

# Module 4: Safe Survivor Action - Risk Awareness



what we wish we had known when we started

"I wish someone had warned me about this *before*."

This is what we, as seasoned survivor advocates and educators, had been saying to ourselves when we decided to create this training.

Our goal is not to discourage you, but instead to ensure you gain the knowledge and tools you need to avoid harm. We found our way without any guardrails so that you don't have to. We want to empower you to thrive, for the long-term.

No objective is worth your harm, even if it's important. As we said from the start of this training, your well-being is the top priority.




# Finding a safe balance is crucial for sustainable survivor work.

Doing survivor activism and support work can be very rewarding and fulfilling. Our experiences have been very meaningful; however, there are things we wish we would have known about before and done differently. It has been both inspiring and discouraging, healing and sometimes even dangerous or harmful.

As survivors, we have all been subjected to challenges working in the field, and witnessed a pattern of this happening to others. That's why we want to give you examples, tools and a guide on how to protect yourself before you go further.





With this in mind, we do want to encourage you to engage in this field if you want to, as your voice is powerful and important.

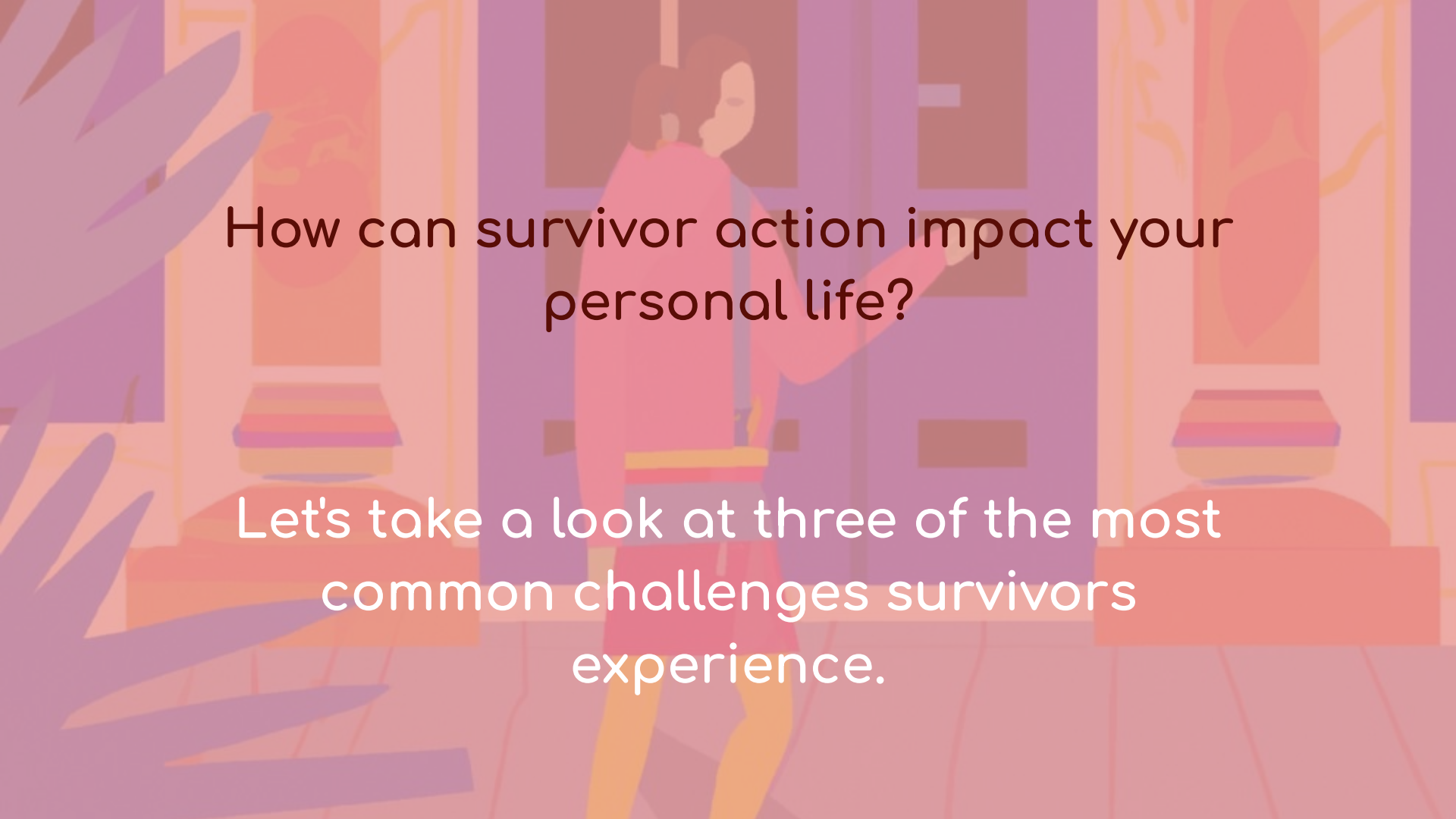
At the same time, we want you to only start this journey if and when you feel ready to look after yourself - we only can help others if we remain safe and stay healthy ourselves.

You deserve to know the risks *beforehand* so that you can make informed decisions about what is best for you personally.

## After completing this module, you will:

- ❑ Understand how working in this field can possibly impact your mental health, private life, education, relationships and career.
- ❑ Become aware of the most common risks for survivors in action so you can quickly recognise the signs and react to protect yourself.
- ❑ Decide what safety looks like in your personal context and set boundaries to safeguard your own wellbeing.

In the next Module, we will make a Safety Plan to prepare yourself so that if something happens, you are ready.



How can survivor action impact your  
personal life?

Let's take a look at three of the most  
common challenges survivors  
experience.

# 1. Your relationships and private life may be affected.

Survivor work can weigh on old and new personal relationships. Sadly, some people may not support you or they may have their own problems with this topic in general.

Coming out about your story of sexual violence or abuse experiences can result in losing people in your life – but if this happens they were probably not the best people to have in your life in the first place. The right people will stay, support your choices and want you to engage in work that is important for you. That said, the loss can still be painful, even if it is ultimately the best outcome for you in the long-term.

For some, they may not be ready to face the reality of what you experienced. For others, they may struggle to understand your journey and feelings. Sometimes they may feel a confusing connection to your abuser, even if you tell them what happened to you.

They may not want to believe your story because it will make them feel scared, sad, uncomfortable, or contradict their own inner narrative. This can feel devastating for you, but **remember always: you're not alone**, and many other survivors share your pain.



It's essential to surround yourself with empathetic and supportive individuals you can trust.

This may take time, but it's worth it. For fully public survivors, you may also experience unexpected reactions from strangers. Some may offer kindness, while others may not.

People may recognise you when you are out. This may result in good interactions, but it can also lead to the opposite and subject you to various forms of aggression or harassment.

You may face **safety issues** related to being recognised as a public figure in a stigmatised field.





For some survivors, it may feel good that they don't have to "hide" anymore.

Other survivors sometimes feel reduced to just being "the survivor".

This is dependent on the environment and people around them, and on how people are reacting and treating them.

It's important to keep relationships with people who see the whole you, and keep reminding yourself that you are so much more than a survivor.

**This is not your full identity.**



## 2. Your education or career can be disrupted.

Education and income are key to independence. Some survivors are exploited from a very young age; because of this, they are not able to start or complete their education or gain financial security. This presents unique risks and vulnerability.

When a survivor is still in school, training or university, they should consider the risk that engaging in this field could pose to their ability to complete their education. They should decide if now is the right time, or if it's better to wait until they have completed their education or training.

Unfortunately, you might also face stigma and discrimination as a public survivor in your career. Bad acting employers or colleagues can use this against you, for example, to try to discredit you or put you down. In some contexts, this is illegal and considered workplace discrimination. It's crucial to know your rights and seek support.

# Here are four examples of how this might impact your education or career:

1. Many survivors start engaging with a sense of euphoria and enthusiasm; this can be very energising, but it can also become all-consuming and, when combined with studies or work, quickly lead to burnout or overwhelm.
2. The emotional toll of returning to previously traumatic topics can hinder your focus. Increased stress may lead to absenteeism, and distraction can impact your ability to concentrate on other things.
3. If you enter into a high-risk activity too quickly, you might become vulnerable to other influences or situations which could disrupt your learning or work.
4. If you decide not to complete your studies and to focus on survivor activism, this might be exciting in the short-term but problematic in the long-term. In a few years, you may wish you could change to do something else, but feel stuck without a diploma, degree or enough experience. This could lead to financial insecurity and limited career opportunities later.



We highly recommend prioritising your education and stability before engaging in high-risk survivor actions or activities.

You will be better prepared to have more of an impact and maintain sustainable balance in your life if you have a solid educational and professional foundation first to build upon.

Instead, at least when starting out, consider exploring volunteer opportunities that complement your studies or work, join communities or become involved on a behind-the-scenes basis.

Low commitment options allow you the flexibility to take a pause or a step back if you start to become overwhelmed or unwell.

### 3. Retraumatisation

Retraumatisation is a repetition or re-experience of psychological, emotional, or mental trauma from your past.

When people with previous traumatic experiences face discrimination, harassment, a renewed experience of violence or anything that they connect with their history of abuse, it can psychologically reconnect them with their previously experienced trauma - this is re-traumatisation.

The previously-experienced suffering and the associated symptoms are then activated in the body.

Sometimes this may be entirely subconscious, and you may not be aware of what is going on.





A person with long brown hair, wearing a dark hoodie, is shown from the chest up. They have their hands pressed against their face, covering their eyes and nose, in a gesture of distress or emotional pain. The background is blurred, showing other people in a public setting. The entire image has a semi-transparent reddish-pink overlay.

Retraumatization and distress in survivor action is unfortunately common.


Retraumatization can happen when survivors are confronted with situations or other external factors that remind them of their experience of exploitation or abuse.

It feels like dropping back into the past, and can cause intense and upsetting feelings.

## Common symptoms of mental health distress experienced by survivors:

Body shaking, trembling hands	Difficulty sleeping, insomnia	Startling or getting scared easily, jumpy
Flashbacks; feeling like you're reliving a specific trauma experience	Strong urges to avoid anything that might remind you of the abuse	Apathy or disinterest in your life and loved ones; loneliness, isolation
Depression or high anxiety, spinning thoughts, obsessions	Hypervigilance, feeling like you're on high alert	Regular irritability, easily upset, crying often
Trouble breathing, quickened breath	Sudden anger or sadness outbursts	Problems with remembering things, foggy memory
Excessive sweating; overheating	Headaches, stomach aches, body aches	Low self-esteem, highly self-critical, guilty feelings
Trouble eating, loss of appetite or overeating; vomiting	Dizziness, a sense that the room is spinning	Weakened immune system; frequent colds or flus, other ongoing injuries



A background image showing two women in profile, facing each other and talking. The woman on the left has long dark hair and is wearing a dark top. The woman on the right has shoulder-length blonde hair and is wearing a light-colored jacket. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter.

## Just because these symptoms are common does not mean they are safe or acceptable.

You should take your symptoms as serious, important indicators of a health problem and seek professional help to address these issues.

Talk to a therapist, doctor and/or other supporting people to find the right resources, and develop a personal Safety Plan (we will come to this later in Module 6).

If you experience one or more of the symptoms above while working as a survivor, it's important to address it before you keep going. However, if you continue to experience symptoms like the ones listed above, you may not be in a safe state to participate in survivor action - at least for now. You might also be experiencing distress even without having any of the symptoms listed above.

# Reflection

Please take a moment to reflect by writing in your journal about how you personally feel you might be affected in your education, private life, and/or working life if you pursue survivor action in this field.

- ☐ Do you recognise any of the symptoms described in the retraumatisation section in yourself?
- ☐ Take a note of which ones you have experienced if so.
- ☐ Are these risks worth it to you at this point in your life?
- ☐ Are there ways you can make your actions less risky and safer for you?
- ☐ Who can you trust to be there to support you?

**Before taking risky action as a survivor, ask: is there a safer option?**

# Threats to Survivors in Action

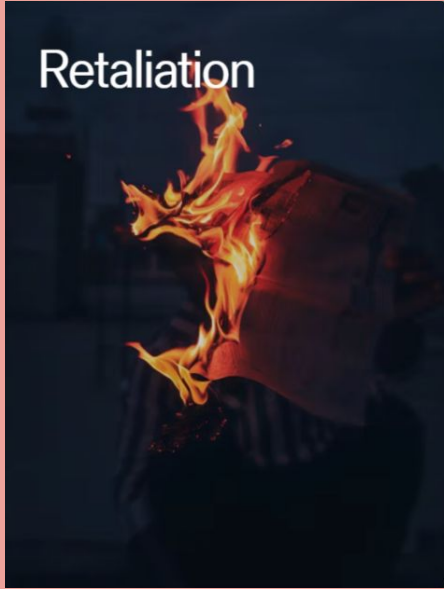
In this section, we will cover some of the more serious risks of danger and safety issues some survivors face when taking action. In the next module, we will help you create a personalised Safety Plan to prepare for them.

**Content Warning:** We will describe some potentially harmful scenarios that may cause you to feel an emotional reaction. Remember that you can take a break at any time and come back whenever you feel ready.



# Direct Threats

Retaliation



DARVO



Re-exploitation



New Harm



# Direct threats

Direct threats are explicit and immediate, posing real danger. They are often considered a crime. They may arise in various forms, such as intimidation, harassment or even physical violence.

Direct threats may most likely come from:

- The original abuser(s)
- Other abusers who feel exposed
- The abuser's supporters, family, friends or fans
- Anti-survivor activists or political opposition

Survivors who engage in public advocacy or visible survivor action are at the highest risk for direct threats. These threats can escalate quickly and unpredictably.

Why do direct threats usually occur? Because survivors may become empowered when they break their silence; this can cause abusers, their supporters and other perpetrators to retaliate to instill fear, maintain control and/or take revenge.



# Retaliation

When a survivor speaks out, one of the most common reactions from an abuser or their supporters is to deny the truth and attempt to discredit the survivor. They may attack their character, reputation or credibility online or in person.

They may also try to attack them psychologically or physically to scare them back into silence. This retaliation can be deeply traumatising.

They may use tactics to humiliate or embarrass the survivor, or frighten and isolate them. They may even make false accusations and take court action, such as filing restraining orders or defamation lawsuits.



# DARVO

DARVO is an acronym standing for Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender. This is a very common manipulative strategy an abuser or their supporters may use to shift blame and confuse the narrative.

They will try to make the survivor seem like the aggressor while portraying themselves as the victim. This is an effort to trick others into doubting the survivor's truth, and can lead to isolation, retraumatisation and other serious harm.

D

Deny

A

Attack

R

Reverse

V

Victim

O

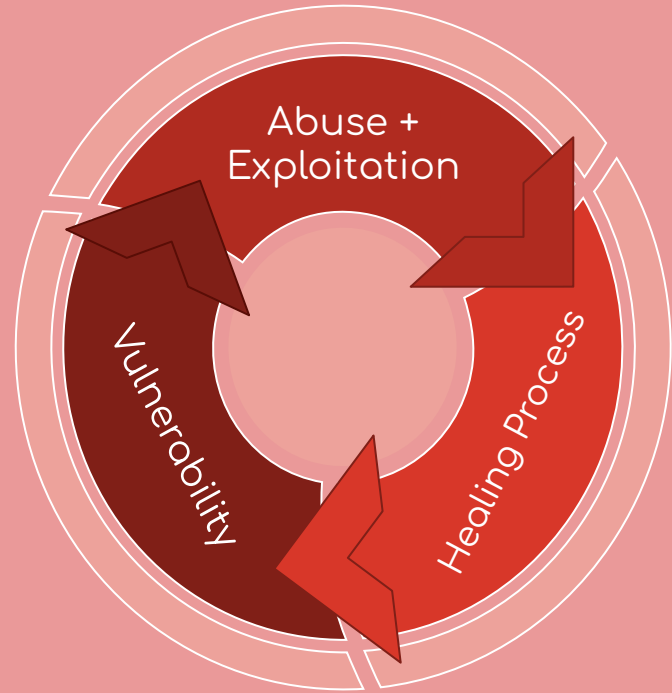
Offender



# Re-exploitation

Re-exploitation can entail situations where survivors fall back into the cycle of the exploitation with an abuser. This does not have to be the same kind of exploitation as before.

As the journey to recovery and resilience is difficult and time-consuming, survivors on this path can along the way be exposed to individuals who try to take advantage of the unstable and vulnerable position that the survivor is in and re-exploit them.



# Take threats seriously.

The consequences of direct threats can be serious and severe. Some survivors have even described them as worse than the original abuse they experienced, especially when they do permanent or highly public damage.

It is essential for survivors to be prepared for how they will react to direct threats before they take any action that will increase their risk - such as speaking publicly or posting online.

We will cover this in the Safety Plan in Module 5. This crucial preparation can help mitigate potential harm.

# Dehumanisation: Survivors are sometimes treated as stories.

## This is harmful.

Survivors are often exposed to absolutely unpleasant and dangerous sensationalism. Some people expect survivors to be available to share highly-personal and traumatic details on demand. This is not acceptable or safe, but unfortunately it still happens often.

Retraumatisation can happen to survivors when they are reduced to being seen only as their abuse story. In that way, they are not known as unique individuals and experts, but instead as "the survivor story" where only their past is seen, not the present person with valuable, unique thoughts and expertise to offer. Dehumanisation undermines their agency and expertise, and can hurt the survivor's identity and self-confidence.

Examples:

1. A journalist without trauma sensitivity training may ask a survivor, "Tell me the most horrific part of your story; everything else you have to say is not as relevant for our viewership, so we don't need it."
2. A survivor is invited for a panel where experts speak about sexual abuse policies; the event organisers only ask the survivor to share their abuse story, while the other panelists are asked for their opinions about potential solutions and how to improve laws.

# Tokenism occurs when survivors are only invited as a symbol.

When survivors are included only for superficial reasons - such as public image or a quota - their actual voices are still silenced. Although it may look like survivors are represented, tokenism actually results in further marginalisation, misinformation and exclusion.

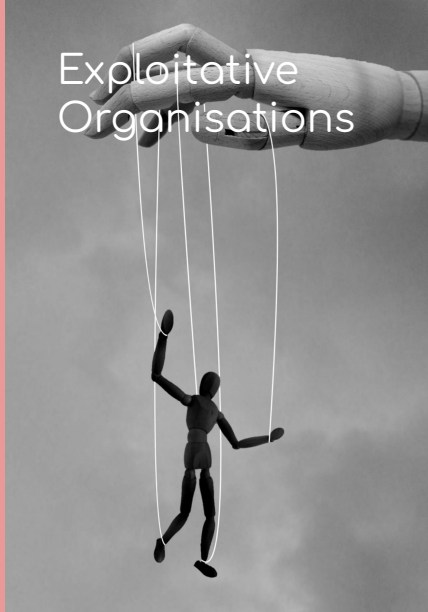
Examples:

1. A politician takes photos with a survivor to post on their social media, but they do not actually listen to the survivor.
2. A survivor is invited to speak at an event, but is given a script written for them instead of the freedom to speak for themselves.
3. A survivor is featured in a documentary, but their story is edited to fit a misleading narrative.



# Third-Party Threats

Exploitative  
Organisations



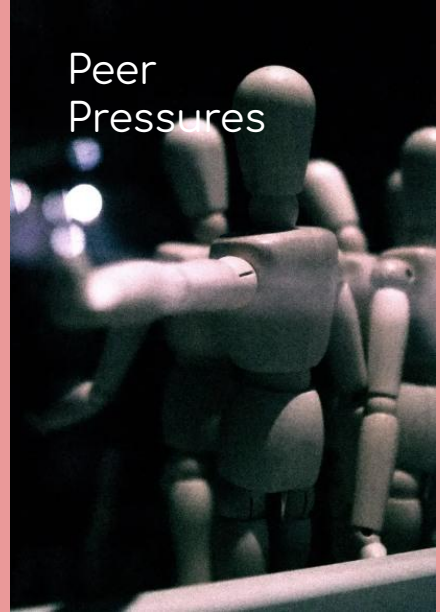
Story  
Stealers



Predatory  
Politicians



Peer  
Pressures



# Third-Party Threats

Third-party threats is an umbrella term to describe risks of harm to survivors in action that come from all other sources.

They are not usually crimes, but typically involve predatory behaviour that can still do significant damage to a survivor.

Often, these threats are unintentional: this means the people harming the survivor may not be intending to hurt them but do not realise the impact of their actions.





## Exploitative Organisations

Some organisations or individuals may market themselves as survivor-centred or trauma-sensitive - when in fact they do the opposite.

They may position themselves as supporting survivors but then exploit and harm them. This may be most often through retraumatising activities, risky actions, abusing unpaid or underpaid survivor labour, and using survivors for their own gain.

They may also guilt or pressure survivors to violate their boundaries for the sake of the cause. This manipulative pressure may cause distress and other serious consequences.





## Story Stealers

Story stealers may be journalists, documentary makers or content creators who exploit survivor narratives for their own profit or attention.

They may use interview tactics to trick survivors into revealing personal details. They may sensationalise the survivor story to attract more views, leaving out important context and manipulating the narrative to fit their own agenda.

Once it's out, it can be impossible to take back. This can dehumanise and harm the survivor. In worse cases, it can also result in outright exploitation or danger.



## Predatory Politicians

Predatory politicians abuse their political position and power for their own gain.

They may exploit survivors to manipulate public opinion in their favour. For example, they might invite a survivor to appear in events or photos with them so that the public will believe they are helping survivors - even when they are not.

These kinds of politicians may expose survivors to high risks of harm, or trick them into compromising situations for personal gain. This manipulation can lead to further trauma for survivors.



## Peer Pressures

Joining the survivor community can be an incredibly wonderful experience that helps you feel connected and less alone. It can also come with unique challenges.

You may feel a strong emotional bond very quickly when meeting people who can relate to your painful experiences. Survivors have to be prepared to navigate complex conflicts within this context.

Some common issues are peer pressure to act against your own values or wellbeing, and/or competition for limited attention, funding or recognition in the movement that may cause hostility.

We will cover how to prepare to handle these situations safely in the next Module.

If you are interested or might be someday want to be involved with documentary makers, journalists, advocacy organisations, and/or political activism - first take our free Survivor Communication Training.

This training will prepare you to safely communicate with these entities without putting yourself in a vulnerable position or risking further trauma.



# Digital Threats

There are three main categories of digital threat survivors should consider before taking action.

We will cover what to do to prepare for and react to these threats in Module 5.



# 1. Cyber Harassment or Online Bullying

When a public survivor is active on social media, they are at high risk of receiving negative comments, harmful messages and upsetting engagement. This can come from trolls, bullies, bots, anonymous users, or even people the survivor knows.

If the survivor has a viral moment or a large following, the risk may increase proportionate to their visibility. While one hurtful message or comment alone may be distressing, the cumulative effect of many can be overwhelming and psychologically damaging.



## 2. Doxxing

Doxxing is the act of publicly revealing personal information, such as full name, an image or video of them, their contact information, location or private details. This invasion of privacy can lead to serious consequences.

Survivors may face threats to their safety as a result and emotional distress. It can also result in physical harassment or stalking. This can create a constant state of fear or anxiety.



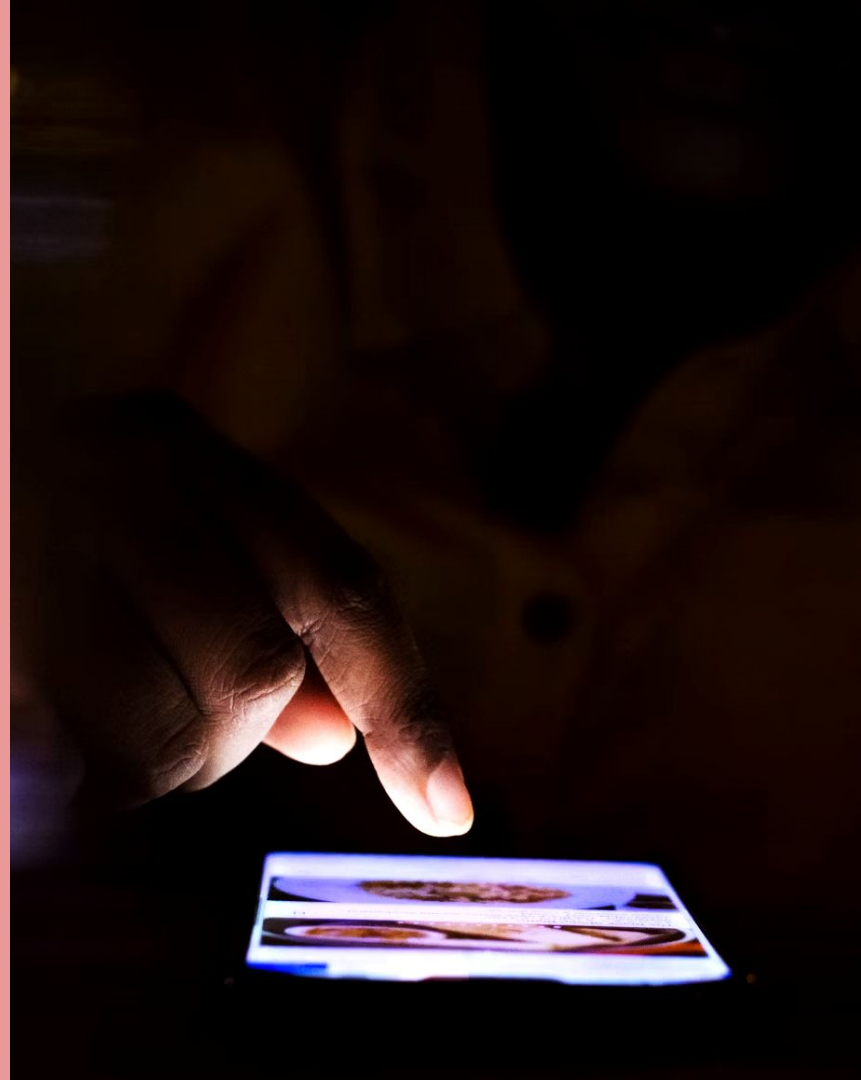


### 3. Blackmail or Extortion

Blackmail is when someone threatens to reveal damaging information unless their demands are met. Similarly, extortion means using threats to obtain something of value from someone. Both can severely impact a survivor's safety and wellbeing.

Especially for survivors who have sensitive information about their abuse or personal history, this can be extremely distressing and isolating.

It can lead to feelings of helplessness and retraumatisation, that they are being controlled and once again a victim of abuse. Survivors with photos or videos of their abuse (e.g. CSAM) are at very high risk of these kinds of threats.





## Self-Harm

Self-harm can come in several forms. It may involve doing physically violent acts to your body, such as cutting, burning, hair pulling, scratching or hitting oneself. It can include behaviors like drinking excessive alcohol or taking dangerous substances. These actions often serve as a coping mechanism for emotional pain.

It may also involve risky, self-destructive or even self-sacrificing behaviour. Survivors may have an urge to punish themselves or feel unworthy of respect, love and happiness due to the abuse they have experienced.

They might struggle with feelings of guilt and shame, and have a harder time avoiding threatening people or situations due to this.

In serious cases, it can also involve thoughts of suicide or serious self-inflicted harm.

# Survivor Action as a Form of Self-Harm



For some survivors, activism itself may be a form of self-harming behaviour.

They may become attracted to or even addicted to the feelings of retraumatisation they experience in unsafe contexts or with people who compromise their wellbeing.

They may put themselves in unsafe situations or push past their own limits and personal boundaries, embracing the suffering they take on as a result, as an effort to prove to themselves or others that they are "good enough" or worthy of respect and love.

This form of self-harm can be particularly damaging for survivors, and it may be hard for people on the outside to recognise it or intervene. The effects can be just as harmful as physical self-harm, leading to additional long-term trauma symptoms.

It's essential for survivors to get help and stop or at least pause activism or support actions if they are using it as a form of self-harm - even if they have been doing so without knowing it.

If you or someone you know is experiencing self-harm, it's crucial to seek help as soon as possible.

Reach out to a trusted friend and/or a professional.

You can use [Find a Helpline](#) to connect with free resources and support services local to you in your preferred language.




Remember that you are never alone and help is available for you.

# Pause

This module was heavy and may have brought up some emotional reactions for you. You can take a moment now to breathe deeply, reflect on your feelings and maybe take a short walk or get a drink of water/snack. If it's helpful for you, take two minutes now to do the grounding exercise in the video below:



An illustration in a painterly style showing a person with long dark hair, wearing a red top, sitting at a desk and reading a book. On the desk is a laptop and some papers. The background is a soft, muted color.

# You've now completed Module 4: Safe Survivor Action - Risk Awareness

[Click here to move on to  
Module 5: Create Your Personal Safety Plan](#)