

# Survivor Guide

**A Toolkit for Sexual Assault Survivors  
and their Loved Ones**



**FAMILY SERVICES**  
SUPPORTING TULARE COUNTY

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# Introduction

Welcome to the Survivor Guide curated by Family Services of Tulare County. This toolkit is intended for sexual assault survivors, their loved ones, and anyone who cares for a survivor.

**If this is an emergency, call 9-1-1.**

If you need to talk to someone and it is a non-emergency, please call our 24-Hour Sexual Assault Hotline at 559-732-7273.

Your safety is of the utmost importance. We want you to be absolutely comfortable and in a safe environment.

In this toolkit, you will find tips for survivors, coping, self-care tips, and resources. For friends, family, or those who would like to help, you will find what to say and what actions to take in present moments, and how to further support survivors in their healing.

We are proud of you for being here, no matter where you are in your journey. The experience you've lived and the feelings you have are valid, accepted, and should be listened to. We hope you can find some peace of mind while reading this.

# What is SA?

Sexual assault (SA) is any forced, coerced, or unwanted sexual contact. It can include but is not limited to rape, child sexual abuse, incest, sexual exploitation and trafficking, sexual harassment, sexual threats, sexual assault by intimate partners, and other forms of unwelcomed, coerced, or non-consensual acts.

## How do I know if I'm a victim?

It may be hard to define exactly what has happened. You don't have to be technical with your assault and you don't have to narrow it down to justify feeling assaulted. If you are unsure if you were assaulted, you can consider these questions:

- Was there force or coercion?
- Was it unwanted?
- Was it non-consensual?
- Was I emotionally or psychologically forced? Examples of these include threats and verbal abuse.
- Were you incapacitated by the use of alcohol or drugs?

A yes to any of these questions indicates this might be an act of sexual assault.

The most important factor to consider is consent. Consent means everyone involved is in agreement to participate in sexual activity.

Remember, you also have the right to change your mind or revoke consent at any time. Consenting to one sexual act does not mean you consent to all or future acts and just because you consented today doesn't mean you consent tomorrow. Communication is key in consent, this can be verbal or physical cues.

Sexual Assault is more common than most people think. The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) estimates that 433,684 people in the United States are sexually assaulted every year. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, an American is sexually assaulted every 73 seconds, and one out of every six women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime.

# What to do after you've been sexually assaulted

## **1. Find safety.**

After an assault, you might be in a state of shock. Your body and mind are trying to comprehend what happened to you and the last thing you'll want to do is critically think about your next step. The best thing to do first to find physical stability and safety.

Find your way to your local hospital, police station, or the home of a loved one. Find someone who will listen to you and help you get where you need to go. If you feel you don't have a place to turn to, please reach out to our confidential hotline.

### **Family Services' 24-hour Rape Crisis Hotline**

Visalia: 559-732-7273 or Porterville: 559-784-7273

## **2. Find medical care and supportive resources.**

Not wanting to seek medical attention because of shame, embarrassment, anger or shock is completely understandable and valid. You may be feeling a lot of different things and it can be difficult to go through this.

Thinking of filing a police report can be intimidating. However, if you are unsure or not interested in reporting, seeking medical attention is encouraged and an option. You may want to check in with your medical provider to ensure your body is medically sound, free of internal injuries, and get tested for sexually transmitted infections. If you have injuries and/or concerns that need immediate medical attention we recommend you to go to the nearest hospital.

If you experience sexual assault, you may want to consider a sexual assault medical forensic exam. We know how hard it is to logically think about the next steps, but in case you decide later to file a police report and seek criminal justice, an exam may help. The window for being tested is often 72 hours or less. For more information, please call our hotline.

We suggest that you do not drink, eat, shower, go to the bathroom, clean yourself, or change clothes. You might destroy important physical evidence in the process. We understand how hard it is to not want to immediately wash away the attack, but this is crucial if you proceed with legal action. If you want to change clothes, take them with you in a paper bag to the hospital or police station.

## **3. Decide if you want to make a police report.**

It may be hard to decide whether to file a report of sexual assault with law enforcement. Victims often struggle with the idea of legal action and the feelings that come with it. There can be several benefits to filing a report but ultimately it is your decision. To make a report, call the police department where the crime occurred or go to the police station in person.

In California, a person may file a claim within 10 years from the date of the incident if they are an adult. If the victim is or was a child when the incident occurred, the victim has until they are 40 years old to file charges.

# Coping Tips For Survivors

**Remember, this is not your fault. You are not to blame. You didn't do and are not doing anything wrong. You are not responsible for someone else's actions.**

You are the owner of your body. Only you can make decisions for it, and only you can consent or accept any sexual activity. You are in control of your own sexual behavior, who you want to be intimate with, and how.

Survivors deserve time to heal, compassion, and support. We want to highlight a few things you can remember to do or use for reassurance in your healing process.

## **Your feelings are valid.**

Allow yourself to feel it all. Welcome in everything you feel and have felt. Many survivors feel uncertainty, anger, anxiety, caution, unsafe, and sadness. Allow yourself to recognize these feelings. They deserve to be acknowledged.

## **Find your support network.**

There are times when you might feel very alone in your journey. Reach out to those who bring you a sense of comfort and safety. Stay connected to someone that can provide a safe space, free of judgment. Community is very important in recovery.

## **Practice self-care.**

Take steps to feel healthy and comfortable, physically and emotionally. Self-care can help you cope with the effects of trauma. It can help you regain a sense of control and body autonomy. Work on your sleeping, eating, and physical activity. Creating a routine for yourself to add a bit of exercise and getting enough sleep every day can help you.

Emotionally, you want to find what works for you. When was the last time you felt balanced and grounded? Try doing activities that will help recreate those feelings for you. Everyone's form of self-care is different. Some things that you can try are journaling, meditating, creative hobbies, or any leisure activities. Your community and support system can also be a part of your self-care.

## **Rest.**

The recovery process can be emotionally and physically exhausting. Make sure you take the time to rest.

# Dealing with Triggers

A trigger is something that can pull you back into a previous traumatic event. The idea, thing, or phrase itself doesn't necessarily have to be anything that directly reminds you of the past trauma. It can be something environmental like a smell, sound, an image, or an emotion or memory. A trigger can cause you to dissociate, or freeze up. They can make you recount the feelings you felt during the incident and make you feel anxious and unsafe. In order to regain your sense of safety and clarity after a trigger, you have to tell your nervous system that you are safe again. Here are a few ways to cope with triggers:

## **Breath Work**

Focusing on deep breathing may help to regain the sense of relaxation and your sense of control. Diaphragmatic breathing is highly recommended when you're feeling anxiety. This is deep breathing from the diaphragm instead of your chest. Place one hand on your stomach and one on your chest, Inhale from your abdomen and count to 5. The hand on your stomach will move while the hand on your chest will stay in place. Pause for 5 seconds and then exhale through your mouth. As you focus on counting you will start to feel grounded.

## **Self-Soothing**

Using the five senses, touch, taste, smell, sight, and sound, to soothe yourself during a trigger can be very helpful. One of the best ways to feel grounded and get relief is to use your touch. Taking a warm bath or going for a swim to let your body touch water is a great way to unwind. You can try to feel the surroundings around you like the softness of a sweater, the fuzzy fur of a pet, or the plushness of a pillow.

## **Being in the Moment**

You can remind yourself that you are past the trauma you've just been pulled back into. Locate yourself by saying the date and where you are. Sometimes it helps to point out the people you are with as well.

## **Creative Activities and Hobbies**

Sometimes after taking deep breaths, self-soothing, and pulling yourself back into the moment it helps to continue on and do a little more. Try journaling or reading a book; sometimes it helps to dive back into our hobbies. It's a great way to remind yourself that you are more than just a survivor.

It's also okay to receive help in your recovery process. A mental health professional can help you address your triggers head-on.

**If you'd like information on counseling and support groups, please call 559-732-7371. We can give you information on all the services we have to offer and get you started.**

# How to Support Survivors of Sexual Assault

It can be difficult to know what to say when a close friend or relative confides in us about their experience. Rape or sexual assault is a traumatic experience, and sadly, there is a high chance we will know or already know someone who has experienced it. Here are a few tips on what to say and how to be supportive of someone who tells you their SA story:

## **Hold space.**

Holding space means you are emotionally, physically, and mentally there for someone. You are 100% there to support them and their feelings. This helps them feel safer. Remember, this moment is not about us; we want to acknowledge them fully. Keep your own issues and experiences separate from this moment.

## **Listen.**

Become that safe space they need. Remind them that they are safe and not alone. You are there for them and believe everything they say. Listen and focus on their feelings. Allow them to express themselves fully.

## **Don't try to fix it.**

Withhold the urge to try to fix everything. Sometimes hearing that someone hurt our friend or loved one can make us want to solve the problem, but this makes it about us and takes the focus away from them.

Maintain confidentiality. If the victim is an adult, it is not your responsibility to report or tell someone else. Let them know that you will keep this information with you and protect their privacy. As an adult, it is only their decision to decide whether to report or not. When it comes to a minor, reporting is necessary to ensure the child's safety.

*Please see page 11 for more information on child sexual abuse and reporting.*

## **Never blame them for what happened.**

Become that judgment-free zone they need and reassure them that it is not their fault. Unfortunately, victim blaming is a severe problem and part of the reason many victims do not come forth with their stories.

## **Stay calm.**

It can be tough to take in this information. Try to pay attention to your own body language, stay relaxed, and take deep breaths. Monitor your feelings and thoughts while you listen to them. It is important to know how your reaction can impact the person disclosing this information to you.



**Offer to join them for self-care and be their ongoing support.**

Staying in communication with a group of supportive people can greatly help in recovery. Offer to join in on some self-care activities and stay connected. Having someone around for support during a critical time is really important. It reassures them that they are not alone and that closer bonds can form. Let them know you will always be there for them.

**Help your friend connect to support resources.**

It's always a great idea to keep up to date on the services and resources available to survivors. Family Services has several ways to not only help your loved one but also to help you. Reach out to Family Services to find out more about our services. All of our contact information is listed on the last page of this toolkit.

**Ask before you touch them.**

Ask before offering them physical support, such as a hug or holding their hand.

## Phrases to Practice

<b>Don't Say</b>	<b>Do Say</b>
Are you sure? Really?	I believe you
Why were you out so late?	I'm here for you
Why didn't you tell me?	How can I support you?
What were you wearing?	It's not your fault
Boys will be boys	Do you need me to take you somewhere?
You have to report it!	I'm so sorry this happened to you
Did you call the police?	You are not alone
You were both drinking	Can I help you find ways to report?
Did you lead them on?	I will support you in any way you need
You have to tell me!	Can I find you some resources and services?

# How to Support as a Survivor

If you are a survivor of sexual assault, supporting other survivors can bring up a variety of feelings. If a friend or loved one comes to you for support dealing with SA, make sure to be honest and maintain your own boundaries.

## **Remember:**

- Think about what you can and can't do. Offer to help them find other resources in case you can't hold space for them at that moment.
- Deep breaths. To avoid triggers keep yourself centered and in the moment.
- Be honest. We want them to know this is their moment, but sometimes it can be hard for us in our own journeys of healing.
- Take breaks. Let them know they are not too much or overwhelming, you just need a moment to gather yourself.

**Remember, you are more than just a survivor.**



# Child Sexual Abuse

It can be extremely difficult when a child you care for has been or you think is being sexually abused or assaulted. Here are a few steps to take when it comes to child sexual abuse.

## **What is child sexual abuse?**

Child sexual abuse is abuse that takes form in any sexual activity with a minor. Children cannot consent to any form of sexual activity. Child sexual abuse can include both physical and non-physical elements. Abuse can be fondling, exposing oneself to a child, masturbation in presence of a child, sexually explicit phone calls, messaging or digital interaction including pornographic images, intercourse, sex trafficking, or any other sexual activity with a child that will harm them physically, mentally, and emotionally.

## **Warning Signs for Child Sexual Abuse**

Here are a few warning signs to look for in a child:

- Seems distracted
- Has nightmares or trouble sleeping
- Writes about or draws frightening sexual images
- Has trouble eating, swallowing, or refuses to eat
- Exhibits adult-like sexual behaviors or adult-like speech
- Has trouble in school
- Bed wetting
- Is threatened by physical contact

## **Physical warning signs:**

- Pain, itching, burning, or bruising in private areas
- Difficulty walking or standing
- Pain during urination or bowel movements

If you recognize warning signs the first step is to make a plan to begin a conversation with a child. You want to create a safe, non-hostile environment. Pick a time and place that is comfortable for them to freely speak to you. Keep it casual and watch your tone. When you ask them questions you will want to keep it casual and direct. Remember, avoid judgment and blame, and keep reassuring.

We know these are really difficult times, and you don't have to go through them alone.

### **How do I help as a parent?**

You may experience many emotions. It's ok to feel anger, sadness, or guilt about what has happened. Give yourself the space to recognize your own feelings.

A child is going to feel some of the same feelings older people do. Younger children may not have the vocabulary to explain what happened or the knowledge to fully grasp the situation.

Give them a safe space and reassure them that they are loved. Be warm and empathetic and have a meaningful conversation. Remind them that it is not their fault. Give the child the space they need to talk. You may feel like asking for every detail, but emphasize how they are feeling in the moment.

**Reporting:** Contact the authorities immediately after your child has disclosed the sexual abuse. This is an important step to protect them from further harm or any form of contact with the person who assaulted them. To make a report, call the police department where the crime occurred or go to the police station in person.

### **How do I help as a teacher or professional caregiver?**

Teachers and professional caregivers are mandated reporters. This means they are obligated to report any child abuse or neglect they reasonably suspect. If you are a teacher or professional caregiver, you should make a report to your local child welfare agency as soon as possible by telephone and prepare a written report soon after.

### **Tulare County Child Welfare Services**

**24 hours a day, 7 days a week**

**1-800-331-1585**

For adults that are not in a professional setting where you have a disclosure, it is recommended to contact both your local law enforcement and county child welfare agency to make a report.

# Contact Us

## Family Services of Tulare County

Family Services is an independent, nonprofit organization with the mission is to help children, adults, and families throughout Tulare County heal from violence and thrive in healthy relationships.

While our program areas are broad, physical and emotional safety are the common threads that tie together everything we do. We build safety in homes, in relationships, and for children through informed and compassionate care that helps people heal from trauma. And when we have safe homes, safe relationships, and safe children, we have a safer community where everyone can thrive.

### General Phone

Programs: 559-741-7310 | Administration/Donor Relations: 559-732-1970

### Mailing Address

P.O.Box 429 | Visalia, CA 93279

## Sexual Assault Services

Family Services' Rape Crisis Center provides 24-hour crisis response and comprehensive, trauma-informed services to adults and children who have been victims of rape, sexual assault, child sexual abuse, and human trafficking. Services include emotional support, counseling, case management, personal and criminal justice advocacy, court accompaniment, and trauma-informed yoga. All services are confidential, and you don't have to report to law enforcement to receive services.

### Phone

Rape Crisis Center: 559-732-7371 | 24-Hour Sexual Assault Hotline: 559-732-7273

### Physical Address for Walk-In Services

1011 W. Center | Visalia, CA

## Domestic Violence Services

### Phone

24-hour Domestic Violence Hotline: 559-732-5941

### Online Chat with an Advocate

You can chat privately with a trained domestic violence advocate Monday-Friday, 8 a.m.-5 p.m., Pacific Standard Time. Chat is available in Spanish and English. Visit [fstc.net/help](https://www.fstc.net/help) to get started.



# FAMILY SERVICES

SUPPORTING TULARE COUNTY



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