

Supporting someone who has survived organised abuse/TBMC can be difficult.

How can you prepare yourself to listen to experiences of ritualised abuse?

Whatever relationship you have with that person – therapist, doctor, teacher, friend – the content and scope of what they tell you will be profound. Reactions such as bewilderment, disbelief, aversion, disgust, fascination, a mix of strong emotions are likely to occur.

The fact that the survivor is willing to share indicates there is some trust and hope present. Keep in mind that you are supporting a person who has survived extreme abuse and their ability to trust themselves and other people has been severely impacted as a result.

The tips below are intended to help you navigate the conversations and how you can support a survivor of TBMC.

The most important thing is safety. The system needs to know they are safe. For safety to be achieved trust needs to be built with each alter. This means respecting the alters boundaries even if you disagree with them. (Unless it is a safety issue) If the alter doesn't want to tell you their name that's alright. If they don't want to talk to you, that's alright. Don't pester them about the reason they don't want to talk. Learn their names, if they have a name you don't like or you find offensive don't say anything. They may interpret this to mean you find them offensive. (Programming trick)

Make sure there is a safe space/place for people to go when they feel overwhelmed. Set up expectations when you will enter the safe place. (safety) Let them decide what they would like in the space. (Within reason) Stuffed animals, colouring books, art supplies, etc. Set up rules for the safe area, i.e don't use other people's things unless permission is given.

Many survivors go through a stage where they appear to not want to deal with their trauma. They might deny it happened as they want to forget it, or they might want to process what has happened themselves before discussing it with someone else.

This is a common part of the healing process. Do not pressure them into talking to you.

A number of trauma survivors are afraid of becoming defined by what had happened to them. For this reason, it's important their trauma is not a constant focus of the relationship.

What can you do?

Listen with an open mind, and remain gently curious. Trust is vitally important to establish and maintain. People make mistakes and tell them you will make them. When it comes to trust, work very hard to maintain their trust. Be upfront with them and tell them there are some things you won't keep secret. They may find this scary but they'll understand you're being honest.

Ask open questions in a way that leaves space for the other person to answer them or not, in their own way.

Be aware of your attitude, in the things you say and do, make sure to recognise and value the other person's autonomy. A survivor is the one person who will understand their healing process the best. The survivor should be given agency over their healing and be able to control their own healing process. Allowing a survivor to make their own choices goes a long way in rebuilding trust as it demonstrates that you respect their autonomy.

As well as being very vigilant of their surroundings they are very aware of how you are behaving. People pay attention to body language, facial expression and tone of voice before they listen to what is being said. Be aware of how you are presenting yourself. Are you saying, "I'm not angry." as you have fists made, talking through clenched teeth, and furrowed eyebrows? Just one of these things will lead them to not believe you. Hard task, I know. Keep in mind their survival depended on them being able to read these cues.

A lot of systems and survivors are very private. Respect their privacy. It won't matter to them if your intentions are well meaning. If you talk about them to other people they may see it as a violation of their trust. Ask them first if you can talk with someone about what is going on so you have support as well. Don't broadcast their issues/concerns.

Leave them space, ownership and responsibility for their own life and choices.

Validate the person and their experience.

As the healing process differs for each individual, you could never anticipate exactly how the survivor wants to be supported. Rather, the survivor needs to tell you. For this reason it is crucial that good communication is practised.

Be aware of the following possibilities:

The person may go back and forth between telling you about experiences and then trivialising or denying them.

Survivors of trauma are extremely vigilant of their surroundings and changes can trigger them. If there is going to be a change try and let them know and ask them to tell others in the system.

There may be distortions in their perception of time. You can, without noticing, be in a conversation with different parts leading to discontinuity in the conversation. This may look like what you have just been told is suddenly not remembered or denied, emotional shifts, etc.

The colour of your clothing, the use of certain words or phrases may be experienced as a trigger for trauma experiences. Seriously consider the account of the other person. In addition, clarify what it means to you. You do not have to promise never to wear certain clothes again, or to stop using certain words.

If the survivor experiences a flashback, work towards getting them back into the present day, place and time. Be very concrete in your request as well as calm. Involve their senses, by asking them to name what is in the here and now (look and notice where you are, hear the sounds, feel the chair you are sitting on, your feet on the ground).

Encourage the system to communicate with one another. It can put you in a tough position if you are the go between and you don't want to be drawn into internal conflicts.

Self harm can occur. Depending on the programming there can be numerous reasons for self harm. Remember self harm isn't a suicide attempt. If you need to contact emergency services for assistance do it. Safety trumps their anger.

Be clear about the (im)possibilities of contact between conversations about the frequency thereof, and times you're available.

Respect their boundaries. If they tell you something is a trigger, they don't want you in a certain space, they don't want to do something, any appropriate boundary is acceptable. If you don't understand, and you know the person well you can ask for understanding not to challenge their boundary. If you still don't understand, accept their boundaries.

What should you AVOID if you suspect ritualised abuse?

Healing takes years. It causes harm when someone who has survived trauma is told they aren't working hard enough, being told how they should heal, what they shouldn't do and any form of pressure. The journey is theirs; they need to navigate it at their pace, and it will be frustrating, and overwhelming at times.

Don't make their recovery about you. It isn't about you. Statements like, "This is my purpose in life," means it's about you. You can't 'save' them but you can support them. You can't make your life about them and their recovery. Respect their therapy/therapist. They aren't your therapist. You aren't the survivor's therapist.

Don't spend all the time focusing on their past and how they should be talking about it and 'working through it.' There is a time and a place for that, maybe that person isn't you. That doesn't mean you're not a person who has a life changing role in their life.

People remember the positive things, the laughter, and how they feel when they are with someone. Healing takes laughter as well as tears. It's alright to spend time doing 'fun' things. Sometimes it's more important.

It's important to remember that everyone's experience and healing process is unique. We can never tell a survivor what they are feeling or what they should do. They need to go at their own pace, taking steps only when they feel ready.

Do not make promises that you are not sure you can keep.
Do not say the other person can trust you.

Do not ask “why?” questions; these can be interpreted as reproach.

Do not ask questions that may suggest you are wondering about the truthfulness of what is being told.

Also, do not say that you believe everything the other person tells you. This could give the other person the feeling that they are not allowed to make mistakes concerning facts and memories. It is better to avoid the word “believe”.

Do not fill in facts for the other person (oh, so how it played out, was....).

Do not suggest how it might have happened.

Do not fill in emotions or experiences for the other person.

Take the other person’s (potential) fear that the group is anywhere and everywhere seriously, but do not go along with the fear. Help them develop discernment wherever possible.

Do not pressure them to leave the group. Keep in mind that it may feel safer for them to (still) follow the system instead of leaving. He / she may feel pressured and / or concerned about loved ones.

Do not try to get the person to report to the police.

Do not take on responsibilities that do not belong to you, but belong to them.

Lastly, as a support person you have to take care of yourself. Take down time for yourself after the conversation to process what you heard and experienced. Make time for yourself and set boundaries so you don’t become resentful, hostile or burnt out. You’re there to support them and be their friend, not their whipping post and enabler. Be sure to do this as you must be healthy to support the person as they walk the long path of recovery and healing.