



I met Cassandra in a treatment center for adolescents several years ago. You can't miss her in a crowd: she has black and red hair, piercings, and wears T-shirts from vintage punk bands. She is also astoundingly creative, and maddeningly intelligent. Cassie devoured books of poetry and literature, and could play almost any musical instrument. We worked together intensely on issues ranging from sexual trauma, eating disorders, body dysmorphic disorder, and self-injury. She recently found me again to tell me, with pride, that she is completely sober, no longer harms herself, is in a happy relationship with a positive person, and has been free of depression and anxiety for years. After a full year without self-harm, suicidal thoughts, panic attacks, or depression, she celebrated her work by tattooing "SURVIVOR" across her upper back.

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Dear Sister Survivor,

I don't have a lot of soft and sweet words for you, and if you're anything like me you'll probably get sick of all the sentimental well-wishing you'll have to put up with from people who can never really understand. "Oh, it will be okay" or "think positive!" or "look for the hidden blessings!" That kind of stuff always makes me so angry, and I think it's because it shows me that some people really can't understand the pain my rape has caused.

I struggle with how to speak to you because my life has been a wreck and I don't think I'm qualified to be anyone's role model. So don't think of me that way, just because my letter's in a book.

First, and this may sound strange, do not hide from the word "rape." Don't make the word feel so powerful that you find yourself avoiding it, refusing to say it. Either you're dealing with it, or you're not... and I'm assuming that you're reading this because you want to deal with it. If it's something that makes you timid, it's something that's still got you submissive, not yet triumphant. The willingness to speak and write about our rapes is a sign we are no longer empty of power!

Second, please be aware that many caretakers will fail you at some point. By "caretakers," I'm not talking about people who lecture you with that "get over it!" crap. I'm talking about people who actually make a genuine effort to love and nurture you. As humans, the best we can do is fit into the spaces of each others' lives, making real

efforts to care. But at times we all make mistakes. A husband or boyfriend might demand that you share details of your rape. Don't. It will hurt both of you. The details are to be shared in confidence with a therapist; a partner does not need to have them to love you. I've never told my partner all of my details.

A parent might overstep their boundaries when it comes to your privacy about your rape. Parents should not treat you like someone who is fragile or helpless. You should be expected to work on your healing, but also to continue your contributions to the world in everyday efforts too. You are not too weak to be dependable, to keep your word, to take time for others, to help around the house. Do not give in to temptation to use trauma as your pass! And when other people treat you like they think your rape leaves you too delicate to handle life, call them on it. Don't let people continue the negative stereotype of rape victims as weaklings.

I have a therapist who is wonderful. I never thought I could work with a male therapist, but after trying several others who were all women, I got nowhere. I reluctantly tried therapy with a male, and it surprised me that it worked. My therapist is not perfect. He makes mistakes, says the wrong thing, lets me off the hook too easy sometimes and pushes me harder than I want to work other times. His jokes are corny. But he's kind. For all of his faults and flaws, the bottom line is just that: he is kind. Many times I've been pissed at him and considered just walking away, doing it on my own, telling him where he can shove it, and even attacking him by shouting that he hasn't ever helped me at all! But it's not true. I've had to re-learn my patience, and to give up my fantasy of ever finding a perfect caretaker. In the end, what I've needed most

is loyalty and friendliness, not perfection. Don't idealize any therapist, but do be honest about needing one.

Avoid rape victims who are unhealthy. I mean spiritually or emotionally unhealthy, not physically ill. I know we're all supposed to talk like we're all powerful, wonderful women, but the fact is there are some real toxic people in our midst. Here are some warning signs of toxic victims to avoid:

- Someone who plays the "poor me, nobody understands me" game every time they get confronted (or pulls the whole "I knew you were a phony!" line anytime they are held accountable).
- Someone who uses their rape to entitle them to special care from others.
- Someone who constantly draws or writes things that are hopeless or preoccupied with horror, gruesome stuff, and pain. Honesty about pain is fine, but hopelessness is a warning sign.
- Someone who pledges to be a supporter, ally, or role-model, but then flees the scene when anything gets too real or uncomfortable. Beware of the "ally" who showboats about what a strong supporter she (or he) is, but who doesn't actually follow through when you need them.
- Someone who continually makes hidden threats against themselves—suicide, self-harm—to test your attention and loyalty.
- Someone who constantly proclaims they are trying to recover from rape, yet somehow you never see any meaningful attempts to change their lives. They still go on drinking,

drugging, cutting, hating themselves, without sacrificing any of those habits for the sake of real growth.

I hope I'm not sounding too negative. I'm not a poetic writer like some of the other women. I just want you to be safe and heal. If you want to heal, you have to face your rape instead of hiding from it. It took me 11 years of alcoholism, drug use, cutting, and sexing before I was finally tired of being "messed up." During that time, friends who swore they'd be with me through it all turned tail and ran at the first sign of how hard this really would be. I wasn't sure it was possible to come back from that kind of pain. I was afraid I was too messed up to make it.

But [my therapist] never lost faith in me. At my lowest points, he believed in me. I thought he was a fool for having more faith in me than I deserved. At first, I wanted to heal just to honor him. But later I realized what he had been telling me the whole time: I can only heal for myself. What he taught me is what I want to pass on to you. Working to please a therapist, partner, family, or anyone else is the wrong motive. I am proud of myself. I never thought I could say that again, and for over a decade I couldn't.

I have not cut myself, taken a single drink, had any abusive relationships, or even hated at myself in mirrors for over four years now. I don't live to please everyone else. I don't eat, or starve, or have sex, or keep

silent, to stuff my emotions. I also refuse to turn away when I see someone in pain. I just can't, not now that I know how it feels.

If you have just recently been raped, you don't have time to waste. You'll want so bad to ignore it, avoid it, convince everyone you're fine. You're not fine. None of us has ever been "fine" after being raped, and if you are "fine" after being raped, then you are clearly crazy! You'll fight it and fight it, and think nothing can ever put your pieces back together again. You'll feel disfigured, hateful, ruined for as many years as you try to stuff it rather than facing it, naming it, confronting it, and joining the rest of us Survivors with pride.

Please listen to the words of wisdom in this book. We are all telling you these things because we've been there. We're not phonies. We're not faking it anymore. We've all had to work through all sorts of hurt, blood, fear, shame, and wounds to be able to say these words. Today, we still have bad days, but we also laugh, play, love, pray, hope, and share. Please choose to be one of us.

*Sincerely,
Cassie*

