

Today, Be Kind to Yourself

 [nytimes.com/2018/09/28/style/self-care-sexual-assault-survivor-guide.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/28/style/self-care-sexual-assault-survivor-guide.html)

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The testimony Christine Blasey Ford gave before the Senate Judiciary Committee on Thursday about her alleged sexual assault by Judge Brett M. Kavanaugh captivated viewers across America. And for many survivors of sexual assault and trauma, her account triggered painful personal memories.

“They have been seared into my memory and haunted me episodically as an adult,” she said on Thursday of the events that unfolded in 1982.

Rape and sexual assault victims are the population most vulnerable to anguish and torment, according to RAINN, the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network — more so than any other group of people who have experienced a violent crime.

Survivors flooded Twitter and other social media sites with tales of exhaustion throughout the week. On Wednesday, the “Call Your Girlfriend” podcast host Aminatou Sow tweeted that the experience of sexual assault still “affects my life on a daily basis.”

“It feels impossible some days,” she wrote, summing up the feelings of many. “Especially this week.”

Sharing on social media — or logging off entirely — can help during these times. Here are some other ways survivors of sexual assault can practice self-care.

Ask yourself: What do I need right now?

Practicing self-compassion, or self-care, is meant to mitigate feelings of shame and judgment, which are often experienced by assault survivors and PTSD sufferers.

Dr. Kristin Neff, a professor of human development and culture at the University of Texas at Austin who has spent the past decade researching self-compassion, says most of her work is in the “yin” side, the nurturing side. But about a year ago, around the time the #MeToo movement began, a number of her friends revealed they had been sexually abused, and something shifted for her.

“They didn’t want to rock the boat. They just wanted to heal,” she said. “I was helping them see that, yes, we need to heal, but sometimes we need to rock the boat to protect ourselves.” Dr. Neff called this the “yang” side of self-compassion; instead of soft self-compassion it was *fierce* self-compassion. Mama bear energy. “It’s about drawing your boundaries and saying, ‘It’s not O.K.,’ which is equally important in the practice of self-compassion,” she said.

If you’re feeling overwhelmed, ask yourself the question: What do I need right now? You may need to be with friends, nurture yourself or comfort yourself to feel safe. Do any small thing that can bring small joy to yourself, she said. Even if it’s just indulging in ice cream.

“It helps heal some of those wounds. It’s not magic, but it can really go a long way,” she said. “Other times we need to take action.”

Feel whatever you’re feeling

Dr. Emily Dworkin, a senior fellow at the University of Washington School of Medicine who researches the use of social support among trauma victims, explained that trauma survivors can regain a sense of power over their experience when they “feel through those tough feelings” instead of tuning out.

“When you start to feel a lot of negative feelings, it’s easy to want to withdraw because it doesn’t feel good,” she said. “But feeling painful feelings is a huge part of self-care.”

There are healthy approaches to this, like journaling and crying when you need to; talking to a therapist or friend; and finding a shoulder to cry on.

Train your body, and your brain

Dr. Tracey J. Shors, a neuroscience and psychology professor at Rutgers University who has been studying the female brain and stress for 30 years, stumbled on meditation only about 10 years ago after a friend recommended it. “I thought it was about relaxing, but I was wrong,” she said. “It’s a way of learning how your own mind works.”

The experience propelled her to launch a study on what she already knew about aerobic exercise (that’s anything that gets your heart rate up and increases brain function) combined with meditation to help women who have had sexually violent experiences. In her research, Dr. Shors found that mental and physical training, or “MAP” training, which includes practicing meditation for 30 minutes followed by 30 minutes of exercise twice a week, helped women recover from traumatic sexual experiences.

Not only did participants have fewer trauma-related thoughts, but the training increased their feelings of self-worth. Most importantly, she said, participants had fewer repetitive thoughts about their past experiences.

“Every time you have a thought about the past, you theoretically make a new memory. And in some cases it’s good to bring up the memory because you want to learn not to respond to them. But if they’re coming up in a stressful way, maybe not so much,” she said. “The only way you can learn about your own mind is if you sit down and listen to it.”

Ground yourself

It is not uncommon for assault survivors to feel disconnected from their bodies. It’s described as an almost alien feeling — that you’re looking in at yourself from the outside. Grounding techniques can help people who are recovering from trauma reconnect with themselves, said Josie Torielli, the senior intervention consultant for the [New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault](#).

“Grounding is really just being able to put yourself in the present moment in a way that’s not threatening and that’s calming,” she said. One grounding method Ms. Torielli uses in practice is the “5, 4, 3, 2, 1 method,” which you can practice on your own or with a therapist. It’s a full sensory exercise: She asks people to name five things they can see in a room, four things they can hear in the room, three things they can touch or feel, two things they can smell and one good quality about themselves.

It can be hard to remember what your coping mechanisms are when you’re feeling activated or triggered, so it’s good to have a plan, she explained. Carry a talisman, an object that brings you a measure of comfort.

“Grounding can be something that you do when you’re on your way to something else,” Ms. Torielli said. And then once you feel a little more present, call a friend, walk, take a run. Or maybe you can find something to laugh about. “It’s important not to discount laughter,” she said. “It’s important to think of the things that can make you feel joy.”