

A Health Care Guide for Survivors of Domestic and Sexual Violence

Abuse can have unexpected effects for survivors, even after the violence has stopped. If you've survived domestic or sexual violence some everyday activities – like visiting the nurse or doctor may now be difficult.

You're not alone. Many survivors of abuse find that seeing a healthcare provider can be anxiety producing.

Going to the clinic can be hard because the staff may seem rushed, or unaware of how vulnerable it can feel – this makes it difficult to connect and feel safe.

There are steps you can take to make medical visits easier and help you become more involved in your own healthcare. But first, let's look briefly at some of the impacts of abuse and why they might make this so challenging.

Why is going to my doctor or nurse so hard for me?

Having a loved one be violent towards you may also be psychologically traumatic. We may use a variety of coping strategies to survive the emotional pain: we may distance ourselves, minimize the experience, avoid thinking about it, and even sometimes deny to ourselves that what we are experiencing is painful. These ways of coping sometimes make survival possible. However, they can also become a routine way of thinking, or handling difficult situations, even when we no longer need them.

Health care settings like waiting rooms can be stressful and hectic and some procedures can leave us feeling vulnerable or remind us of the violence that we've survived. Language or other cultural differences between you and your provider may also complicate your ability to understand or connect with each other.

What can I do to make my nurse/doctor visits easier?

Tell them about the abuse

If you feel comfortable with your provider, let them know that you are a survivor of violence. Explain how you think the violence has affected your health. You may want to discuss any untreated injuries, un-prescribed medications, possible exposure to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unplanned pregnancies, and ways in which you might have coped through use of drugs or alcohol. Your health care provider can then help you consider ways to address these concerns.

Trust your instincts during this discussion. If you feel scolded or in other ways judged by the nurse or doctor, they may not be the health care professional for you. The relationship between you and your health care provider should have open and caring lines of communication in order for you to feel comfortable being honest with them and relying on their help.

Take charge of the visit

Having control over your appointment can make it easier for you. Ask your nurse or doctor if you could change your visit to give you more control. If you don't know what to ask for consider this trauma-informed healthcare approach:

1. Meet with your doctor or nurse to discuss the reason for the visit and discuss how the appointment will proceed step-by-step
2. Your provider leaves and you get undressed for the physical exam.
3. During the exam, your doctor/nurse waits for your approval before every step. For example, the doctor might say, "Now I'm going to lift your gown and push hard on your abdomen, OK?" You indicate whether or not it is OK to proceed. If the exam can't be completed, the two of you decide whether to reschedule it and discuss ways in which the procedure might be made easier, if possible.
4. After the exam is completed, you have the option of getting dressed again before discussing possible next steps with the doctor.
5. To the extent possible, you receive written follow-up information, diagnoses, and next steps.

Change these steps if needed so that they feel most comfortable for you.

Ask someone to come with you

Have a friend go with you to your appointment. They can sit in the exam room with you just for support, hold your hand during painful procedures, or be the designated note taker so you can remember and review the details of the appointment later. Sometimes it's important to note that many health care providers will want to meet with you alone during some part of the exam. At this point you can ask your friend or support to step outside but let the provider know that during the exam you would like your friend present.

After your medical appointment

Take some time after your appointment to reflect on how it went. Write in a journal on your own or sit with your friend or support person and discuss your appointment. Consider how it felt and what you learned. Did you feel comfortable with your health care provider's approach? Do you understand the results of your visit and your next steps? Do you feel your provider listened to you and took the time to help you understand your options? This time and thought can help you relax, plan, and stay on track when it comes to caring for yourself.

These free confidential hotlines are available 24 hours a day with access to language interpreters. Some of the websites offer hosted chats:

National Domestic Violence Hotline 800-799-SAFE (800-799-7233) www.thehotline.org

National Dating Abuse Helpline 866-331-9474 www.loveisrespect.org

National Sexual Assault Helpline 800-656-HOPE (800-656-4673) www.rainn.org

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline '1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)