

Having to See Your Abuser

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By: Kat

Survivors of childhood sexual abuse, rape, or sexual assault often have to see their abusers after their attacks. Sexual violence is frequently committed by people we know—within our family, school, work, church, or any other community environment. However we know our abusers, we cannot always avoid interacting with them.

These interactions are painful and create additional struggles. Our world becomes more difficult as we struggle to cope with the aftermath of sexual violence and how to assimilate back into our lives. Seeing your abuser can be an intense and frustrating experience.

Here are some of the some of the emotional responses seeing your abuser may create:

- Panic
- Anxiety
- Stress
- Shame
- Embarrassment
- Self-blame
- Injustice
- Frustration
- Numbness, disbelief

These emotions can easily make us feel out of control. Very often we have to pretend everything is happy and fine when we are around others and wearing this “mask” can feel nearly impossible when we are around our abusers.

Things to Keep in Mind:

- Remember, you survived
- It wasn't your fault
- You don't have to pretend
- Your abuser's reaction is not reality

You Survived: You survived a horrific and painful ordeal. Whether this ordeal was ongoing or a single event, it does not take away from how truly amazing your survival is. You are here today, putting your life back together. In the aftermath of sexual violence, it is very hard to appreciate the courage it takes to live through and heal from these events. No matter what, your abuser cannot take that away from you. Every day you are moving forward.

In short: Give yourself credit for your survival.

It Wasn't Your Fault: Sometimes, seeing your abuser can bring up feelings of shame or embarrassment. Although these feelings are a common reaction to the trauma, you didn't do anything to deserve these feelings. Your abuser chose to hurt you. Your abuser is the true owner of shame, embarrassment, and guilt. Whenever you see him or her, remind yourself it wasn't your fault.

In short: Put your abuser's name or his/her in a sentence with however you are feeling. "This isn't my fault, he/she is the one who is truly shameful and should be embarrassed."

You don't have to pretend: Confrontation can be an option. Our [Confronting Your Abuser](#) article discusses ways to confront your abuser and how it may be helpful. If you feel that confrontation is not the best route for you, there are less direct ways of releasing your emotions. You can journal about your frustrations or feelings. Join and log onto the [Pandora's Aquarium message board, chat room, and online support group](#) and make a post about how you are feeling or search/respond to other posts about similar experiences. Survivors create a compassionate and empathetic community, many of whom share common emotions and encounters.

In short: You are not alone. While your outward impression may have to pretend, your mind and heart does not. You deserve to speak out about what is going on—to yourself, to your community, or to your abuser.

Your Abuser's Reaction is Not Reality: Our abusers reactions after the attack(s) are confusing. They may avoid you or talking about the situation. They may tell you never to tell anyone else. They may lie to others to cover up their actions. If you confront them they may deny it or twist the facts in their favor. Our abusers alter the reality of what happened in their mind to avoid responsibility. If your abuser is a friend, family member, or other trusted individual, these reactions can be extremely hurtful. It can intensify feelings of self-blame and shame. Our abusers denial can make it difficult for to recognize what truly happened.

In short: Don't believe your abuser's reaction. Remind yourself their response serves to deflect the truth to protect only them.

Having to see your abuser is never easy. It will always serve as a reminder of the horrible trauma they put you though. Nothing can erase what happened. But seeing your abuser does not have to make you feel out of control—it can empower you.

My Story:

I knew my abusers from high school. In the days after the attacks, it never occurred to me that I would find myself in another painful and awful situation. I didn't consciously think of how the days would go, I just thought that everything would sort of return to normalcy. I

needed that normally, and I counted on my notion that I would be able to go back to my old self. I tried to convince myself that nothing, absolutely nothing, had changed. I was determined to pretend.

As much as I pretended on the outside, I was overwhelmed with emotions every day. Emotions I didn't want to feel but found me anyway—the nervousness before school or class; the panic of seeing them in the hallways; the awkwardness when we would hang out in our usual group of friends. I felt like everything had changed around me, nothing looked or felt the same. Yet, I couldn't pinpoint what actually had changed. I felt different, but I was counted on the familiarity of everything else to ease my suffering.

In addition to the anxiety and panic, I also felt (and continue to feel) a strong feeling of injustice. I would constantly ask myself, "Why do they get to be happy?" "Why is everything fine for them?" I was so angry at what was going on. It was all so unfair and there was nothing I could do to change the situation. I wasn't in a place to tell anyone. And even if I had, I didn't think it would change anything. I struggled with these emotions until I left high school and moved four states away. Even now, I fear one day running into them.

Additional Reading

[Confronting Your Abuser](#)

[Does Anyone Else See Their Abuser on a Regular Basis?](#) Register and log on to join in on this discussion on the Pandora's Aquarium message board..

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