

# Pandora's Project

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## Online Safety by Ash

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### Inside this issue:

Writing Contest Winners	2-3
Should I Press Charges?	4
Wendy Maltz Q&A	5-7

Social networking sites are becoming increasingly popular and are a way for many people to keep in touch with their friends. These kinds of sites can pose unique challenges for survivors of sexual assault. From protecting your online safety, to being contacted by an abuser or feeling the urge to make contact yourself, it can be difficult at times to know how to make sure that you are acting in your own self-interests. Many survivors struggle to learn how to put themselves first, and in the world of online social networking that can sometimes bring up difficult situations.

### What if your abuser contacts you?

We encourage everyone to take a close look at their privacy settings on all social media sites, such as Facebook. Do not feel guilty about denying a friend request from someone you do not know or do not want to see your personal information. This is your profile

and your decision. If your abuser tries to contact you through a social media website, you should consider immediately blocking this individual. If your abuser is sending you harassing or threatening messages, you might consider reporting them. Most websites have options to report harassing messages. You can find information on reporting them to Facebook [here](#).

Although it may be your instinct to delete any messages from an abuser, we recommend saving any threatening messages and keeping a log of any contact with the abuser. This will come in handy if you decide to speak to the police about what has happened.

Some survivors have reported being contacted by an abuser who acts friendly or acts like nothing has happened. This can

be particularly confusing, as it may bring up some difficult memories and others might not understand why you are upset, particularly if he/she hasn't said anything threatening or if no one else knows about the abuse. Allow yourself to process any difficult feelings that come up. Talk to a trusted friend or therapist about how you are feeling and about how difficult this is. Know that you are not alone and that it is natural to feel upset and confused. Keep reaching out for support as you work through this.

Are you looking for more information? Be sure to read the extended version of this article on our [website](#), where you can find information about online safety, dealing with inappropriate comments and more.

### Some resources:

- [Safety with Social Media](#) – Tips on staying safe with social media by Womenslaw
- [Reclaim Privacy](#) – Free online scan of your Facebook privacy settings



## Writing Contest Winners!

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In our last issue, we asked you to share your answer to the following question:

**“What would you like people to know about the impact of sexual assault?”**

We were overwhelmed by the number of entries we received as well as the diversity in the submissions. While we are only acknowledging a select group of winners here, we would like you all to know how much we appreciate the heart and soul that went into every submission. Thank you to everyone who participated! We look forward to future contests where we can acknowledge your thoughts on sexual violence and healing. Please visit the Pandya's message board to see all of the entries.

It's hard to imagine a time before I knew what it felt like to be all wrong.

I didn't know as a child that the wrong I felt was outside of me, that it was imposed on me. That's something I'm still learning.

You can't unfeel and you can't pray away that kind of trauma.

You can overcome it but you can't undo it.

Everyday is different. Sometimes most of the day passes without me remembering.

But most days I'm scared of my own mind, that demands I think of nothing else.

On those days I don't feel right in my own skin. It crawls and aches. My body remembers and I don't know how to make it stop.

-hp\_gracie

To the lucky ones –

Please accept the enduring nature of sexual assault – no-one just gets over it - it remains a part of one forever, but just that - a fragment; it is not all we are. Neither is it a reflection of who we were.

Be aware - secondary wounding cripples recovery. Never minimise or compare our experiences. We will recover in our own time and our own way – please allow us that. Comfort and support are invaluable and cost very little. Recognise that we are not tainted, freakish or dangerous. Also that pity is not helpful.

The knowledge of another's past may cause you unwanted feelings of awkwardness, confusion, guilt, fear. In such a situation, please be generous - don't shoot the messenger; the victim is not responsible for this, neither should they be expected to ease your discomfort.

Finally, understand that we were never to blame. Never.  
-Wil

### Society's Unwanted Secret

The impact of sexual assault goes far beyond words and emotions. Picture a pretty little flower, each petal representing certain human aspects : happiness, trust, love, inner beauty, integrity, security, potential. Now picture that flower being violently uprooted, the petals being torn apart. The flower is left flailing in the wind, the ruined pieces of herself shattered all around her.

It's a constant battle of the past vs. present. Searching for your true self among the distrust, guilt, shame, fear, insecurity, anger and self hate. Dependant on these new tools of self destruction to repair the damage . Knowing all the while you will never be who you were truly meant to be. A whole life shadowed by pain and confusion. The emotional turmoil scars internally, the only way to survive is to separate yourself from reality and existing on the fringes of society.

-RavenButterfly

## Writing Contest Winners! (continued)

I want to tell you  
 What it is like to feel the blame  
 To hurt deep inside  
 And hide in shame  
 I want you to know  
 Why I could never tell  
 How the words just wouldn't come  
 However hard I would yell  
 I want you to see  
 The real me  
 The person that I was meant to be  
 I want you to know  
 That sometimes I don't feel  
 That I numb myself  
 But that I want to heal  
 I want you to know  
 That if you are like me  
 Come take my hand  
 There is a greater strength in we  
 -Natalie Burns

### Did you Know

Did you know long ago  
 when you hurt her  
 how it would still be affecting her today

Don't get me wrong  
 she's so strong  
 she's an angel  
 with a past that she just won't erase

Some nights  
 I still hear her cry  
 she's still hurting  
 even after all the healing

It is easier to be  
 angry, living miserably  
 Though it is hard to forgive  
 a girl has to live

Through the tears and the years  
 as she has built up her life  
 and discovered what's inside

If you are wondering  
 who this may be  
 that little girl  
 she was me

-Tessa Shea

## Check this out...

### [Start by Believing](#)

"*Start by Believing* is a public awareness campaign uniquely focused on the public response to sexual assault." You can share your story and encourage others to make a personal commitment to believing victims of sexual violence.

### [Need Help Now](#)

Need Help Now is a site that provides information to people who have been the victim of sexual picture or video sharing by their peers. You can find information on removing the pictures, dealing with the situation and getting help. The site is Canadian-based and is primarily geared towards teens, but the information is helpful and can apply to anyone.

### [Intimate Partner Sexual Violence: A Multidisciplinary Guide to Improving Services and Support for Survivors of Rape and Abuse](#)

Coming soon! A new book co-edited by Pandey's Board of Directors member Louise McOrmond-Plummer.

### [Dear Jane Doe – A Steubenville Tribute](#)

A video tribute "dedicated to the Jane Doe of Steubenville and all the Jane Does and John Does who have been victims of sexual violence."



## Should I Press Charges? By Ash

This is a question that most survivors have come across at some point during their healing process. The decision to pursue legal action is a very personal one. Everyone will have a different reason for choosing whether or not to pursue charges. Regardless of whether you are considering speaking to the police hours after an attack, or years down the road, it is important that you weigh your options and make the choice that is right for **you**.

Chances are that you will experience pressure from family or friends to report the attack to police. While most people mean well, they often do not understand what is involved and the emotional toll that the process can take on an individual. No matter what your family and friends tell you, you do not *have* to report; this is your experience and this is a decision that you must make for yourself. Do not be afraid to speak up for yourself and to explain that this is a decision you need to make.

When you are trying to decide whether to speak to the police and start the legal process, it is important to evaluate all of your options. Take some time to think about why you do and don't want to press charges and what you would like to get out of the process. Your primary concern here should be you.

The ultimate motivation for your decision should focus on you and your healing, and should not be dependent on the perpetrator or the outcome of the trial. If your only objective is to have the perpetrator found guilty, you could end up disappointed. But if you focus on yourself and your personal goals, you are more likely to be satisfied, regardless of the outcome of the trial. It is important to look at all the possibilities and think about how you would deal with those potential situations.

Fear is a common factor cited by survivors who choose not to press charges. It's completely natural to be afraid or unsure, but try not to let those feelings be the sole motivation in making your decision. There are ways to address those feelings and work through them, so they should not hold you back if this is something you would like to do.

No matter what you decide to do, remember that you are not alone and that you deserve to have support throughout your healing process. You can find peer support on legal and other issues at [Pandora's Aquarium](#).

Find more information on deciding to report or not to report on our [website](#).

### Some questions you might consider when making this decision are:

*Will this help keep me physically safe?*

*Will I have people to support me through the process?*

*What would I like the outcome to be?*

*How will I feel if I do not get my desired outcome?*

*How will this benefit my healing?*

## Sexual Healing: An Interview with Certified Diplomat Sex Therapist Wendy Maltz, LCSW **Part II**

*I'm afraid to start dating again because I fear the topic of sex. Do I need to work on sexual healing before starting to date? Or is it better to pursue sexual healing with a partner?*

One of the first steps in sexual healing is to develop a new attitude about sex. A survivor needs to be able to think of sex as something different from what occurred in abuse.

What words and feelings do you commonly associate with sex? If words like “fear, hurt, pain, obligation, disgust, out-of-control, pressure, and unhappiness” come to mind then you probably have a concept of sex that has been contaminated by the past abuse. When you toss out the old concept of sex learned in the abuse, you can begin thinking about sex as something positive, consensual, safe, fun, pleasurable, genuinely caring, and life-affirming. There are many helpful strategies for developing a new concept for sex. To start, you may want to find out more about healthy sex, and how it is based on conditions such as consent, equality, mutual respect, trust and safety. My website, [www.healthysex.com](http://www.healthysex.com), and book, *The Sexual Healing Journey*, have sections devoted to assisting you. You can also talk with people who have positive attitudes about sex. Ask them how they think about sex, what's healthy about it, and why.

Changing sexual attitudes is a step in sexual healing you can take whether you are in a relationship or not. However, if just the thought of discussing the topic of sex with a new partner has you shaking in your boots, you may want to get some attitudinal changes going first. Having your own ideas of healthy sex firmly in place can also help you select a partner with a compatible approach to intimacy.

*I have a long history of abuse and was taught that my self-worth was tied to being sexual. I now find myself using sex in unhealthy ways and having sex with people I don't like. How do I go about finding my self-worth outside of sex and abuse?*

You have a unique and healthy sexuality that has nothing to do with the abuse. One of the great benefits of sexual recovery is that you get a chance to undo negative messages about your sexuality learned in the abuse and create a sexual self-concept that is positive and enhances your self-esteem. You now can be who you want to be as a sexual person.

There are a number of important steps you can take to improve your sexual self-worth. First off, stop engaging patterns of sexual activity that mimic what happened in the abuse. Don't have sex under pressure. Don't have sex simply to please someone else. And, don't settle for a partner who treats you like a sex object or performer. Many survivors report that it helps to take a time-out from sex for several months or more. This period of abstinence can give you an opportunity to distance yourself from unhealthy behaviors and start a new. You learn to focus on yourself as a valuable person—your talents, dreams, contributions, and positive relationships. You start building your self-esteem from within—without sex at first, and then later as a healthier kind of sexual person.

Due to the abuse, you may never have gotten a chance to learn to have compassion for your self, to understand your needs and limits, and, most of all, to love and respect yourself. Later you can learn to connect this healthy self-love with sexual feeling and expression. Sex can then become something you desire for your self, and are able to choose to joyously share with a partner, within a context of mutual respect.

*I am a survivor of rape and have just started seeing someone new. Should I tell him about my rape before we have sex for the first time? Do I have to tell him at all?*

You need to decide whether and when to tell a new partner about the past rape. On the one hand, it's understandable to feel some anxiety about discussing past sexual abuse with anyone you don't yet know very well. On the other hand, this is important information about yourself. Withholding it could undermine the development of trust and set you up for experiencing problems in sexual intimacy.

You may want to consider a number of factors in deciding whether to share with this new partner.

--*What is it about sharing that triggers so much discomfort?* Do you worry he will be overly inquisitive or sensitive? Are you concerned he'll be overwhelmed and reject you? Do you fear he will lack understanding and compassion? Often when a survivor feels lots of discomfort about sharing it is a sign that she is carrying around unnecessary guilt and shame about what happened to her. If this is the case, it can be helpful to get to a place where you accept the rape as past trauma-like being the victim of a robbery or getting hit by a bus – rather than something that influences your value or defines you.

--How comfortable are you with your sexuality and sexual relating now? Informing a new partner about past sex trauma can be very helpful if you need him to be sensitive about intimate touches, activities, and overall treatment. Without this knowledge a new partner is like a person walking unawares in a minefield. Uninformed, he runs a high risk of doing something in sex that inadvertently increases your anxiety and triggers unpleasant memories—harming sexual satisfaction for both of you.

--What kind of relationship do you want with him? If you are considering developing a meaningful, long-term relationship with the guy, then it makes sense to put your cards on the table now. Wouldn't it be in both your best interests to let him know about this significant life experience? Wouldn't you want him to tell you if he had experienced something of this nature himself? Honesty from *both of you* is critically important to establishing a healthy, caring relationship. A partner worth keeping will admire you for your openness and thank you for trusting him with the information.

If you do decide to disclose the past rape, remember that you are in the driver's seat with this process. You choose when, how, and how much you want to share at any given time. I often recommend survivors share "in safety and in steps." You start with providing a brief general description of what you experienced and share more specifics at a later time only as they become more relevant to deepening emotional intimacy. (More specific information about disclosing past sexual abuse is provided in Chapter 9 of [The Sexual Healing Journey](#)).

*I am dating a supportive partner, but I have zero sex drive. I find that it's easier to just push myself through it rather than say no. I want to want sex, so how can I make myself get into it?*

Low sex desire is one of the most common sexual concerns for survivors. Possible causes are plentiful, and can include everything from low hormones (testosterone is the hormone of desire), tiredness, stress, and medication side effects, to relationship factors such as inadequate lovemaking techniques, lack of communication, and built-up resentments.

A chronic lack of sexual desire may be related to other factors, as well. These include: being afraid of sex, approaching sex as an obligation, feeling disgust about sex, fearing flashbacks to abuse, sexual pain, functioning problems, and troublesome sexual fantasies. Because of the wide range of possible causes, it's always a good idea to be evaluated by a medical professional, as well as to speak with a mental health professional who specializes in treating abuse survivors and is trained in addressing the sexual repercussions of abuse.

The approach of forcing yourself to have sex when you really don't want to usually backfires. Instead of coming to feel more comfortable with sex, most survivors who do this a lot end up resenting sex. They are more likely to unconsciously associate their intimate partner with the perpetrator of the past--someone who demands or expects sex from you when you really don't want to be doing it.

If you really don't want to be engaging in sex right now, then don't do it. Develop some compassion for the part of you that needs a break. A period away from sex can be crucial to healing. It can provide an opportunity to resolve psychological issues related to the abuse, form new attitudes about sex and yourself as a sexual person, and begin a program of relearning touch, that allows you to approach touch and sex in new ways. Freed from feelings of obligation, you can later return to sex gradually, following your own natural curiosities and interests. For sex to become something you really want, you will need to identify and honor the conditions that enable you to experience sex as positive intimate sharing.

*I feel like my partner is becoming impatient with my sexual healing. What can I do?*

First off, talk with your partner. Find out if your hunch is correct. Discuss how each of you are feeling about the process of sexual healing and what you each need. Brainstorm ways you can work together better and move sexual healing along at a steady pace.

It's common for intimate partners to feel impatient with this process, at times. Partners can't *see* progress, as well as survivors *feel* it happening—especially in the early stages of sexual healing. And, they are dependent on the survivor to face problems, keep progress going, and make changes towards healthy sexual intimacy.

Good communication can help reduce stress. Have regular discussions with your partner. Share what you are doing to heal. Reveal what you are learning and how your attitudes about sex and feelings about yourself as a sexual person are changing.

Involve your partner in the process of healing. Partners often feel better when they become more educated about what is going on and learn specific ways they can help. Partners often benefit from attending some counseling sessions with the survivor. And they are often relieved when they join with the survivors in doing a series of relearning touch exercises. As a survivor you can help by maintaining physical affection such as, hand-holding, hugging, cuddling, stroking, and massage, even when you are taking a break from sex. Partners who are kept informed and actively involved in the healing process are better able to facilitate the sexual recovery and cope well with how long it takes.

For information on specific ways intimate partners can participate in sexual healing see Chapter 9 in [The Sexual Healing Journey](#) and Wendy's DVDs for couples: "[Partners in Healing](#)" and "[Relearning Touch.](#)"

*Sometimes, the only way I can enjoy sex with my partner is to think about the abuse during sex. I don't tell my partner what I'm thinking about. Should I stop?*

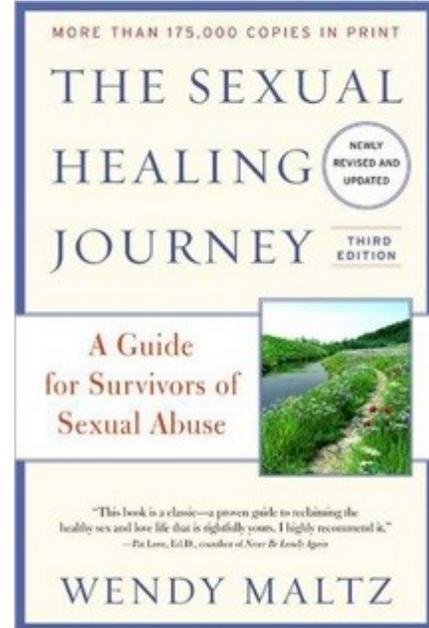
When you say the “only way” you can enjoy sex I am assuming you mean that you have become dependent on sexual fantasies of abuse to increase arousal and achieve orgasm. As mentioned earlier, many survivors experience abuse fantasies as a repercussion of the early trauma. A question is: *Do you want to stop having them?* Even though you have become conditioned to using them for arousal, know that change is possible and that you are capable of learning new ways to increase sexual excitement and reach orgasm.

Telling a partner about abuse-related fantasies can help a survivor overcome shame and develop emotional closeness in her relationship. And, if you want to get rid of the fantasies, bringing them out into the open more can help diminish their pull and power. Sexual fantasy revelations are best shared with a partner who is educated about the nature of sexual fantasies and how they can play out as a result of abuse trauma. An informed partner is less likely to have a negative response or misinterpret what your sexual fantasies mean.

Remember, too, that you can share in general terms, and don't have to share specific details. For instance, a survivor might share, “I'm having some sexual abuse thoughts intrude again. Could we stop and you just hold me for a while?” Later, sex can be continued focusing more on sensual touches, different sexual activities, affectionate feelings, and being in the present moment.

*Wendy Maltz, LCSW, DST, is an internationally recognized psychotherapist and expert on healthy sexuality and sexual recovery. A licensed clinical social worker, licensed marriage and family therapist, and a certified diplomat of sex therapy, Wendy has more than thirty years of clinical experience treating sex, intimacy, and relationship concerns. She is co-director of Maltz Counseling Associates in Eugene, Oregon, and an adjunct professor at the University of Oregon Graduate Program in Couples and Family Therapy.*

Her web site is [www.HealthySex.com](http://www.HealthySex.com).



*[The Sexual Healing Journey by Wendy Maltz](#)*

A huge thank you to Wendy Maltz for taking the time to answer questions from our members. If you haven't already, be sure to check out the first part of the Q&A in our [March issue](#).

Please stop by Wendy's website at <http://www.healthysex.com/> and read her book, [The Sexual Healing Journey](#) for more information.