



Survivor Input on Therapy

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Though we didn't specifically ask about counseling or therapy, therapy was frequently mentioned by survivors as a way to heal. Survivors mentioned appreciating various modalities of therapy, including talk therapy, support groups with other survivors, art therapy, and somatic therapies.

Therapists who did not understand the dynamics of sexual assault and domestic violence caused harm to survivors, and therapy was often inaccessible or unaffordable.

- When asked who they went to for support or help, 49% of respondents said they went to a counselor.
- When asked which systems were helpful in supporting them, 31% said counselors/mental health providers.
- When asked which systems were harmful, 11% said counselors/mental health providers.
- When asked what needs they had (or still have) for support and healing, 74% of respondents said they needed therapy.
- When asked what resources would make it possible for them to participate in a restorative justice process, 76% said therapy or counseling, and 61% said a support group.

"[After experiencing child sexual abuse], I did have a therapist at first who asked me what I was wearing when things happened and if I had given him the idea that it was okay."

"Something that really changed my life in a positive way was somatics. I found that healing was working with a practitioner who can guide me through all of the pain and suffering and sadness and fear, and activation that really rooted itself in my body after that experience."

"It would be nice to have a therapist, I have had zero healing or help, a lot of days I have a feeling of hopelessness."

“I have built up a way through with the therapy process. I have healed.”

“The therapy was expensive and it was hard to pay for it...”

“Talk therapy only goes so far for some people, including me. I’ve been getting somatic therapy and that’s been helpful. In my mind, I see it clearly but in my body I’m still afraid. It’s a slow process.”

“But what I did in therapy – then I didn’t feel forced to forgive them, and I got to a place of neutrality where I know it happened and I don’t care about them, but I feel safe in my spaces...”

“My counselor was so helpful...she was the first person to tell me that I was in an abusive relationship and I deserve better.”

What does healing look like to you? What does justice look like to you?

- 30% said **therapy or counseling** for the survivor
“Healing for me took a lot of inside work, personally just for me, a lot of therapy...”
- 26% said validation and belief
“Justice would be if I was believed by my family and others, not being blamed for it and having to deal with it internally...”
- 23% said well-being and security (joy, success, art, nature)
“Healing looks like being believed and supported by my community, having that energy being put into me recovering my autonomy and safety.”
- 21% said self-compassion

“For me, healing looks like...a lot of it looks like acceptance. Accepting that I can’t change other people or how they behave. What I can change is how to relate to what happened to me.”

- 16% said structural supports

“The only difference now is that I don’t get beat up. But I still feel like a victim, because I have been living in poverty since I left, and I can’t get out of it.”

- 12% said support groups with other survivors

“I found community in that as well, talking with other survivors of violence. It’s a sad thing, finding others who have experienced violence. Having a space to talk safely and feel validated.”

- 7% said community support (family, friends, coworkers)

“I knew that [my dad] believed me and wanted to help me. That was the most supportive part of the whole process.”

What was helpful in support for you?

- 61% said validation (including being present and engaged)

“The first healing thing that happened was just having someone validate for me that it was a negative experience and that it wasn’t my fault.”

- 39% said tangible and logistical support (money, time, effort)

“They got me beds and clothing to replace the things he destroyed after I left him.”

- 29% said healing through **therapy or counseling**

“I’ve had lots of therapy. I worked on it really hard in my twenties. The process of healing for me is...being able to talk about it. To have your feelings affirmed.”

- 26% said advocacy and information

“They supported me throughout the entire process. They made such a difference, came to court with me for the protection order. I couldn’t have done it without them.”

- 21% said connection with other survivors

“Really just friends who continuously give me support and who have had similar experiences that should not have happened.”

- 13% said autonomy and agency

“I wanted to have autonomy in how I wanted other people to respond, in how they related to them. It helped me when people asked me how I wanted them to move forward.”

- 11% said connection to services

“...they helped me get to the next step in my journey.”

What was harmful in support for you?

- 44% said barriers to services and support (services or structural support were not provided, hard to access, or non-existent; and/or the survivor was discouraged from seeking help)

“The guardian ad litem told me that if I tried to get help from DVSA or went to a shelter, they would give custody of my son to his dad.”

- 34% said receiving responses from people who didn’t know how to support a survivor

“People and the systems tell you, ‘Sorry, so sorry’ but they don’t help you. The last thing you want to hear is ‘sorry.’ You need help.”

- 17% said they faced additional forms of discrimination

“It was so hard to understand the system because of my language and culture and being a woman alone in a house taking care of the family, because I have no social security card.”

- 10% said having consequences to the survivor for their self-protection or retaliation

“I also ended up going to jail because I retaliated to get away from her. I had a DV charge and wasn’t able to get a job because of it...I can get it expunged but it would cost me...”

Background

In the summer and fall of 2022, the S/DV Commission sought feedback from survivors of domestic and sexual violence. We did semi-structured interviews and surveys with more than 40 survivors, after which we conducted thematic analysis of the responses and developed this survivor input report. This feedback was gathered and analyzed in conjunction with and under the guidance of Dr. Christina Byrne, a researcher and psychology professor at Western Washington University.

In the interviews and surveys, survivors shared their experiences, what justice and healing could look like for them, and their feedback about restorative justice processes.

Survivors described experiences that included:

- One-time violence and persistent, on-going violence
- Lethal physical violence and severe emotional abuse
- Abuse that lasted for months, years, and decades
- Sexual violence experiences across the lifespan
- Sexual violence committed by trusted adults, friends, partners, neighbors, and dates
- Manipulation and coercion as a part of domestic violence (30%) and sexual assault (16%)
- Abusers using children to manipulate and abuse the survivor (19%)
- Retaliation from the abuser and from the broader community
- Systems responses that helped (17%), systems responses that compounded harm (17%), and systems that were absent or inaccessible
- Co-occurring substance abuse and mental illness
- Repeated victimization experiences, by the same abuser (77%) and by different abusers (30%)

“As this was happening to my body, I had a thought that I joined the many generations of women that I come from, in this culture.”

Read the full report [on our website](#).