

## Tool A:

### 12 Tips for Supporting People who Have Experienced Sexual Harm

Below are a set of general tips, practices, and things to keep in mind when supporting someone who has experienced sexual harm. These tips may be helpful for members of organized support collectives as well as for acquaintances and loved ones of folks who have experienced sexual harm.

These tips were generated by Bryn Mawr's Students Against Sexual Harm (SASH) collective, and draw in part from the Philly Survivor Support Collective's

[\*Strategies for Survivors\*](#) zine.

\*Note: Tool A is a reframing of Part I: SASH General Practices

PSS = Person Seeking Support

#### 1. Practicing a language of deferring choices to the person you are supporting.

Move away from language that directs the PSS, or tells them what they are thinking or feeling. Examples of this type of directive language include:

*"Let's just meet at the coffee shop."*

*"I can tell that you're sad."*

*"Well, I already know he is a terrible person."*

The experiences, feelings, and opinions of folks who have experienced sexual harm are often denied by other people, and folks who have experienced sexual

harm often are working to build a sense of power, agency, and trust in themselves.

Using language that offers space for the PSS to make their own decisions, and to figure out for themselves what they are thinking and feeling can be really important. Examples of this language include:

*“Do you have a sense of where you would like to meet?”*

*“How are you feeling right now?”*

*“How do you feel about him as a person?”*

**2. Not assuming that because someone has experienced sexual harm, they are necessarily weak, powerless, or a victim.**

Folks who have experienced sexual harm are often referred to as “victims.”

This word resonates with some people, but is rejected by others because they feel it strips people who have been harmed of their agency and invisibilizes their power. It’s important not to assume that the PSS has had their “power taken from them” because they have been harmed. Rather, allow space for the PSS to tell you how they feel.

**3. Coming from a place of, and practicing, *trust*.**

It is important that we come to this work from a sense of trusting the stories of folks who have experienced harm. Often folks who have experienced sexual harm are told that their stories are false (by the person who harmed them, or by people they tell their story to), which can sometimes cause those who have

been harmed to lose trust in their own understanding of what happened. We understand this practice of “trust” within the context of a system of power that tells people who sexually assaulted/harassed that their experiences are not true or not valid, while continually assuming that those who sexually assault/harass are innocent, or “didn’t mean to do it.”

It is important to let people who have been harmed know that you believe their story. Having someone believe your story can make all the difference in whether or not you believe it yourself.

**4. If the person who has been harmed feels *guilt*: honoring the *emotion*, but refuting the *thought*.**

Folks who have experienced sexual harm often feel that it was their fault. Sometimes, we may even feel that something is our fault while *knowing*, rationally, that it is not.

It is not always helpful to say something like, “*don’t feel guilty*.” Telling people how to feel is rarely helpful.

On the other hand, it can be crucial to let people know that what happened to them *was not their fault*.

Therefore, we suggest language that honors the *feeling* of guilt, but clearly rejects the *thought*. Some examples are:

*“It’s so hard not to feel like this is your fault, but this is 100% not your fault.”*

*“I’m hearing that you’re feeling guilty, and I understand that, but I want you to know that in no way do I think that what happened to you was your fault.”*

*“It makes total sense that you are blaming yourself, because society tells us to blame ourselves, but in no universe are you responsible for what happened to you.”*

#### **5. Not assuming gender pronouns.**

It’s important not to assume anyone’s gender pronouns. Just because someone looks or dresses like someone else you know that uses, say, “she/her” pronouns, does not mean that that person also uses “she/her” pronouns. Assuming someone’s gender or misgendering them could be traumatic and/or could seriously interfere with your ability to support that person.

Instead, you could (a) use the neutral “they/them” pronouns to refer to anyone whose pronouns you don’t know for sure, or (b) share your pronouns first and ask the PSS if they feel comfortable sharing theirs.

#### **6. Not assuming anyone’s identities or experiences.**

It's important not to assume anyone's identity (ie. race, class, politics, (a)sexuality, (non)disability, religion, family situation, citizenship status, etc.) or their experiences (ie. past experiences of trauma or lack thereof, etc.).

## 7. Practicing empathy and compassion, not sympathy.

*Sympathy* is often pity disguised as caring. Sympathy is a practice of feeling sorry for the other. It is the "Oh, poor you," feeling, often followed by a sense of, "I'm glad I'm not you."

*Empathy* and *compassion* are practices that build connection and mutual understanding. Through empathy and compassion, we hold space for the suffering of others' within ourselves.

Some examples of language and behaviors that reflect empathy and compassion include:

- Saying things like, "*That sounds really hard,*" or "*I'm hearing you say that you're feeling X.*"
- Smiling when someone else smiles, laughing when they laugh.
- Leaving space for crying, for anger, for whatever emotion the other person is experiencing.
- Being mindful of treating someone as a victim, of thinking "oh, poor you," in a way that is condescending.

## 8. Never touching other people without asking them.

It is always important to check in about positive touch. It can sometimes be especially important for folks who have experienced sexual harm to not be touched unless they have asked to be touched. Some ways to do that are by asking things like:

*“Would you like a hug?”*

*“Are you wanting me to hold your hand right now?”*

*“Want a high-five?”*

Of course, we often have relationships in which we touch each other all the time without asking. In some cases it can feel good to have an established exchange of positive touch with someone you love. In these situations, it might be a good idea to discuss what kinds of positive touch you feel good about receiving without asking, and what kinds you would like the other person to always check in about. You might say something like:

Person A: *“Would it feel good for you if we checked in every time we give each other positive touch? Or are there certain kinds of touch that you generally feel good about?”*

Person B: *“I like it when you touch my shoulder or rub my back in passing without asking, but please check in with me before giving me a hug.”*

## **9. Stop talking and listen!**

Active listening is an immensely important part of providing support. Check in with yourself to see if you're talking too much, and if you're really listening to what the other person is saying.

Silence can be a good thing! It can be helpful and important to leave space for silence and not feel pressure to fill all of your time together with conversation.

**10. Respecting that everyone has their own process for living and dealing with experiences of sexual harm.**

It is important to recognize that you can't decide what someone's process of dealing with sexual harm will be. All you can do is give someone the support that they *ask for*.

Someone might have a way of dealing with their emotions/experiences that you think is unhealthy or an addiction. For example, maybe the person smokes cigarettes, drinks alcohol, or cuts themselves as a way of coping with their trauma. Unless that person asks you for your support in stopping that practice, it may not be your place to pressure them to stop, and doing so will often only lead to frustration on both sides.

**11. Figure out who *your* support people are, and turn to them for support.**

It can be exhausting, draining, and sometimes triggering to support someone who has been harmed. Sometimes, we may be in a situation where we don't know what to do to support the PSS. It is important to have other people in your life who you can turn to at these times, *people who are not the person you are supporting*. If you are a part of an organized collective like SASH, turn to the other people in your group for support.

**12. Take care of yourself.**

This work is hard. It's very important to check in with yourself and to recognize when you can and can't be available to support someone.

Ask yourself, *Is this something I can do today?*