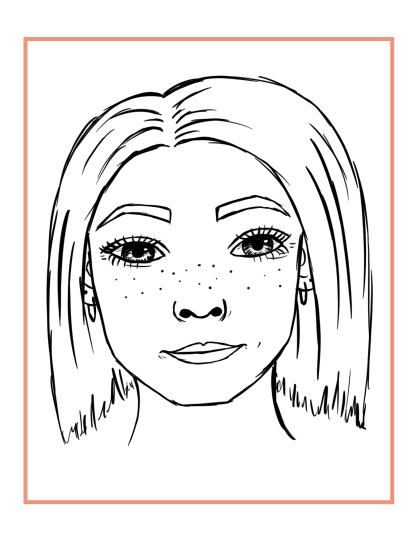
-Hannah

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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

I suppose I'll start with my story and why I took on this project: I was involved in a shooting when I was 14. Although I was untouched by the bullet, I was left traumatized and ultimately broken.

Being an outgoing kid, it was easy to tell something was wrong when I began to shut out the world after it happened.
Besides counseling, which I initially declined, I wasn't offered many resources after the incident.

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.



I want to emphasize that this book is based on my experience and the way that I process and relate to others. I have tried to include a variety of options and approaches, but I can only speak from my own experience.

Trauma is not a one-size-fits-all situation, and it takes time to learn how to best support those who are suffering.

There have been over

275,000

gun violence incidents in the United states between 2014 and 2018.*

 $^{^{}f \star}$ statistics from the Gun Violence Archive 2019

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.

Victims don't choose to experience trauma, but now are forced to deal with it. The road to recovery can seem daunting, and sometimes impossible. But this is where you, the support group comes in. Through these mindful tips you can be the rock that the survivor may need. Nobody needs to deal with trauma alone.

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.



Curvivors 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

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.

Everyone's situation is different, but the immediate shock can hold victims back from wanting to leave their house, communicate with anyone, or return to their routine. Running errands for them and creating a safe space, without pressure to open up right away, will help ease the transition from victim to survivor.



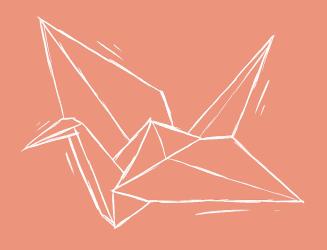
Things to do:

- 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

As time goes by you may want to encourage them to begin activities again, even if that just means picking up old hobbies that brought them joy. Just remember that we all move at different paces and nobody should be forced to jump back into anything that makes them uncomfortable or uneasy.





Post-traumatic tress lisorder (PTSO)

Many survivors will experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after the event. This can result in flashbacks, nightmares, disassociation from event or responsibilities, general anxiety, and other things.



Although the feelings and anxiety come and go PTSD is a valid and uncontrollable reality. There are many options for overcoming PTSD including counseling, therapy and medication. You can do your part by validating their feelings and reminding them that their reactions are natural.



There are many levels of PTSD, and it can manifest in many ways. When mine was at its worst I could see every detail of the attacker, often briefly seeing him in a crowd or when I was alone. However, other times I still experience it but only through anxious thoughts.

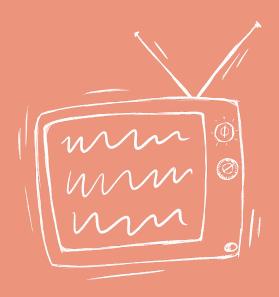


The quickest way to bring me back to that moment is through one of my triggers. It sends me directly into fight or flight mode, and can take awhile for my adrenaline rush to die down. The intensity of them fluctuates depending on the news, the season, my mental health, and other aspects of my life.

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.



When my PTSD was at its worst I couldn't even sit through an entire class without freezing and breaking into a cold sweat. I would get anxious whenever anyone unzipped their backpack or went to the bathroom for a few minutes. The thought of them coming back with a weapon would race through my head, completely distracting me from the task at hand.

What helped me was identifying friends that would leave class with me, give me water, help me breathe and wait with me until I was ready to go back.

Learning the details of your loved one's event can help you identify things that may upset them. Triggers can go beyond the immediate scenario and items in their event, so keep that in mind when the time comes to have a discussion about identifying triggers.

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Curvivors

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.

I found in my journal: "I feel guilty feeling bad because I got out alive, but it still really affects me emotionally. I don't think it should since I'm alive after it. I should be happy" Wrestling with these thoughts has helped me realize the impact this event had on me, and allow me to grow from it.

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.

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I am grateful I had the distance to do this with my counselor because I felt guilty sharing such upsetting thoughts with those closest to me. However, what I did appreciate was that my most trusted friends would ask me after my counseling meetings if I wanted to talk about it, and although I would say no the first few times, eventually I opened up.

Sharing these feelings with them has allowed me to continue tackling those questions with people who know me better.

Spending time with the survivor and letting them know they are loved can help them come to terms with their reality. Allow them to struggle with the question "why," as it will help them overcome the event, but ensure they do this in a safe place and can decompress as well.

Short-term
Johns 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.

Some of these include:

- Not eating
- Not sleeping
- Not leaving the house, or isolating oneself from the world
- Abandoning responsibilities
- Emotional disassociation
- Obsessing over news coverage of similar events

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.



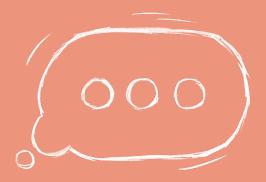
Things to Focus On

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,

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.



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.



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.



Mings

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.

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.

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.



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 CH

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.

Alvocates also need Seff-Care If you are supporting someone who is dealing with such immense pain it's going to take a toll on you. Being their rock is important, but it's also exhausting. Make sure you take care of yourself. Seek counseling if it becomes too much, and make sure you show up for yourself as well.

Some Concluding
Thoughts~

I want to thank everyone who has helped me write this book. Thank you to my friends and family who did support me after the event and to those who encouraged me to use my experience to impact and support others.

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 Joing

This book was only able to include my perspective and experience, but I would love to expand upon this topic and include the journey of others. If you or someone you know has been involved in a trauma, or want to share your story please reach out via email or Instagram at the following:

thehandbookstories@gmail.com @thehandbookstories

There are thousands of people who have been victims but are now survivors. It's time we share our stories and change the conversation around gun violence.

