



Benefits & Risks of Social Media Groups for Survivors

Social Media Groups for Survivors

Social media is a powerful means by which people connect with others to share information, experiences, ideas, and opportunities. In recent years, numerous social media groups have been established whose purpose is to offer a space for survivors of sexual assault or abuse to share their stories and gain perspective and support from survivors. Some of these groups are managed by visible nonprofit or advocacy organizations, while others are managed by individuals or grassroots groups of people who are survivors or otherwise care about the issue of sexual assault. The popularity of social media groups suggest that survivors receive certain benefits from these groups that they have been unable or unwilling to access otherwise.

The Benefits of Social Media Groups

Social media groups dedicated to the issue of sexual violence offer some benefits that some survivors find to be safe, supportive, or otherwise appealing:

- **Anonymity:** while complete anonymity is impossible to achieve online, it is easier for some survivors to speak about difficult topics with greater honesty and authenticity online than they would in a face-to-face setting. This is especially appealing for survivors who have not felt capable of sharing their experiences via traditional means due to fear, a lack of support, or a sense of shame or embarrassment in their daily lives.
- **Accessibility:** social media groups are free to join and are accessible 24/7, which is often appealing to survivors who need connection or support outside of business hours, or who cannot access available or affordable face-to-face services in their community.
- **Acceptance:** social media groups for survivors offer a built-in electronic community of individuals who have endured similar experiences. This is often especially appealing for survivors who feel isolated, dismissed, misunderstood, or otherwise unsupported in their daily lives.

The Risks of Social Media Groups

Unfortunately social media groups for survivors also include risks:

- **Anonymity of others:** anyone can create or join a social media group, including offenders. Even among closed groups that require approval from an administrator to join, anyone can create a false persona online that enables them to create and access groups and content within those groups. Some groups are completely open, meaning that anyone can view content posted without ever joining or following the group.
- **Accessibility of sensitive content:** no content shared on social media is ever private or confidential, including content shared in closed or private groups. Content can be copied and pasted elsewhere, posts can be shared in public forums, and content can be saved via screenshots at any time.
- **Criticism:** responses to content posted by survivors in social media groups is not always supportive. Sometimes followers respond in ways that can cause the survivor to feel attacked, shamed, or ostracized.



What to Look for in Social Media Groups

Survivors who are looking for or are currently part of a social media group should carefully evaluate the following factors when determining whether to join or leave a particular group:

Who owns and administers the group?

The “about” section of any social media group should clearly state the name and contact information of the organization, person or persons who administer the group, and the purpose of the group. Take time to conduct an online search of them to determine what kind of activities they have been publicly involved in.



Note: Many nonprofit organizations who provide bona fide advocacy services to survivors have public social media pages or accounts, which are used for sharing information about their organizations, links to news articles, and links to reputable resources about preventing or responding to sexual assault. These organizations do not typically facilitate discussion of survivors’ experiences on their social media pages; rather, they offer hotlines, in-person services, or links to other support services for survivors.

What kind of content is shared in the group?

If it’s possible to view the content posted on the group before joining it, scroll through several posts to see what kind of content is posted, how followers react to the content, and what involvement (if any) the group administrators have in monitoring or responding to it. Pay attention to several things:

- **How does the content make you feel?** If the content kindles or deepens feelings of sadness or anger, or if the content triggers traumatic memories or symptoms, it most likely is not beneficial to you. Conversely, if the content makes you feel more grounded, hopeful, accepted, and understood, it may be beneficial.
- **Does the content abide by legal and ethical standards?** If the content shares survivor experiences without permission, encourages vigilantism against offenders, declares the guilt of someone who has not been convicted of a crime, and/or attacks the character of anyone for any reason, it is not a safe group to join or remain part of.
- **What do the owners/administrators of the group post or comment?** If the administrators of the group consistently post lengthy, detailed content about their own victimization experiences or personal lives, if they post or fail to remove posts that don’t abide by legal or ethical standards, or if they join or encourage comment threads that are abusive or unethical, then it is not a safe or beneficial group to join or remain part of.

Protecting Yourself on Social Media

Unfortunately it is impossible to be engaged with social media and remain completely anonymous, private, or confidential. Nothing that is posted or shared on social media is ever completely private, no matter how many safeguards are put in place. It’s important to remember that while most people are honest and join survivor groups for support and a sense of community, such groups are also easy targets for individuals whose intent is to manipulate and take advantage of vulnerable people.

When posting information about yourself online, never post information that you would theoretically be unlikely or unwilling to reveal about yourself in a different type of public setting. If an individual on a page or group, or the group itself, posts threatening or inappropriate content, you can report them to the social media platform (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, etc.).



Some general social media safety guidelines for survivors:

- Familiarize yourself with the privacy settings on all your social media accounts and use them consistently.
- Do not display things like your home address, birthdate, location of employment, phone number, or private email, even if you utilize the highest privacy settings.
- Do not accept friend or follower requests from anyone you don't personally know.
- If any friend or follower makes you uncomfortable, you can block them from any of your social media accounts at any time.
- Refrain from "checking in" or displaying what location you are in when you post something.
- Do not name or declare the guilt of any offender if they have not been convicted of assaulting/abusing anyone. You could be sued for libel or defamation of character.

Additional Resources for Online Safety

Below are resources from reputable organizations regarding online safety for survivors of sexual violence:

Internet Safety and Online Resource Collection from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center:

<http://www.nsvrc.org/projects/internet-safety-online-resource-collection>

Technology Safety Resource Collection from the Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs:

<http://www.wcsap.org/technology-safety>

Technology Safety & Privacy Toolkit for Survivors from Tech Safety, in partnership with the National Network to End Domestic Violence: <https://www.techsafety.org/resources-survivors/>

Safe Resources for Crisis Support

- **In Ohio:** Ohio Sexual Violence Helpline: <https://www.ohiosexualviolencehelpline.com/>
- Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (includes a free online chat service): <https://www.rainn.org/>
- National Child Abuse Hotline: <https://www.childhelp.org/>
- National Domestic Violence Hotline (includes a free online chat service): <http://www.thehotline.org/>
- National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline (includes a free online chat service): <http://www.loveisrespect.org/>
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (includes a free online chat service): <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence: 216-658-1381 / 888-886-8388 / info@oaesv.org / www.oaesv.org

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