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***Establishing safe and caring relationships is important for people healing from sexual assault and other kinds of abuse. The enclosed six cards outline practical, everyday tips for supporting people with disabilities who have experienced violence.***

***The tips on each card are linked to the values of trauma-informed care – safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. These tips can be used by anyone in the lives of people with disabilities.***

***People with disabilities created the art for these cards. Disability Services of SAFE in Austin, Texas, created the tips.***

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Support  
for  
Healing



# General support for healing

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**These tips can help you support family, friends, loved ones, and clients with disabilities who have survived abuse or sexual assault.**

- Listen. Believe. Say, *I believe you.*
- Focus on the survivor and the support they need, not on your own experiences. Ask, *How can I help?*
- Avoid letting your own fears and concerns limit their activities.
- Allow time and space to heal and recover — on their schedule.
- Remind the survivor that what happened was not their fault. The perpetrator is responsible.
- Avoid probing questions about the abuse or assault.
- Stay connected, even when it feels awkward or uncomfortable.
- Take care of yourself and know your limits. It's OK to take a break.
- Encourage the survivor to seek professional support when they're ready.

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# Safety

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***Will I be safe with you physically and emotionally?***

**To increase the survivor's sense of safety:**

- Keep your expressions and voice calm and relaxed — even when it's not easy.
- Ask the survivor directly: *What helps you feel safer? Is there anything you need?*
- Understand that some places, activities, and people can be reminders of what happened to the survivor.
- Follow the survivor's lead in talking about what happened.
- Predictability and routines help. Most survivors feel safer when they know what is going to happen next — no surprises if possible.
- It is OK to set boundaries. Saying what you can and cannot do helps the survivor know they can be safe with you.
- Before using physical affection to show your love and concern, ask:  
*May I give you a hug?*
- Encourage self-care rituals such as drawing, journaling, and breathing exercises.

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# Empowerment

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***Will you support me to find and use my own voice?***

**To support the survivor in regaining personal power:**

- Respectfully listen and really hear what they have to say.
- Remind the survivor that they did the right things — because they survived!
- Avoid suggesting they should have done something differently. That blames and shames the survivor.
- Encourage them to look for opportunities and activities to express themselves — such as music, dance, theater, art, and journaling/writing.
- Also encourage the survivor to practice asking for what they want, being assertive, saying *no*, and setting personal boundaries with you and others in their daily life. Regaining personal power is part of the healing process.
- Support the survivor in setting their own pace for healing and recovery.
- Avoid responses that start with, “At least...” (*At least you weren’t hurt. At least you’re alive ...*) This perspective devalues the survivor’s experience.

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COLLABORATION

# Collaboration

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***Will you work with and support me in achieving my goals?***

**To make collaboration a natural part of the relationship:**

- Tell the survivor, *I am here to support you. Ask, What are you most worried about?* Really listen to their reply.
- It's not helpful to take over or try to solve the survivor's problems. Let them know that it's OK to ask for help. It's also OK for you to follow their lead.
- You can offer support even with small tasks, like helping them turn big tasks into small steps or helping to set reminders about appointments. Ask first.
- Offer to help connect the survivor with professional and other supports, such as counseling, exercise, meditation, support groups, yoga, etc.
- Practice breathing exercises together to help work through strong feelings of sadness, anger, rage, and grief. (Breathe in for four seconds, hold for four seconds, breathe out for four seconds. Repeat four times.)
- Remind the survivor that they are safe and not alone.

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# Choice

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***Will I be able to make my own decisions?***

**To create opportunities for a survivor to make decisions about their life:**

- Respect the survivor's right to make choices in their space, privacy, and schedule.
- Trust the survivor's ability to make these choices. Keep your own worries in check.
- Help the survivor create a list of possible options, including the consequences for different actions or choices.
- Make suggestions, not demands. Avoid telling the survivor what to do or how to do it, even if you believe you are right.
- Ask the survivor what helps them when they are stressed or anxious, and how you can help.
- When they make a mistake, let them know that it's OK. We all make mistakes.
- If you give advice, be clear that they don't have to use it.

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Trustworthy



# Trustworthiness

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## ***Can I trust you?***

### **To support the survivor in regaining ability to trust:**

- Be patient. Healing from trauma takes time — sometimes a very long time.
- Be honest and keep your word. Only make promises that you can keep.
- Be truthful if you don't understand what the survivor is asking or telling you.
- Keep what they tell you confidential — it's their story to tell. Honor their privacy.
- Avoid saying that you understand how the survivor feels. You may share some understanding, but each person experiences a traumatic event differently.
- If you do have a similar experience, it can be OK to briefly say so. For example, you might say, *That also happened to me*. However, this is not the time to process your own experiences.
- Respect and create healthy boundaries. Let the survivor know what you can and cannot do. Try saying, *I can help you with \_\_\_\_\_, but I can't help with \_\_\_\_\_*.

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