

INTRODUCTION



Introduction

I have been working with survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault for about 6 years, ranging from all demographics, genders, countries, cultures and socioeconomic statuses. Every person asks me the same root question: “How do I get over this?” To which I would respond, “There is no carved out, foolproof method to healing from about. Everyone moves at a different pace, and uses different techniques, because everyone is different”. That’s what I was taught while working in safe houses and on hotlines, and in turn what I taught others when I taught in the community, trained other advocates, and educated first responders. To some degree, that’s very true: There is not one specific, exact way that works for everyone, or a specific timeframe in which healing occurs. Every experience is so different, and unfortunately there are no emotional band-aids to lay over a survivors brain until it’s ready to heal. The healing process is rigorous and trying; but eventually, if you keep working at it, you’ll feel better.

The more that I coached survivors on their healing journeys and the more programs I’ve worked with and created, the more I realized that there is, in fact, a very specific method to healing. If victims don’t do these five things, they will not be able to start their healing journey. It’s not exactly the same formula for everyone, but if survivors follow these five steps not only will they heal from their abuse, but they will also have the tools to build themselves up into the person that they want to be: their own personal “Champion». These are the steps I unknowingly used that got me from living in the constant state of my victimhood to then becoming the Champion of my voice and my story. Nobody guided me through these steps, they were just the result of trials and errors that brought me to where I am today. I have coached thousands of survivors (turned Champions) on the same method for years. I’m sharing what worked for me and many others, and I believe wholeheartedly that it will work for you, too. Know that it takes more than just reading and understanding these steps for this program to work; you have to work this method into your everyday life. Create the habits, do the research and the work, and believe in yourself. It’s so much easier said than done -- believe me, I understand -- but if you follow this method, you will be so much farther down the healing path than you are at this very moment. If you’re reading this, you’re taking your first step to change your life and take your voice back. Why not commit to doing whatever you need to do to get there?

Introduction

Just because I have ordered the steps in this method does not mean that it is the right or only way for you to heal. Some people never get stuck in the victim mentality. Some people will drop it before they break their silence. Everyone's experience is different, and by no means am I here to tell anyone that they are healing wrong, as long as they are coping in a positive and healthy way. I have one last clarification before we get started: Throughout this packet, you'll see the words "victim", "survivor", and "champion". Typically you'll see words like this used interchangeably, but in this program I encourage you to not view them that way.

A victim is a person who has not yet started to heal. Usually they haven't broken their silence, and they most definitely have not dropped their victim mentality. Victims have their work cut out for them, because they are just starting their healing journey; but just like survivors and champions, are just as capable of creating the life they want. They are at the beginning of their journey, and that is perfectly okay! If you are a victim, it is important to not compare your beginning to someone else's middle.

A survivor is someone who has broken their silence and has begun to heal. They are out of their victim mentality, and learning and growing toward their strongest self everyday. Survivors still have a lot of work to do, but are farther along in their healing journeys. Hopefully, they are able to talk about their abuse and are using their story to empower themselves to push to become champions.

Champions are people who have surpassed the level of survivor. They are well into their healing journey, feel comfortable and confident speaking about their abuse, have found ways to rebuild themselves, and are confident in themselves and their power! The path to healing is ongoing, but these are the people who have taken their voices back and have control of their lives again.

I'm excited to take this journey with you. Know that it won't be easy, but you're going to come out of it a stronger, rebuilt version of exactly who you want to be. Congratulations on taking your first step to healing, and taking your voice and your life back!

-Marissa F. Cohen

Champion, Change Agent, Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Healing Expert

Step 1: Break Your Silence

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1.1 Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway!

1.1:1 What is the Story You're Telling Yourself?

It's not news to me how scary it can be to speak about your abuse for the first time. Hell, the first time I spoke about my abuse, I was triggered into my first panic attack. And if that doesn't seem bad enough, I was operating a car with my best friend in the passenger seat, while on a highway. The story goes, we were passing an ice cream shop, and my friend mentioned that she'd wanted to go in. I vaguely remember what she said, probably something like, "If you love me, you'll take me to get ice cream". From there I had a flashback to my sexual assault, lost control of my breathing, and burst into hysterics. She needed to jump to my side of the car to take control of the wheel and steer us to the road's shoulder before something seriously bad happened. In between gasps for air and sobs with no control of my words, I told her what happened with my (then) ex-boyfriend, just 6 months earlier. It wasn't really a willing act of "Breaking the Silence," but it was necessary, and I'm grateful everyday for that momentary lapse in self-control.

Fear is a natural part of the healing process. So much has been taken away from you, and you probably feel alone and afraid. Know that that's a completely normal feeling. But I urge you to also recognize that this isn't something that you should do alone. When you have support and people in your life that know what you're going through, the road ahead is less daunting. If you don't feel as though you have an ally or confidant, I have developed a special Facebook group to help validate and empower victims of sexual assault, domestic violence and abuse. [Ruhe Champions Empowerment Lounge](#)

1.1:1

What is the Story You're Telling Yourself?

Attempting to trust people after your trust has been broken in the face of abuse is sort of like putting together a puzzle; you feel like you're broken into so many pieces, and you don't know what to look for to make it all fit. If it was one person or several people who hurt you, who knows which people will be the right fit, or will break you into more pieces? You have every right and reason to be afraid; but you will also stay exactly where you are if you remain afraid and refuse to try.

What is the story that you're telling yourself? Are you telling yourself that nobody will understand, and nobody will believe you, or that you will be blamed for what happened to you? Are you telling yourself that you're lying about it, or that you were asking for it? Although in the media those seem to be very common responses, chances are that is just your fear taking over and telling you a story. In my experience, that is so far from true that it's in another galaxy. And statistics show that I'm right. One in three women and one in five men will be assaulted in their lifetime, which means that if you know more than five people, chances are someone you know will be able to relate to what you're feeling. Maybe that person has some guidance on something they've tried that has worked for them to heal, or at least a listening ear for you to vent too. The Ruhe Champions Empowerment Lounge is filled with people who can relate to you and your story. By you sharing your story in this group, you could be helping hundreds or even thousands of people in the future that may be sitting in the same emotional spot that you are in right now. I truly believe that I just happened to be really lucky. Unbeknownst to me at the time, my best friend (and the first person I told) was also a survivor. Her story is hers to tell, but she was the perfect person to tell and break my silence. She sat and listened, let me vent, didn't judge, didn't advise. She just listened and loved me unconditionally, and validated me. I can't speak for everyone, but that is exactly what I needed.

So, let's change your story. Instead of being afraid that you'll be blamed, shamed, and criticized, let's tell the story that you will be comforted and validated with open arms by a loved one, friend, or trusted confidant. They will let you speak your truth, will listen intently, and give you exactly what you need. Doesn't that sound much better?

What was the story that you were telling yourself?

What is your **new story**?

1.1:1

What is the Story You're Telling Yourself?



*Change your story,
Change your life.* ”

- Tony Robbins

Fear is something we all recognize, but I want you to think of it as an acronym for “Fantasized Experiences Appearing Real”. What does that mean for you? What experiences are you not having, but anticipating a negative outcome from? All that is doing is stopping your progress, and subconsciously willing these negative outcomes into reality. Psychologists call this a self-fulfilling prophecy; you believe something is going to happen, so you subconsciously make it happen. It’s the energy you’re attracting, and without even meaning to, you’re setting yourself up to have your fear come to life.

You’ve changed your story, now let’s change your mindset. If you weren’t afraid to speak about your abuse, what would you do or say? Finish these sentences:

If I weren’t afraid, I would speak to _____

If I weren’t afraid, I would say _____

If I weren’t afraid, I would _____

If I weren’t afraid, I would _____

If I weren’t afraid, I would _____

1.1:2 What Am I Afraid Of?

1.1:2

What Am I Afraid Of?

Now that you have a few things that you see you would do if you weren't afraid to break your silence, let's take this idea one step further. What is the outcome that you're actually afraid of? No judgement here. This is just about honest introspection. The fear you're feeling is your brain trying to defend you from being hurt again. It's a defense mechanism, like "Fight, Flight, Freeze or Fawn". It puts a picture in your head of a "worst case scenario". As much as that defense mechanism is protecting you, it is also stopping you from healing. Let's phrase it this way: "I want to Break My Silence, but I stop myself by imagining _____".

What is the outcome that you are afraid will happen? Are you afraid that you're going to be blamed? Are you afraid that you're all alone and nobody will understand you, or are you perhaps afraid of being retaliated against? Are you afraid of re-living your trauma and re-traumatizing yourself? Think about it, and write it down:

I want to Break My Silence, but scare myself by imagining _____

I want to Break My Silence, but scare myself by imagining _____

I want to Break My Silence, but scare myself by imagining _____

I want to Break My Silence, but scare myself by imagining _____

1.1:2
**What Am
I Afraid Of?**

Being afraid is completely normal, but don't get stuck in your fear. By choosing the right support person to Break Your Silence to and knowing that you have support with millions of other people who have dealt with similar experiences, you are on your way to being okay. It will get better. Let's transform these fears into power statements! For example: "I want to Break My Silence, and I will be met with love and validation".

I want to Break My Silence, and _____

I want to Break My Silence, and _____

I want to Break My Silence, and _____

I want to Break My Silence, and _____

1.1:3

Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway!

What has comforted you in the past? What have you used to make difficult situations easier or more comfortable? There are things you can do to make Breaking Your Silence easier, but they are all very personal to you. Think about what has comforted you in the past. Was it perhaps holding someone's hand, or a teddy bear, or security blanket? Was it listening to soothing music? Could it have been being in a lit-up or dark room? Was it indoors or outdoors? Whatever your personal preference is, make sure to incorporate that into breaking your silence. My personal preference is to be in a big, open space, like a classroom, or outdoors. I am much more comfortable when I am holding an object. I like to hold my book, *Breaking Through the Silence: The Journey to Surviving Sexual Assault*, because I feel empowered when it's in my hands. If I don't have that with me while I'm talking about my trauma (and I find that I speak about it a lot), I feel more comfortable with a sensory object in my hand... something like a paperclip or a napkin that I can fidget with.

Neuroscience has shown that your brain cannot actively concentrate on two things at once. Splitting your attention is really a myth, because even though you can be doing two tasks at once, your brain can only concentrate on one at a time. However, your brain sends receptors to both sites that are active, which is why we can walk and talk at the same time. So, if you're talking about your abuse while fidgeting with a paperclip or holding someone's hand, your brain is sending messages to both locations, and all of your concentration won't be solely on your story.

Think about comforting things you do when you're feeling sad, upset, depressed, or doing something that you don't really want to do. Think of a person that you call, or something that you do other than using mind-altering substances. We want to be fully in control of our bodies and minds when we're doing this exercise. It's a very powerful and liberating experience, and best enjoyed with a clear head. When I'm having an uncomfortable experience at home, or speaking about my story in a smaller or more personal setting, I always want my dogs around. I like to have them next to me, so I can hold them and pet them for comfort. They can sense when I become tense or uneasy, and snuggle into my lap (and these are big dogs we're talking about, not lap dogs), to provide me with comfort. When I'm having a more intimate conversation with people I know very well, I feel the most comfortable resting my head on their shoulder. It's a weird little quirk of mine, but that position for me is extremely comforting. I feel soothed and supported. What is something that you can do to make you more comfortable? What is/are your comfort item(s), action(s) or person(s)/pet(s)?

1.1:3

Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway!

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

How can you incorporate these things into Breaking Your Silence?

Now, let's describe your ideal situation for when you do Break Your Silence. Where will you be? Who will you be with? What will you be doing? What will be there to comfort you, or what will you do to comfort yourself? Describe it in detail so you can prepare yourself for the situation. If you're comfortable, share it on our Ruhe Champions Empowerment Lounge. See what other people have posted as well!

1.2 Selecting the Person You'll Open Up To

1.2:1 Selecting Your Confidant

Choosing the right person to Break Your Silence to is important. It can mean the difference between feeling empowered to continue growing and shutting down completely. Two days after my assault, I tried to bring it up to two friends because I was genuinely confused, and wasn't processing what had happened to me. So, when I briefly mentioned that we'd had sex, but I didn't want to, my two friends' reactions were explosive. They immediately asked me a million questions, and were loud about it. They weren't aggressive towards me, but it felt that way at the time. So I shut down until... well, you know the story.

I don't want that for you. I want a one and done, signed, sealed, delivered, "that's all folks!" kind of experience for you. If you'd feel more comfortable, you can reach out to me and my team. Send me an email at me@MarissaFayeCohen.com, or text into our text line at **(224) 404-0652** and we will be there for you, support you, and empower you to break your silence. You do have the resources and people that want to help you heal. Thousands of them. It's just about finding a good fit for you. Let's figure out who that is for you.

Who, in your life right now, do you think would be a person that you'd feel safe and comfortable talking to about your abuse? This is someone that wouldn't judge, and would love and validate you, while you tell them your truth. If you can't think of anyone, there are literally hundreds of resources in place to support you. There are hotlines all over the world, national and local; there are groups on social media dedicated to supporting survivors ([Ruhe Champions Empowerment Lounge](#)), in-person support groups, therapists, and crisis centers. Advocates are trained around the country to be there for victims and survivors 24/7, 365. There are people out there. Let's figure out who that is for you. For me, sometimes speaking to strangers is easier than speaking to people that know me very well! I've probably told my stories a thousand times, and even published them in a book, so I'm very comfortable speaking my truth. But I can definitely say, I am way more comfortable telling people that don't know me that well. For me, telling my mom was the hardest thing I had to do, but talking to a room filled with strangers was much easier.

Let's figure out the perfect person/people for you to break your silence to.

Circle the answer that fits you best. There is no right answer:

I want someone who will : Actively Listen / Advise Me

Someone who : Knows my Abuser / Doesn't know my abuser

Someone who : Knows me very well / Doesn't know me very well

Someone who is: In-Person / Over the Phone or Online

Someone who: I know very well / I don't know very well

Now, make a list of people in your life or resources that you have, that fit this description:

Of these people or resources, which one would you be the most comfortable telling? Who would be the most supportive of you? Who would be the most helpful? Who do you trust the most? When you determine who/what that person or service is, write their name below with their phone number:

That is who you should tell. Do it while you're empowered. Call that person or that resource, or join a Facebook page, and speak your truth. And if that person isn't the most supportive, tell someone else. Once you talk about it, all that weight and heaviness will be lifted. You'll be a new person. You'll feel validated and refreshed. And like I said, if you'd prefer to break your silence to me, and my team of advocates, we are always here for you! Just send us an email at me@MarissaFayeCohen.com or text into our text line at (224) 404-0652 . It all gets easier from here.

1.2:2 Selecting Your Confidant Progress Sheet

1.3 Starting the Conversation

1.3:1 How to Set It Up

Now, probably the most difficult part of all of this is figuring out how to actually break your silence. You have figured out a way to make yourself feel more comfortable. You've selected a person or service that you feel comfortable with. You are empowered and going to break your silence. But how? Do you just rip off the bandaid and say it? Or do you ease into it?

Well, you know my story. I didn't even know I was going to say it until it was already out in the open; but I did have a choice of when to say it again, and that wasn't easy either. It was in my next real relationship that I revealed my trauma, and I didn't want him to push me too far too fast, because I was afraid of the reaction I would have. I didn't know if I would dissociate, or in a knee-jerk reflex throw him off the bed. So, I sat him down and told him what had happened: that I lost my virginity by being raped, and that I was nervous that I might have a bad reaction if we were to get intimate. He was perfectly understanding, and we took it slow, but it was still a little bit scary. I didn't know if he would think of me as "damaged", or if he wouldn't want to put up with someone who has "intimacy issues". But I trusted my gut, and it turned out that he was a very understanding person.

Sometimes just sitting someone down and telling them in a private setting what happened to you is rewarding. You never know; maybe they'll have a story to share with you as well, which is unfortunate, but also extremely helpful and healing for both of you. You can invite the person to your home, go outside for a walk, go for coffee, or call them on the phone and say that you need to talk about something. As long as it makes you comfortable. I've talked to thousands of people about this throughout my life, and everyone has a different safety plan. Like we figured out before, having your plan is your first step, so the whole setup is done. It's just about getting your ideal confidant there, and starting the conversation.

1.3:2 A Little Nudge

Now it's time to take action, take your final steps to breaking your silence. The first time is the most difficult, right? There are a million songs written about this. It is not only the act of speaking and vocalizing your abuse, but also the moment you actually accept it. You internalize it, embody it, and make it real. That's not to say what you've experienced isn't real -- but there's a plausible deniability that you're kicking to the curb...a hidden part of you that will be released from the confines of your body and mind, and will no longer take up space within you. That's a great, big, huge weight taken off of your shoulders! It's also the moment that you take your life back. There is a ton of power in uttering the words, "I'm a survivor", and meaning it.

To avoid being tongue-tied and having to stress about how to break the ice, I've come up with a few opening lines to help you stress less. By no means are you required to use any of my recommended openers -- because this is an incredibly personal journey -- but these are some optional ways to approach Breaking Your Silence:

"Hey [insert name], I have something that I would really like to chat with you about. It's difficult for me to talk about, but I would really like your support".

"So, there's something that has really been bothering me, and I really need to talk about it. Are you able to chat for a bit? I just really need to vent".

"I have something I really need to talk about. Can you be here with me while I vent? I don't want advice, just a friend to listen".

Once the flood gates open, your mouth does most of the work, and your brain is on a break. Then, it's your job to make sure that your confidant knows the best ways to help you. Communication is key! Sometimes people want to help, and don't really consider that advice isn't always wanted, so if you just want to vent be sure to tell them that. You need the kind of support you want. Steer the conversation in the way that works best for you! You're in control of this conversation. You are no longer a victim of your past. You are a survivor, marching triumphantly towards your future! Before we move on to Step 2, I want to do a quick check in on your self-talk! Reflect on how you spoke to and about yourself while working through Step 1. Did you doubt yourself, or tell yourself that you don't have any friends or confidants? That nobody is there for you or that people won't care? Or did you cheer yourself on? Did you think of a bunch of people who would be there for you because you're worth it and they love you? Were you kind to yourself?

Reflect on the things you said to yourself throughout Step 1. Write them down:

Now, I want you to take all of the phrases, comments, self-doubt and negative self-talk, and change them. Change your story, change your life, remember? Rewrite them as positive and encouraging words, and highlight them:

Be mindful of how you talk to yourself throughout this process. Changing the way you talk to and about yourself (which we get more into in part 3), is crucial to healing! From now on, every time you catch yourself speaking negatively of yourself or using a negative self-talk, you are to write down one amazing quality about you in the margins of the page, or in a journal or notebook you look at every day.

1.3:2 A Little Nudge