

Supporting Incarcerated Survivors: Building Coping Skills

Developing coping skills is essential to healing from sexual abuse. But basic coping techniques, such as reaching out to a friend or loved one, typically are not available to survivors who are incarcerated. Advocates can help survivors identify and build coping skills that can be practiced inside a detention facility.



First Steps

It is important to check in with the survivor about what techniques they already use to cope. Remember that there is no right or wrong way to heal, and that survivors themselves know which approaches work best for them.

When you discuss coping mechanisms with a client who is incarcerated, give them a range of options that can be adapted to a detention setting. Offering survivors choices helps them exercise agency – which is often difficult to do behind bars.



Coping Techniques

Coping mechanisms that are self-contained – that can be practiced discreetly and without special materials – typically work well for incarcerated survivors. This includes deep breathing exercises, guided imagery, and grounding.

Instructions for deep breathing

- If you are able, take a breath in through your nose for a count of 4
- Try to hold your breath for a count of 4
- Then breathe out through your mouth for a count of 4
- Hold your breath out for a count of 4
- Repeat until your breathing slows to normal and any feelings of unease start to lessen

Instructions for guided imagery

- Get into a comfortable position and begin the deep breathing exercise above
- Picture a place, real or imaginary, where you feel completely safe (such as in a kitchen with loved ones or on a beach on a tropical island)
- Try to picture every detail and try to answer the following questions:

- What do you see? Hear? Feel? Taste? Smell?
- Who is with you?
- What are you doing in this place?
- On a piece of paper, try to write about or draw this safe place. Include as much detail as you can, so that it becomes easier to transport yourself there in your mind in moments of stress

Grounding

- If you are experiencing intrusive thoughts or the beginning of a panic attack, touch an object close to you, such as the arm of the chair you are sitting in, the sleeve of your shirt, or a book
- Ask yourself the following questions:
 - What does the object feel like? Is it soft or rough?
 - What material is the object made of?
 - Is the object warm, cold, or is it room temperature?
 - What color is the object?
 - Is there anything else you notice about the object?
- Take a moment to take three deep breaths, letting yourself focus on the object you are touching

