



LIVE LIFE TOGETHER.

DOING LIFE WITH ADULT
SURVIVORS OF SEX
TRAFFICKING

Written by Survivor Hope Doe



A LETTER FROM HOPE

Thank you for taking the time to learn how you can be a friend, a mentor, or an advocate for a survivor of sex trafficking in America.

I know it isn't always easy to step into someone else's pain. I know our stories are traumatizing, shocking, and downright terrifying.

But by listening to our stories you are choosing to acknowledge that we never asked to endure the darkest parts of humanity, and we crave friendships, community, and support, just like everyone else.

When I finally escaped my trafficker, I was lost, broken, alone, and afraid. Sometimes I still am. But then I am reminded that there are people who care about me, who support me, and who value me for me.

I also understand that it isn't always easy and that you probably need some direction on how to help support a survivor in times of crisis, so I put together this guide.

I hope you find it helpful. I hope you understand that you are part of our healing journey. Thank you for reminding us that we have value, dignity, and worth.

Your friend,
Hope





LIVE LIFE TOGETHER

“A real friend is one who walks in when the rest of the world walks out.”

- Walter Winchell

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SUPPORTIVE FRIENDSHIPS.

We all want to be in community. We all desire deep connections with other people, but when doing life with an adult survivor of sex trafficking that can mean learning new skills that will help you be a better friend to an individual who has experienced trauma. This guide is meant to help you understand how you can be a friend, a support, and a confidant for an adult survivor of sex trafficking.



HELPFUL

Let them vent.

Sometimes people just need to vent. The same is true for survivors. It may not always be trauma related. Sometimes the day to day stressors can become overwhelming to survivors who are also trying to deal with trauma. Just having a safe person to come to is helpful.

Tell them you believe them and what happened to them was not their fault.

This may seem simple. It may seem like a no brainer to you. It isn't that simple for survivors. Even for survivors who have worked on this extensively in therapy, bad days happen and this is always helpful to hear. Shame, guilt, and self-doubt are things that can come creeping up on survivors when they least expect it. Remind them you believe them. Remind them it wasn't their fault. Do it often and sincerely.

Ask what triggers them.

Knowing what their triggers are will help you be prepared if the survivor gets triggered. In some cases, different triggers will have different reactions, so becoming familiar with what they are can help you calm the survivor when they do get triggered. Please note that survivors often do not know all of their triggers and may not always be able to tell you what they are. Ask them what helps them when they are triggered. Do NOT touch a survivor who is triggered unless you have previously discussed with them that that is helpful. Some survivors are able to ground themselves (come out of the trigger) quicker if they are touched. Some survivors will become more triggered if you touch them. Some survivors have a specific song that is grounding to them. Some survivors carry a comfort item with them. Some survivors will ask that you just speak with them when they are triggered. If the survivor is unsure of what helps them when they are triggered, be open to trying things with them to see what helps.



HELPFUL

Encourage them to seek professional help.

As much as you care about and want to support the survivor in your life, you are not a professional. You are not responsible for processing their trauma or helping them overcome their history. Supporting them can help exponentially, but it is not a substitute for professional help. Discuss this honestly and gently with the survivor in your life. Stress that you are bringing it up because you care about them and you want the best for them. If finding a professional feels daunting or overwhelming for the survivor, you can help them find resources and narrow down lists of providers. Anti-trafficking organizations and domestic violence shelters often have lists of trauma informed and trauma specializing therapists.

Look up triggers in movies/TV shows before watching them.

This is something simple and helpful that can go a long way in reminding the survivor that you care about their well-being and helping them stay away from things that trigger them. You can find this information with a simple Google search of “*movie title* trigger warning.” The Parent’s Guide available on IMDb is also very helpful for listing things that could commonly trigger survivors. Understand that things that are helpful coming from another survivor may not be helpful coming from you. There are things that are okay coming from someone who understands that may not be okay coming from you. Things like “you’re overreacting” and “that’s in the past” are not helpful coming from someone who isn’t a survivor. Another survivor can truly understand the magnitude of these statements in relation to the trauma of trafficking and they have unique knowledge that someone who isn’t a survivor may not have.



HELPFUL

Set healthy boundaries.

It is okay to let a survivor know if you are feeling overwhelmed or unsure how to help them. It is okay to let a survivor know that there may be certain times that you are not available to them. It is okay to talk to a survivor if you think they are crossing your boundaries and it's okay to establish new boundaries as the relationship changes or new issues arise. Be gentle but firm. Assure them that you still care about them and you still want to be there for them, but that you need the boundary you are putting into place. It is not helpful to you or the survivor to have boundaries that exhaust or overwhelm you. It is okay to ask for space. It is okay to ask the survivor to not talk about their trafficking with you for a while. It is of the utmost importance that you are open and upfront with the survivor about your boundaries.

HURTFUL

Do not ask for specific details.

Depending on the emotional state of the survivor that is speaking with you, do not ask any questions. If the survivor you're speaking with appears emotionally stable and calm, it is okay to ask for more information, but at no point should you ask for details of the violence.

Do not compare what they're telling you with your personal experience.

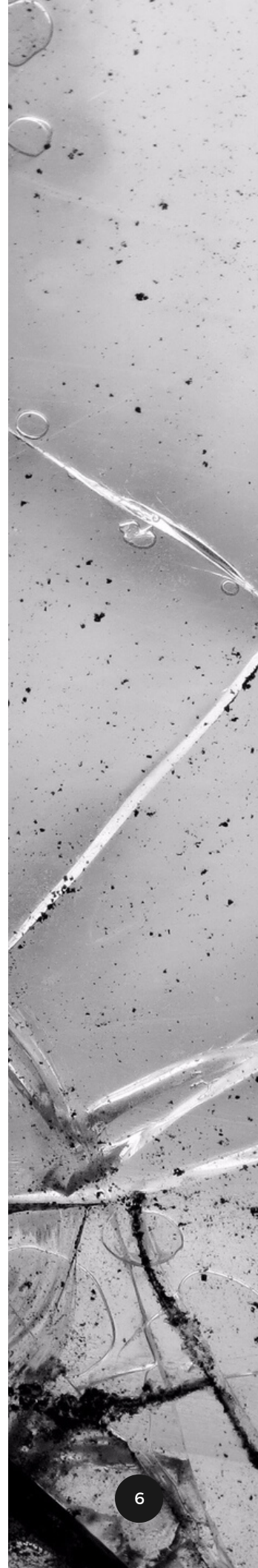
This can come across as dismissive or minimizing of their trauma. You may be trying to have empathy, but that is not how it comes across. Do not say that you understand unless you have also been trafficked. You do not understand. Even with the best intentions of saying this, you do not understand unless you have been there. And there will be things the survivor cannot explain that you will not be able to understand if you have never been there. It's a habit and it will be tempting. Don't do it.

Do not tell anyone else.

The survivor trusted you with their story. Not anyone else. When you tell a survivor's story to someone without their permission, you are breaking their trust and making it harder for them to trust others in the future. For exceptions to this rule, see Crisis Intervention.

Do not flippantly use the word "triggered."

This social media and news media trend has been damaging to survivors, most of which suffer from severe PTSD. Do not use the word "triggered" unless you are speaking about reliving aspects of trauma (not limited to sex trafficking, many people have lived traumatic events and experience triggers). It does not mean upset or offended. Many individuals have experienced various types of trauma, which causes them to develop triggers, a serious mental health symptom. It is important to take triggers seriously, as they are a harsh reality for survivors.



HURTFUL

Do not make jokes about prostitutes, porn actors/actresses, or other sex workers.

If the survivor you are supporting does not identify as belonging to one of these groups (though many of them will,) they may still have people in these groups that they consider friends, that they worry about, and that they wonder every day if they are still safe and alive. Don't make jokes about people they care about.

Do not tell them “that’s not who you are anymore.”

Many survivors have deep-seeded identity issues. They do not want to be defined by their past. They do not want to identify with it. But for many, healing identity issues takes a lot of time, work, and professional help. It is not as simple as walking away and becoming someone new immediately. We wish it were. Instead, try reminding them who they are now.

Do not have expectations of how fast they should heal.

Healing is not linear. No matter the trauma, people heal at different rates. This is true for survivors of sex trafficking, too. It is unfair to expect a survivor to “get over it” on a certain schedule. It doesn't matter if they've been out of the life for 5 years or 50. Healing will take all the time the survivor needs it to take. They will hit plateaus. They will backslide. They will feel overwhelmed and want to quit. None of this means that they are not healing. Give them time.

I WISH YOU KNEW

These are thoughts that survivors offered when asked what they wish the people around them knew. They aren't true to every survivor, but can provide insight into some of the fears they face.

"YOU ARE THE FIRST PERSON WHO EVER LOOKED AT ME LIKE AN EQUAL."

- My body is still out there in pornography and people might recognize me from it. I live in fear of that every day.
- I have seen and done things that normal people can't even handle hearing about.
- I hate myself a lot.
- What I went through still hurts me today, even if I seem okay.
- Time does not take away the trauma.
- I am haunted by what I went through every single day, even though it's been 13 years.
- It is still fresh in my mind after all this time, like it just happened yesterday.
- Even when I'm distracted or having fun, it's still there, in the background of my thoughts.
- I can tell you're shocked, even if you try to hide it.
- I'm always scared you will leave me once I tell you.
- I'm afraid you will think less of me for what happened to me.
- It's easier for me to go through this alone than to have one more person not believe me.
- I need you to tell me you believe me. I told seven people before anyone believed me.
- I just want you to treat me like a normal person.
- Sometimes I wonder if there is something inherently wrong with me because I can't get over what happened to me.
- I'm afraid all I'm good for is what happened to me.
- Sometimes I can't tell if the way I'm feeling is how a normal person feels.
- I just want to know you're going to stay.
- If I don't give you a reason, it's something I think might be more than you can handle.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How often do I reach out?

This depends on the personality of the survivor and where you are in your relationship with them. If you talk to them every day and all the sudden stop hearing from them, reach out. If they seem to be struggling more or have voiced being in a tough spot, reach out more. If they voice that they are afraid they're bothering you, reach out more. As long as the survivor is not in crisis, reach out as much as you feel comfortable.

Talk to the survivor about it. Ask them if every day is too often, if they would prefer once a week. Ask them if there are certain times they struggle more. If there are, reach out more during those times. This could be a certain time of year, a holiday, or even a specific time of day.

If the survivor is first reaching out to you, it may be a good idea to check in with them every couple of days. Remind them that you're there if they need you, ask them how they're doing that day, and just have a normal conversation with them. If this is too often, you can adjust as necessary. Be willing to adapt to what is best for both of you.

How persistent should I be when reaching out?

If you are used to regular correspondence, a survivor disappears on you, and then does not answer your messages, it is okay to send them another text. Voice that you are concerned and you are just checking in to make sure that they are okay. Do not spam them with messages, call them repeatedly, or begin asking others if they have heard from them.

If the survivor is answering messages, but is doing so in a manner that is unusual for them, it is okay to ask if something is up. It is okay to point out that they are acting differently than usual and ask if there is anything they'd like to talk about.

Remember the survivor is allowed to say no. They are allowed to not want to share what is going on with you. They do not have to talk to you if they are not ready or do not want to.

Remember that the survivor may need space. They may be struggling with something. They may just be doing something away from their phone. They are not obligated to answer your messages.

Please note, this does not apply to crisis situations. For that, please see the Crisis Intervention section.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

When does helping move into enabling?

When you find yourself regularly doing things for them that they could do for themselves, you are probably enabling them.

Part of being a survivor is learning the balance of being independent and also allowing people to help. You may be trying to help a survivor who is completely unreceptive of your help. You may have a survivor who feels completely incapable of taking care of themselves and relies on you for everything.

Here are a few examples of help without enabling:

- A survivor is unemployed and struggles to buy groceries. Instead of buying them groceries every week and bringing them to them, you could help them apply for food stamps. From there, you could go to the grocery store with them if that is something that is hard for them. You could help them budget the money they have to last the amount of time it needs to. You could share some of your favorite recipes with them, and ask what some of theirs are.
- A survivor calls you several nights a week in a panic. This has been happening for months, and you are starting to feel worn down by it, but you still want to support them as much as you can. You should help them find professional help, because this level of anxiety is more than someone who is not a professional can handle. If calling to talk to you helps calm their panic, you could suggest they write to you instead, and they can tell you about it later. You can talk to them about what constitutes an emergency, and ask that they only call you after a specific time if it's an emergency. Make sure that you enforce the boundaries that you put in place.
- A survivor has recently gotten in trouble at their job for consistently being late. Their car recently broke down, and they are not willing to let anyone help. They assure you that they are fine and they do not need help, but you know that if they continue to be late, they will lose their job. You could offer to take them somewhere so they can rent a car while theirs is in the shop. You can offer to call them in the mornings before their shifts to make sure they get up in time to make it to work. You could honestly and openly discuss with them that you know they struggle with accepting help, but it's okay to need other people and that does not make them any less strong or independent.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How do you know what to do to help adult survivors get stronger and more independent without pulling the rug out from under them?

The things survivors need to be able to be independent often come in the form of meeting basic needs. Helping a survivor meet those needs helps them become independent. Often, survivors have been arrested for their role as a victim of sex trafficking. Upon rescue or escape, either directly from the life or jail, a survivor needs services to help them get back on their feet. Necessary services to help empower a survivor usually include:

- **Rental Assistance & Food:** One of the most immediate needs for survivors are the basic needs of shelter and food. A survivor needs to be connected to the local housing assistance program to fill out an application for rental assistance. This looks different in each city, but rental assistance is one option for survivors, along with registering for food stamps or helping them register to receive food from a local non-profit.
- **Employment:** Help a survivor find a living wage employment opportunity in a job where they can gain experience or they are passionate about. Economic empowerment is one of the most effective ways to help an individual gain independence and break the cycle of victimization. Survivors of sex trafficking have only known “work” as a painful and traumatic experience. Therefore, we have to understand that survivors will need a variety of employment opportunities that meet their specific talents and needs. The most effective work environment for a survivor of sex trafficking is a trauma-informed employment opportunity.
- **Therapy:** Encourage a survivor to seek trauma-informed therapy and keep regular appointments. If they are unsure how to access services or identify a trauma-informed therapist, you can help them navigate the process of finding a therapist with whom they feel comfortable.
- **Medical & Dental Services:** Survivors will experience a variety of medical needs as a result of their trafficking situation, and not all of them will be covered by insurance. Helping identify providers or services who can help address these medical needs or coaching the survivor how to identify these services will empower them to seek help.
- **Legal Services:** Often survivors of trafficking have criminal charges in connection to their trafficking situation. In order for a survivor to be eligible for certain housing and employment opportunities, they will need to address past convictions. By connecting a survivor with a lawyer who is willing to provide pro bono services and working to get their record expunged it will help them become more independent through expanded opportunities.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What's appropriate when it comes to physical touch?

This is a question that needs to be asked directly to the survivor. Some survivors thrive on healthy, appropriate touch. Some survivors, like anyone else, just aren't physically affectionate by nature. The most basic and important part of finding what's appropriate is realizing that touch has been used against survivors and that is something that they have to work through.

What is appropriate may change over time. When a survivor first exits trafficking, for example, they may not be able to handle being touched at all. Even being in close proximity to someone may make them anxious and uncomfortable. As a survivor heals and takes charge of their own body, you may discover that they become a "hugger" or crave physical affection. If a survivor is reaching out for it, it is perfectly okay to give as much or as little physical touch as you are comfortable with and feel is appropriate.

It is important here, also, to know what your own boundaries are and what you consider appropriate. This includes what is appropriate for both your and the survivor's culture and what is appropriate between different genders.

As much as survivors may be afraid and avoidant of physical touch, it is also possible for a survivor to go the opposite direction and be overly physically affectionate. They may be experiencing a drastic change, going from constantly being touched in a trafficking setting to, in some cases, not being touched at all. While the touch they experienced during trafficking was not with good intentions or a good experience, it was still touch. Losing that can be a shock to survivors.

Another instance where survivors may struggle with being overly affectionate is when they begin to trust you. They may seek out affection from you because you feel safe and they're not used to that. Keeping boundaries is important in this situation especially. You can be there for them. You can hug them and hold them and just be close to them (provided you are comfortable with that.) But loose boundaries can lead to affection turning inappropriate which can leave you feeling burned out, used, or uncomfortable and leave the survivor feeling abandoned or re-traumatized.

Remember that this is learned behavior and takes time to be unlearned. Remain firm in your boundaries and discuss with survivors if they are not abiding by them. Trust what feels comfortable and appropriate to you and talk to the survivor about what feels right to them.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What's the best way to offer constructive advice without sounding critical?

How would you approach someone who is not a survivor? When it comes down to it, the same kind of redirection that you would use for anyone you care about is appropriate also for survivors. Remind them that you care about them and want what's best for them. Give them the advice just like you would if you were carrying on a conversation with them. Do not talk down to them or over simplify what you're saying.

When giving advice for things such as changing behavior, think about why the survivor might be exhibiting this behavior. Is it a measure to make them feel safe? Is it something that has become a habit to them from what they've gone through? Is it something they never learned was inappropriate because of the trafficking situation? This last question is particularly relevant if they were trafficked as a child. The answers to these questions aren't to say you can't talk about these things or offer advice, but knowing why the survivor does those things could be helpful in addressing them. And taking the time to see where they're coming from and that trafficking can affect their lives for years after exit will likely help them feel seen and valued.

**HAVE A QUESTION?
ASK A SURVIVOR.
EMAIL YOUR QUESTION TO
INFO@SAFEHOUSEPROJECT.ORG**

CRISIS INTERVENTION

**MAKE A PLAN PRIOR TO A CRISIS.
IT ALWAYS HELPS TO BE PREPARED.**

**“Trauma is personal. It does not disappear if it is not validated. When it is ignored or invalidated the silent screams continue internally heard only by the one held captive. When someone enters the pain and hears the screams healing can begin.”
— Danielle Bernock**

Discuss with the survivor what care plan is best for them. Having a plan in place before a crisis can help a survivor feel more in control of what is happening to them.

Some questions to ask ahead of time are:

What do you want me to do if you're feeling suicidal?

Honor this as much as possible, but know that you must call 911 following a suicide attempt.

Who can I call to come sit with you if you're feeling suicidal and I can't come?

Provide a few examples of why you may be unavailable for the survivor so they do not feel like you just don't want to be there to help them.

If you need to go to the hospital, which hospital would you prefer?

Emphasize that you will try to get them to that hospital, but if their lives are in immediate danger, you will be calling 911 and where they are taken is up to emergency personnel.

If I call your therapist for you, will you talk to him/her?

Some therapists allow clients to call after hours in an emergency and some offices have emergency numbers. Their therapist likely will not talk to you, but having their professional opinion can help you assess the severity of the situation.

What are some signs that you are feeling suicidal?

Many survivors deal with chronic suicidality and are aware of the signs leading up to suicide attempts. They may not know all of them, but oftentimes they can name at least a few to look out for.

Will you tell me if you need intervention?

Again, many survivors deal with chronic suicidality and are aware when things start to go downhill. This is not always true, and they may not be able to tell you at all times. If they aren't able to know when they begin to spiral, speak with them about promising to reach out if they start feeling depressed, anxious, or suicidal.

CRISIS INTERVENTION

PASSIVE VS. ACTIVE SUICIDALITY

Another important thing to note is the difference between active suicidality and passive suicidality. Passive suicidality itself is less of an emergent threat, but it can turn into active suicidality at any time and require intervention.

When a survivor voices wanting to die, but not wanting to kill themselves, they are passively suicidal. Survivors who are passively suicidal do not have a plan to commit suicide and may not have even thought about killing themselves. They just want to be dead.

An actively suicidal survivor has a plan for suicide. They may write out a note or begin giving away their belongings. They may straight out say they want to kill themselves. Actively suicidal survivors are a direct threat to themselves and need professional intervention.

Hotlines

National Human Trafficking Hotline

1.888.373.7888, SMS: 233733 (Text "HELP" or "INFO"), or humantraffickinghotline.org

National Suicide Hotline

1.800.273.8255 or [Suicidepreventionlifeline.org](https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

National Domestic Violence Hotline

1.800.799.7233 or thehotline.org

Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN)

1.800.656.4673 or www.rainn.org

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

1.800.662.4357 or samhsa.gov

CRISIS INTERVENTION

SUICIDALITY ASSESSMENT & STEPS

“We don't heal in isolation, but in community.”— S. Kelley Harrell

Is the survivor in immediate danger or an immediate threat to themselves or others?

- If the survivor has already attempted suicide, call 911.
- If the survivor is suicidal with a plan, encourage them to go to their local emergency room for care. Offer to go with them. If they will not go and are planning a suicide attempt, call 911.
- Do not leave the survivor alone. If you cannot be with them, call another person the survivor trusts who can.
- Remind the survivor that you are seeking intervention because you care about them and want them to be safe.
- If the survivor is not in immediate danger, it is okay to not take immediate action. Continue with the following steps.
- If at any point the survivor attempts suicide or develops a plan to do so, seek immediate help by calling 911 or taking them to the Emergency Room.

Remind the survivor that you are there for them and care about their safety and wellbeing.

- You are someone they trust for a reason. Remember that. They came to you because you were a safe person to come to.
- You are not a professional. You are there to love and support the survivor, not fix them. Your relationship is to be their friend and it's okay if you don't know exactly what to do. Just being there can help a lot.

What caused the crisis and what can we do about it?

- Being a survivor can be really overwhelming sometimes. Sometimes survivors know why they're feeling suicidal. Sometimes they don't. If the survivor says they do not know why they feel that way, do not pressure them to find a reason.
- Another option is to ask the survivor what tasks or responsibilities feel overwhelming right now and what can be done about those things.
- Discuss options to help take some of the pressure off the survivor. Remind them of things that are within their control.

CRISIS INTERVENTION

SUICIDALITY ASSESSMENT & STEPS

What is the survivor feeling?

- They may be overwhelmed, exhausted, anxious, angry, shut down, or an array of other emotions or combination of emotions.
- It is not your job to assess or treat their feelings. Just let them feel them.
- It is important to listen to and validate a survivor's feelings, especially in crisis. Remind them it's okay to feel their feelings, their feelings matter, and you are with them.

What coping mechanisms does the survivor have? What helps?

- Once you've allowed the survivor to talk through what they're feeling, talk about what kinds of things usually help them cope with the specific feelings.
- For example, if the survivor is feeling overwhelmed, what usually helps them when they're feeling overwhelmed? Making lists or prioritizing tasks is an example.
- If the survivor identified a specific trigger, event, or task that caused them to feel suicidal, what can be done to cope with that?
- For example, if a survivor is feeling suicidal because they lost their job, what can help them feel like they've taken steps toward remedying that? This could be applying for unemployment, making a plan to talk to their therapist about why it is hard for them to maintain a job (if the loss was due to trauma response), or looking for new jobs that they are qualified for.

Make and implement a plan.

- Once you've identified the problem, talked through the survivor's feelings, and identified coping mechanisms and ways to help, make a plan.
- This could look like doing the things that the survivor has said helps or it could be making a plan to get through the time feeling suicidal until the survivor can get help. For example, making it through the night in order to call their therapist in the morning.
- The plan does not always have to involve the survivor doing something. Sometimes doing anything can feel incredibly overwhelming. Sometimes it's best to just sit together, talk, or watch a lighthearted movie.
- While the end goal is helping the survivor no longer feel suicidal, the goal of this plan is to help the survivor get through feeling suicidal without hurting themselves.

Follow up.

- Once the survivor has gotten through feeling suicidal, fallen asleep, or communicated that they are feeling better, be sure to check in with them later. Call them the next morning. Check in when the movie is over. Touch base to let them know they did not scare you off, you still care about them, and you are still there for them.

Adapted from Robert's Seven Stage Crisis Intervention Model.

SURVIVOR CARE PLAN

This sheet is to help you notice signs that you may need to reach out for help, as well as to help support people in your life know how to best help you in a crisis.

Early Warning Signs

Signs things are really getting bad

Things I can do to distract myself

Things that help calm me

People I can call (names and phone numbers)

Professionals I can call (names and phone numbers)

Things I need to do to keep myself safe

Things my support people can do to help me keep myself safe

Reasons to Live



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