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# 12 Tips When Working With Sex Trafficked Survivors

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By Jen Unangst

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I am not a doctor or a counselor but from my own experience as a trauma survivor\* and through research and hands on mentorship, I believe these 12 simple tips can aid in the healing process of a survivor. Often times, we can re-victimize or trigger an already broken spirit by our words or actions. My hope is that these simple steps can help us, help them.

- **Don't say** "I understand" to a survivor because you probably don't.
- **Don't give unsolicited advice:** Instead, review options with the survivor and then support her decisions. Allow her to take control over their own life, even if you believe you would do something differently or if you believe she may regret her decision.
- **Don't gasp or grimace** when hearing a traumatic story (and you will). Be prepared to hear possible stories of child rape, torture or even murder.
- **Don't over talk** a survivor. It's important to let her speak and get her feelings out without us trying to have an answer for everything. She may for the first time in a long time have her voice back, let her use it.
- **Don't tell her not to get a tattoo or piercing** or cover them up. This tells the survivor she should change and gives her the message you don't accept her as she is. Tell them their blue hair and black eyeliner is cool! We love with no conditions.
- **Don't put down a survivor's pimp.** Often times there is a trauma bond that we don't understand. She may love her pimp. She will learn over time she was actually victimized by him. This must be a gentle slow process and can be very painful.
- **DO NOT ask the survivor about her story.** Trust me, she will tell you but only what she feels comfortable telling. Don't ask question like, "why didn't you run? Just don't ask. It's important to focus on the future. What are her dreams and aspirations?
- **Try not to call nicknames.** Refrain from words like sweetie or honey that may have been used by johns, pimps and abusers and could trigger her. Always helps to ask first.
- **Don't grab a survivor's hand or touch her without permission.** Also, you don't have to lay hands on her to pray for her. Trust me, that's very uncomfortable the first few times. You'll get to know who likes hugs and touch and who doesn't. It's important to ask.
- **Don't press the survivor to report her trafficker** to the police. Don't insist that she talk to someone about it. Doing nothing is a valid option and needs to be supported.
- **Don't be afraid to say no!** It's important to instill healthy boundaries. Just because she's a survivor doesn't mean you give her everything and say yes to anything she asks for. It's a hard thing to do but will teach healthy relationships and instill trust.
- **Don't treat her like a victim.** The minute she leaves or is relocated from her pimp she is no longer a victim but a survivor. Try to focus on her future. Let her counselors deal with the past.

*\*Jen Unangst is a survivor of childhood molestation and sexual assault. In an attempt to escape her trauma, she later became addicted to substances and sold her body to support her addictions. Jen began her recovery through family support, a faith-based sobriety home, and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. She currently works for Compassion First, a nonprofit in Oregon dedicated to helping survivors of domestic sex trafficking.*