

How to Find Long-Term Healing as a Sexual Assault Survivor

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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RIVERBEND - Sexual assault/abuse is all too common. While the ER is a good place to go immediately after an assault to treat physical wounds, sexual assault and [domestic violence survivors](#) usually have emotional or mental wounds that need attention, too.

In the weeks, months and years following an assault, it can be difficult to process what happened or move forward without proper support. Therapists, support groups and loved ones can help you through this. There are also advocates who are specially trained to support survivors in the immediate aftermath of an assault.

What advocacy groups are near me?

Sometimes you aren't sure what help you need; you just know you can't do it by yourself. This is when an advocate can step in to help you through the process of going to the ER, reporting an assault to the police or finding resources to support long-term recovery. Many of these groups also offer counseling or support group services. Ultimately, you don't have to do this by yourself.

Based in Vandalia, Sexual Assault and Family Emergencies (SAFE) is a group that provides medical and legal advocacy. They are available 24/7 to sit with you in the ER or stay with you during the evidence collection process. If you choose to file charges, they can also talk you through this process or help you with some of the filing and transportation needs you might face. SAFE also provides counseling services completely free of charge, regardless of how long ago the abuse or assault occurred. For more information about SAFE, their services and the counties they serve, [visit SAFECrisisCenter.org](https://www.safe-crisis-center.org).

In St. Louis, Safe Connections provides counseling and support group services to people ages 12 and up who have experienced sexual assault/abuse, domestic violence or sex trafficking. They offer several group services depending on what your needs are, as well as 24/7 crisis services. Check out [SafeConnections.org](https://www.safeconnections.org) for more information.

There are several more services and resources available throughout the country. Visit [Centers.RAINN.org](https://www.centers.rainn.org) to find a center near you.

How do I heal long-term?

[Beth Ahlin, LCPC](#), breaks down some of the key things a survivor should know about how to heal. Ahlin explained that there is a difference between prolonged exposure to trauma and an isolated traumatic event. Prolonged exposure is considered “complex” trauma, but that doesn't mean an isolated event, like an assault, is “simple.” In fact, Ahlin urges people not to think of trauma as comparative at all.

“I think people think of traumas like ‘Big T, little t.’ Like, ‘I only qualify for trauma if I have a Big T event, like I was sexually assaulted or I survived a natural disaster or I went to war.’ People think of those as Big T trauma situations,” she explained. “I think part of it is undoing the idea that trauma happens on a hierarchy. People believe, ‘Oh, I don't qualify as traumatized because my trauma didn't look like this formulaic traumatic experience.’ Trauma is different for everybody.”

But Ahlin speaks with a lot of people who believe they don't deserve therapy or healing because the traumatic event wasn't “bad enough.” This thought process can come from a number of places, but Ahlin said she often sees critical self-talk in clients who have sat with a trauma for a long time.

Ahlin tells people to think of trauma like tar. The longer you sit in it, the more time it has to sink in and the deeper it goes. This can mean therapy takes longer or you are more affected by the symptoms of trauma when compared to someone who begins therapy right away. While it can be a difficult decision to start therapy, join a support group or otherwise reach out for help, this is why Ahlin encourages people to do so as soon as they can.

“If you have a sexual assault and you wait a year or more to get into therapy, that trauma, that inner critical voice that plays a role in that as well, all of that’s had time to really sink in and take a hold of you,” she said. “So by the time you get into therapy, there’s just a lot more work to be done to undo a lot of what’s kind of already set in.”

What if therapy isn’t for me?

While Ahlin encourages therapy as a way to heal, she said that the top advice she can give is to find support and connection. How you do this is up to you, but she noted that it can be helpful to work with a therapist or support group to “fill that gap” if needed. But ultimately, connection is one of the most helpful ways to heal from any traumatic event, including sexual assault.

“There is really no one-size-fits-all answer or solution, so to speak,” Ahlin said. “Therapy can be super helpful, support groups can be super helpful, just general support. I guess I can say the one-size-fits-all solution is connection. We need other people. We need deep, strong, loving, empathetic connections with other people in order to heal and feel whole again...However you fill that gap, that is the way to healing, is being in connection to other people. Being seen, being heard by other people.”

Call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673 for more help and resources. Remember, surviving a sexual assault feels lonely, but you are not alone.