

ASK SOMEONE TO COME WITH YOU

At times, it may be helpful to have a friend go with you to your appointment.

You can ask someone to go with you if:

- You are having a hard time getting yourself to go for medical exams.
- You are afraid you will not remember your discussion with the doctor or nurse.
- You need a friend to sit in the exam room with you for support.

You might ask your friend to:

- Hold your hand during painful procedures.
- Take notes so you can remember and review the details later.
- Remind you of any questions you had.

Many health care providers will want to meet with you alone during some part of the exam. At that point, you can ask your friend or support to step outside. But before you start, let the doctor or nurse know that you would like your friend present during most of the exam.

WHAT TO DO AFTER YOUR MEDICAL APPOINTMENT

- Take some time after your appointment to reflect on how it went.
- Write in a journal on your own or sit with your friend and discuss your appointment.
- Think about how it felt and what you learned:
 - Did you feel comfortable with how they treated you and how they did the exam?
 - Do you understand any results, information, or instructions?
 - Do you feel your doctor or nurse listened to you?
 - Did they take the time to help you understand your options?

This time and thought can help you relax, plan, and stay on track when it comes to caring for yourself.

THERE ARE FREE CONFIDENTIAL
HOTLINES AVAILABLE 24 HOURS A
DAY WITH LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS
IF NEEDED. SOME OF THE WEBSITES
OFFER HOSTED CHATS:

NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE

1-800-799-SAFE (1-800-799-7233)

(TTY) 1-800-787-3224

www.thehotline.org

NATIONAL DATING ABUSE HELPLINE

866-331-9474; text "loveis" to 22522

www.loveisrespect.org

NATIONAL SEXUAL ASSAULT HELPLINE

800-656-HOPE (800-656-4673)

www.rainn.org

CHILDHELP NATIONAL CHILD ABUSE HOTLINE

1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)

www.childhelp.org

NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE

1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255); (TTY) 800-799-4889

www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

NATIONAL
Center on
Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health

www.nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org

FUTURES
WITHOUT VIOLENCE®

www.futureswithoutviolence.org

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A Health Care Guide for Survivors of Domestic & Sexual Violence

The physical and emotional harm that comes from being abused by a loved one can affect survivors, even after the violence has stopped. Whether you are now in an abusive relationship, or you experienced domestic or sexual abuse in the past, some everyday activities—like visiting the nurse or the doctor—may be difficult for you.

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If you avoid visiting the nurse, doctor, or dentist, you're not alone. Many survivors of abuse find that seeing a healthcare provider can make them feel anxious or uncomfortable.

Going to the clinic can also be hard because some health care providers are not always sensitive to the ways that trauma can impact health or they may seem rushed, making it hard to connect. There are steps you can take to make health visits easier and be more involved in your healthcare.

WHY IS GOING TO MY DOCTOR OR NURSE SO HARD FOR ME?

Studies have shown that experiencing trauma and violence can lead to many health problems. The stress of abuse takes a toll on the body and on a person's well-being, and can lead to ongoing health issues.

Experiencing violence by a loved one can affect how we feel and may be traumatic. We may use a variety of coping strategies to survive: we may distance ourselves, minimize the experience, avoid thinking about it, and even sometimes deny to ourselves that what we are experiencing is painful. These ways of coping sometimes make survival possible. However, they can also become a routine way of thinking, or dealing with hard situations, even when we no longer need them.

Seeing a doctor or nurse means you're paying attention to what's going on in your body. At the same time, it might be hard for you to focus on your body for many reasons. For example, to cope with stress or anxiety, you may distance yourself, or "go away in your head." This is what some call "dissociating" and it can make it hard to feel what's going on in your body. This is a clever tool our minds use to give us a break from trauma. It allows us to function and keep going, but it can also get in our way. The problem comes if we dissociate when we need to be present to take in and process information, or say what we need. A health visit can also bring up responses such as fear, or difficult memories of the abuse that make us dissociate when we may actually want to stay present.

Waiting rooms can be stressful and hectic. Tests and exams can leave us feeling vulnerable or remind us of the violence that we've experienced in the past. Language or other cultural differences between you and your provider may also complicate your ability to understand or connect with each other. All of these things can get in the way of a health visit going the way that we want it to.

WHAT CAN I DO TO MAKE MY NURSE/DOCTOR VISITS EASIER?

Tell them about your concerns

You can tell your nurse or doctor about concerns that you have, such as that exams sometimes make you feel nervous, and if there are things that would make you feel more at ease. If you feel comfortable, you can also let them know that you are a survivor of violence. Knowing about the abuse may help your provider meet your health care needs. You can share how you think the violence has affected your health. For example, you may want to discuss past injuries, unprescribed medications, possible sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unplanned pregnancies, and ways in which you might have coped through use of drugs or alcohol. Your doctor or nurse can then help you consider ways to address these concerns.

Trust your instincts during this discussion. Not every doctor or nurse will support or understand your needs. Ideally the relationship between you and your doctor or nurse should feel supportive and open enough for you to feel comfortable talking with them about what is important to you. If you feel dismissed or judged by the nurse or doctor, they may not be the right one for you. Find a doctor or nurse who listens, is sensitive to your needs, and supports you.

Take charge of the visit

If you're worried that your visit may trigger fear, bad memories, or cause you to "space out" or dissociate, consider making a plan with your health care provider ahead of time. Making such a plan may increase your sense of control over your appointment and may make it easier for you to feel comfortable and participate in decisions. If you are unsure what to ask for, consider this approach you can share with your doctor or nurse:

The doctor or nurse should take these steps:

BEFORE THE EXAM:

1. Meet with you when you are fully dressed before the physical exam to discuss the reason for the visit and to review the procedure step-by-step.
2. Leave the room to allow you to change clothing for the physical exam.

DURING THE EXAM:

3. Wait for your approval before proceeding with each step. For example, the doctor might say, "Now I'm going to lift your gown and push hard on your abdomen, OK?" You can then indicate whether or not the provider is OK to proceed.
4. If the exam can't be completed, you and the provider can agree to reschedule it and discuss ways in which the procedure might be made easier, if possible.

AFTER THE EXAM:

5. Give you the option of getting dressed again after the exam, before discussing possible next steps with the nurse or doctor.
6. Leave you with written follow-up information. Include diagnoses, medication schedules, and next steps.

Change these steps if needed so that they feel most comfortable for you.