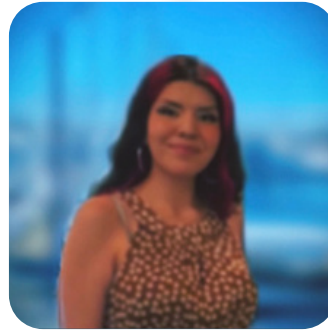


Tips for Romantic Partners of Survivors

One Survivor's Perspective



I applaud anyone and everyone who shows up for survivors in order to help them thrive.

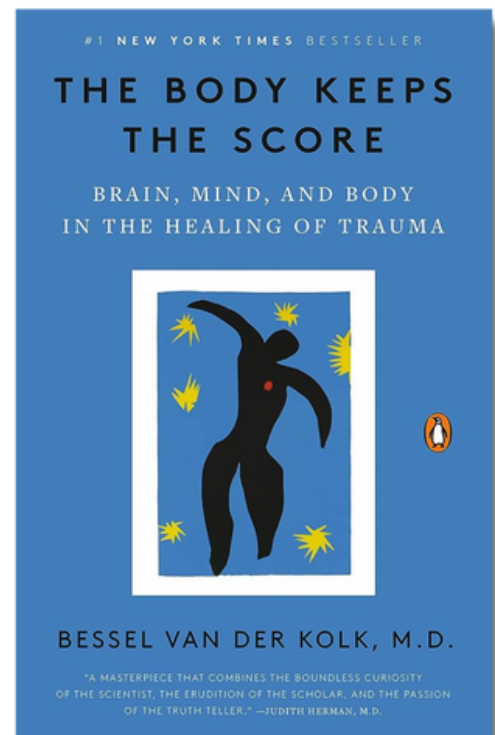
By Alyssa Marie Gomez

Introduction

Many partners have things we casually encounter: coffee dates, disagreements, double dates, bills, beach trips, long conversations, telling each other our hopes and dreams, our fears, and I think it's a beautiful thing when people find one another to love. However, one area that I'd like to shine a spotlight on is that before we got into relationships, we had an entire story prior. Many of us, including myself, have endured various forms of abuse as children, specifically sexual abuse. I'd like to provide some insight as to how you can help your partner navigate their healing journey and how you can encourage them, along with learning a couple therapeutic tips and reminders in order to better understand your partner.

I encourage all partners of survivors to learn more about how PTSD affects survivors. There's an amazing book I highly recommend to survivors and their loved ones called "The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma" by Bessel van der Kolk M.D. It goes over the entire breakdown of how PTSD affects survivors long-term in addition to offering an in depth explanation to these residual effects.

Recommended reading:



Navigating Disclosure

I would like to start with: everyone is different. Some survivors are more comfortable when it comes to speaking about their trauma depending on where they are in their healing journey. Some don't speak about it at all, and that's okay, it's a really hard thing to talk about. It's so raw and vulnerable. I would say to definitely give them time. It's not a negative reflection of anyone or anything, there are just some things that as survivors we commonly think/are concerned about. Such as "I don't want to traumatize them with that information", "I don't want to make them cry", "I don't want them to look at me like I'm dirty and not pretty anymore", "I don't want to tell them and it be too much for them", "I don't want to tell him and him use it against me one day".

A survivor can equally have profuse feelings for their partner whilst not disclosing their story. I would say disclosure should always be handled with empathy. Try to not ask too many questions and avoid making your partner feel "interrogated." Give them room to disclose as much or as little as they would like. After survivors disclose their trauma, I'd recommend thanking them for trusting you to tell you. Reassure them that they are in a safe place now and that their emotions are valid. Sometimes we just need a hug, sometimes we just need to punch a pillow, sometimes we just need to yell. Ask them what else they need to ensure they're okay and stable after disclosing their trauma. It's really intense for survivors to talk about their trauma and then just try to move onto the next subject of conversation. It's not a subject; it's a personal wound they're opening to show you why they still bleed.

Navigating Intimacy

A huge factor for couples in general is communication; especially in couples where one or both partners have trauma, communication will be key to this relationship. Often people have to put their pride to the side and be raw, I still struggle with letting down my walls to let my own partner in. However I have to remember I can't block him out because he's not my enemy. And I think that speaks for almost all couples. I have found over the years being friends with so many other survivors that we're all so unique yet have so much in common. We feel things very intensely, we may respond intensely. I have had to practice calming myself down over the years and my partner helps me with deep breathing techniques (which I also highly recommend). He taught me the Navy SEALs 4x4x4 breathing exercise, where you inhale deeply for 4 seconds, hold it for 4 seconds, release for 4 seconds and repeat this — you'll soon find yourself calmer. We all have a way we deal with confrontation and if you and your partner trigger each other's temperament or trauma, it can be especially difficult to navigate.

At some point, all couples, especially those who have partners that are survivors, should sit down and talk about what triggers them. If they know where it stems from along with how it makes them feel, it makes it easier to understand why we do what we do or why we say what we say—why we feel the way we feel. I've noticed with fellow survivors, when our partners know why we do what we do, it's easier for them to understand how to better help us when we need our support people. For example, one thing that really triggers me is men yelling at me, I don't do well with that because I start shaking and talking loudly in return to rebuttal. I grow irritated out of fear that I might get hit, I might grab something like an inanimate object near me to defend myself if need be. I've had to work on this over the years but I've done it since I was 15. My boyfriend can see the trigger is men yelling. Then the warning signs that things are breaking down for me are when I start shaking and getting loud. I become confrontational out of self-preservation instincts that have been hard wired into my brain as a result of being in life or death situations as a child. Often when our "Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn" response kicks in, we can't keep up with trying to manage it because we're trying to cope, but the response itself interferes with one's ability to cope when the brain has been wired to survive since we were kids. Often when this happens, we have to react and implement our coping skills from DBT (Dialectical Behavioral Therapy) and CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy). These coping skills can vary from techniques to hobbies to activities outdoors, etc. - something that makes the survivor feel good and relaxes their nervous system. Emotional regulation and distress tolerance are huge factors that I urge any survivor along with their loved ones to look into. It's very broad and I believe that there is something for everyone.

What helps me is distractions. My boyfriend will give me AirPods and put a podcast on that's funny or we play with our pets (fur babies are awesome for emotional regulation!). Another technique I use when I'm triggered is to build my mastery with arts and crafts with my boyfriend. I'm good at crocheting and makeup so it makes me feel good to do those things whilst painting and sketching tattoos makes him feel good. Along with building our skills, it's also regulating my emotions when I'm too amped up from being triggered, in addition to my partner coping with me rather than just watching me cope. It's very important that survivors find control over a situation or task when feeling triggered or out of control along with having a support system. We don't want to feel so intensely and wish we could not be triggered. It's a chemical and psychological response that is beyond our grasp, so I encourage all partners to not only share your interests/hobbies, but learn what hobbies or crafts or exercises that your partner likes to do and what they are good at. Doing these things with them will help them feel safe and secure. It's very vital for partners of survivors to be supportive. I've found that survivors are as loyal as you are to them, sometimes even more. We are very passionate and insightful souls.

Navigating Sexual Intimacy

This subtopic is, again, going to be different for everyone. As everyone is comfortable and uncomfortable with different things, this requires you to sit down with your partner and discuss their boundaries. Be respectful to these boundaries. Give them room to be comfortable in their body. Our bodies were a commodity for others. Our bodies were a vessel for them to abuse. We weren't seen as people to the ones who hurt us. We need time to heal from this and love ourselves along with our bodies again. If we want to have sexual intimacy, we'll let you know. There are some of us who don't want to for now, there are some of us who never want to, there are some of us who might want to sometimes and not want to at other times, and there's some of us who want to. It's different for every survivor, as everyone's story is different along with everyone being at a different place in their unique healing journey. The last thing we want/need is a partner who is pushing for our body when we are so much more than that, and we deserve to be recognized for more than that. Many of us want to be seen for who we are and what we can contribute to this world.

Navigating Family Relationships

- If your partner's family is not supportive or if they were/are abusive, but your family is healthy and generally a good, enjoyable environment, I'd recommend extending invitations from family get-togethers/events/holidays with your partner. For example, I personally have a lot of family that I am estranged from so my partner has brought me to his family's holiday events and get-togethers for birthdays. I enjoy that they're so inclusive and loving. It's important for survivors to have stability and a family environment that is healthy, which can be very helpful in their journey of healing, in addition to feeling loved by others in a capacity they're not used to.
- If your partner still has contact with their family that isn't supportive/were abusive, I'd recommend that you offer to accompany them anytime they interact with them. Establish a safety sign or safety word to use when your partner feels uncomfortable. (For example, when your partner feels uncomfortable, the signal can be to tap their fingers on your hand, they say "Do we have — at home?" It can even just be a superhero: "Have you seen the new — movie?" Just have it established prior to the event. If it at all feels unsafe for you or your partner, please leave immediately. It's better to ensure safety and feeling comfortable rather than having your partner feel triggered/threatened/in danger/fearful, etc.

- If your partner has a supportive family, I recommend learning more about them and your partner's connection with them. Learn what types of foods they love to make together as part of their culture/family traditions/favorites. Learn what they like to do in their free time and find common interests or something that may spark your interest. Try to do these things with your partner if and when they're having a hard time, as often a sense of community or familiarity can bring comfort when it stems from a positive or pleasant experience. It's a technique I learned from DBT therapy called self-soothing, when you bring pleasant or familiar coping mechanisms into action when in distress. It's meant to stimulate and calm the senses in addition to providing relief to the body when doing physical activities such as hula hooping, purchasing a nice lotion or perfume, etc.

Thank You

I would like to thank all the partners of survivors in addition to those who wish to learn more about how to help us on our healing journey. These are some tips and techniques you can go off of or adapt and integrate into other techniques/strategies etc. as all survivors have unique stories and personalities, thus we all will have a different healing journey and things that work in different orders or ways. I applaud anyone and everyone who shows up for survivors in order to help them thrive.

About the Author

My name is Alyssa Marie Gomez, I am a 21 year old survivor advocate and mentor for CSEC survivors. I was trafficked when I was 15 by gang members I knew and trusted. I am currently in college majoring in Pre-Law so I can become a lawyer for foster youth and youth human trafficking survivors in the juvenile court system. I am a published poet and love art from makeup to crocheting.

