Your Voices

An inspirational compilation of poems, narratives, and letters from survivors of sexual violence
**Mission Statement**

SASSMM was established in 1983 and has a mission to help empower, support, advocate for and inspire hope for survivors of sexual violence. SASSMM is an agency dedicated to providing advocacy and support to survivors, families and concerned others affected by sexual assault, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment.

SASSMM is also steadfast in its work to create a shift in social norms surrounding gender and sexuality to eradicate sexual violence. We offer services to improve awareness and response to sexual violence throughout Eastern Cumberland, Lincoln, Sagadahoc, Knox and Waldo Counties.

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Fall 2017

SASSMM
Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine
Welcome Reader!

Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine (SASSMM)’s mission is to help empower, support, advocate for and inspire hope for survivors of sexual violence. Over the 34 years that SASSMM has provided support and prevention services, it has advocated for and assisted thousands of Midcoast residents, who are often unseen.

Sexual violence happens to 1 in 5 Mainers, it happens to 1 in 4 female children, and 1 in 6 male children. Regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, or ability, each survivor’s experience is unique; their narratives personal.

A few years ago SASSMM compiled booklets entitled “Your Voices,” which contained victim impact statements, articles, poems, art, and letters written by survivors and concerned others impacted by sexual violence. The majority of these stories spoke of sexual abuse in their youth. Many of the authors were high school and college age when they authored their experiences. These individual stories have a strong and powerful message for each of us. They allow us to understand the presence of sexual violence in our lives, to recognize that it exists, that it happens here, and that it happens frequently between people who know each other.

In spite of that pain, the authors of “Your Voices” want us to hear them, to respect them, and more importantly, to believe them and speak out against sexual violence. In this most current edition of “Your Voices,” SASSMM has been able to build upon the narratives and articles and poems that have been gathered to date, to diversify the stories shared by different survivors, and to add new reflections from community members and partners. We have also included a mindfulness self-care component to the compilation. This section will assist readers in their healing and processing of the material, as well as their own individual experiences. These materials are also readily available on our website: www.sassmm.org.

Arian G. Clements
Executive Director, SASSMM
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“To all the little girls who are watching, never doubt that you are valuable and powerful and deserving of every chance and opportunity in the world to pursue and achieve your own dreams.” – Hillary Clinton
Worth It: A Meditation of Hope and Healing

So many times I have asked myself, is healing possible after a tragedy? What does it feel like? Do you ever stop hurting? Do you get your life back?

When I was in high school, I was repeatedly raped by a father-figure friend of the family whom I loved and trusted. If you remember how vulnerable and scared age fifteen is, if you recall how fragile a girl's dreams, innocence, and trust are, you will understand my agony when these precious things were stolen from me.

Too ashamed to tell my secret and without words to express the horror even if I could have spoken out, I lived through four years of high school in an iron cage of silence, trying to survive. I withdrew into a dream world where I felt safe and protected. Even there, I could not escape the pain that was eating me up inside.

Just before graduation, I knew I had to tell my parents about the abuse.

Instinctively I knew that before I could live, I first had to heal. Healing began with stammering, halting words, as my parents' love melted the icebergs of silence that had separated us for far too long.

After graduation, the carefully constructed house of cards that I called my life collapsed. The first tentative words I had spoken were like a dike giving way. I could no longer hold the pain inside. I had to cry. I had to get angry.

There were times when the pain was so great that I couldn't draw a deep breath.

Times of overwhelming grief for lost childhood, lost girlhood, lost belief in the world, lost relationships, lost chances and times of quiet heartache.

Every day I dreamed of what I would do with my life once I got it back. Every night I lit candles to symbolize brighter days ahead. Healing became the laurel crown I coveted as the victorious end of a race I thought I could never finish.

Like a receding storm tide, the agony gradually began to ebb. A pasture full of lightning bugs on a sultry summer night, the first snowfall of winter, apple blossoms against a springtime sky, and fallen leaves in autumn all gave me the same old thrill of delight.

“A woman with a voice is, by definition, a strong woman.” Melinda Gates
Dear 17-Year-Old Me

I am writing to you because I have something to ask of you. I want to ask you for your forgiveness. I have blamed you for nine years now and have questioned why you did not leave your rapist or tell someone about what he did to you.

I want you to know that it was not your fault. You were just a kid who was trying to be like your peers by having a boyfriend and going out with someone who loved you. I know now why you stayed in that relationship even after you were raped. You were scared. So scared that you were even willing to be silent and continue to go on by yourself.

How did you do it? I am so impressed with your strength. You were raped and continued to go to school and graduated with high honors. You even applied to colleges and prepared for your next move into the future. You were so strong.

I want to tell you how sorry I am for pushing you away, instead of embracing your strength and courage. I want to let you know that you are safe now and loved by me. The person who raped you no longer has a part of you. I want you to join me into the unknown future. I realize now that I can only learn from you and hope that I can be as strong as you were during that period in my life.

I don’t know what the future holds but if I live to be 70, I will sit down on the shore and look out at the wide-open ocean. Guess what? You will never be blamed again for a choice that you did not decide or agree with. You will be with me. You are (anonymous name) and I love you!

The door is open and I am letting you in. You are truly a part of me and I am glad you are safe now. You should have been with me a long time ago but it is never too late to learn and forgive. I am so glad you are here today with me, now and forever.

Love, ME
Prior to May 20th, 2009 my two male coworkers and I decided to talk to our employer regarding some of our recent concerns; I did the bulk of the talking while they stood in solidarity with me. At 10 am we took our usual coffee break; we all stood outside the main entrance of the small business. I decided that I would speak first and said to the boss, “I have a couple of things I need to say to you, and I would appreciate if you would reserve comment until I am finished.” Immediately following that statement, I explained that last summer my coworker and I did a job offsite in Portland, Maine. I further explained that I was aware that someone came into our work space and inquired where we were. The response from our boss at the time was, “They are probably off fucking somewhere.” At this point in the conversation he began to deny ever saying that comment. I asked him to let me finish speaking. I said that I found comments like that extremely offensive and that it started unjust rumors among the staff of the larger organization with which we were affiliated. Again, he denied ever saying this, and he wanted to know who would have said that. I told him, then and there who it was, one of the owners of the boat yard, and that we could check with him regarding this specific comment.

I transitioned into the second topic I felt obliged to raise. I indicated that I was aware that he was looking at pornographic images at work. I reiterated that one of my coworkers (standing there) talked to him a few months prior, on behalf of all of us (three employees), to implore him to discontinue this behavior.

I commented that the observable changes following this first conversation was a change in the positioning of his computer to make the screen less visible to others near his desk at the head of the plotting table, near the wall of hanging work orders, or near the tall desk where we greet customers. He then said that he looks at newspapers online and that he is the boss and has the right to do this.

I said that, “I understand that European newspapers have different standards than we do and have images that can be construed as pornographic, but I happen to know that you look at a website called ‘Met Model,’ and that’s not the kind of thing that just pops up on its own.” He did not respond to this. I said that his looking at porn at work is inappropriate, and that it makes me very uncomfortable. I then asked if anyone else, looking at and referring to the two men standing near me, had anything else to say.

One concurred that looking at porn at work is inappropriate. He explained that if a customer “were to see that” that he could lose his business. He said that observing porn at work is against labor laws. Ultimately, our boss did not deny looking at porn; he was silent for much of the end of this conversation.

See next page
Confronting

continued: He did not apologize for his behavior, and he did not say that he would discontinue it. His cell phone rang; he took his business call inside, and everyone resumed work as the time allotted for our coffee break was over.

In retrospect, I wish I had known more about my rights as a worker, particularly around sexual harassment and what constitutes a hostile work environment. I didn’t know that organizations like SASSMM existed to provide support around any type of sexual violence and could help answer questions and even direct me to legal assistance.

In this case, the two male owners of the larger organization in which we were embedded knew about this situation (because in addition to this confrontation with the boss, I told them), but they chose to ignore it. No one should be made to feel so powerless, especially in a workplace. I didn’t push because I didn’t know what else to do, we were in an economic recession and a job was essential, and it took all my might to have the interaction I recounted above. I don’t want others to have to go through this kind of thing alone. Mostly, I wish we could live in a world where power is not enacted through sexualized means, and where these conversations don’t have to happen in the first place.

It Happened, It Hurt,
I Am Healing

One young girl bounded upstairs, one young girl came down in tears
One young girl packed up for camp, one young girl sat in the dark and damp
One young girl was like another; they never said anything about their brother
One young girl felt so grown up, one young girl then threw up
Two are affirming, believing, and feeling
Six say it happened, it hurt, we are healing
One slumped in a corner banging her head
One woke up wondering what she had said
One refused to pretend any longer
One still struggles to find trust – and wonder?
Two are affirming, believing, and feeling
Six say it happened, it hurt, we are healing
One clean and sober, committed and new
One with a partner who departed from two
One with a husband learning to care and be kind
One with a little red house hard to find
Two are affirming, believing, and feeling
Six say it happened, it hurt, we are healing
One rarely sees her teenagers three
One with a boy almost too big for her knee
One with two youngsters still quite wee
One with a boy who plays soccer with glee
Two are affirming, believing, and feeling
Six say it happened, it hurt, we are healing
One faces with clarity an uncertain place
One reckons with horrors in more than one face
One has found some peace at her base
One goes on searching at her very own pace
Two are affirming, believing and feeling
Each say it happened, it hurt, I am healing

Anonymous
Against All Odds by Heather

Against all odds, I have survived 35 years of abuse. I was never wanted. My mother attempted an abortion at home but it failed. As a baby, I was shaken, stepped on and beaten and yet I lived.

The sexual assaults started when I was a toddler. My family knew and did nothing. Almost daily, people yelled at me, hurt me, told I was never wanted, and that I was stupid and worthless. Yet I clung to life and found strength in the Lord.

The people at church respected my family. My Mom taught Sunday school while my Dad and my brothers were friends with many of the congregation. On the outside, we seemed normal but behind closed doors, I never knew what would send them into a blind rage that would cause me to get hurt and blamed for all their problems. Still, I held on to the hope of a better life someday.

Being homeschooled isolated me from the world and I was forbidden to go anywhere alone so that their secret would be protected. I quickly learned it was safer not to say anything to anyone. I rarely told people my name, if they could get me to say anything at all, for I was a “nobody” who had no value. Yet, inside I kept holding on.

I survived by teaching myself to read and write, along with all my other schooling, to avoid as much emotional and physical abuse as possible despite being told I was stupid every day, despite my A+ average. I survived almost daily sexual abuse from my brothers and so much more. I did my best to make my family happy with the hope that someday I would be loved. It seems like the only thing I have ever wanted in the world was to be loved.

By the time I was 28; I had enough and started fighting for freedom. I started finding my voice again. I started letting myself feel for the first time in over 25 years. I started to let myself believe I had value and deserved to be healthy and safe. I started advocating for myself, worked at stopping the self-harm and eating disorder. I started standing up to my family and enduring their wrath as they pushed back. But I have stood firm and survived.

I knew I was not strong enough to do it on my own. In time I found a friend in whom I could trust for support. Recently, I connected with someone from SASSMM and, along with other support staff, they have helped me to build confidence in myself, to set up a safety plan and are trying to find a place where I can be safe for the first time in my life.

Against all odds, I will get through this one day at a time.
L
ower your gaze or close your eyes, if you feel comfortable doing so. Position your body in a way that is comfortable, perhaps with your feet flat on the ground and your hands palm up or palm down on your lap.

Notice a place in your body where you have discomfort or know as a place where you hold stress. Imagine that a bright and healing light has begun to form overhead. This light can be whatever color you want it to be—whatever you associate with healing, happiness, goodness, or any of the other attitudes of mindfulness. If you don’t like the idea of a light, you can think of it simply as a color or an essence.

Now, think about this light beginning to move through your body or over your body (whichever you choose), from the top of your head, moving inch by inch, slowly, until it reaches the bottom of your feet. Spend a few moments just hanging out with the presence of this light or essence in or around your body.

Notice if it has any other qualities besides color, like a texture, or a sound, or a smell.

Draw your attention back to where you noticed discomfort or stress earlier. What has happened to it?

If the distress is still there on some level in your body, think about deepening your breathing so that it makes the light or essence more brilliant and intense…so brilliant and intense that the discomfort can’t even dream of existing within it.

This exercise might take some repetition or practice before you notice subtle, or not so subtle, shifts in yourself.

Light Stream Imagery

I’m sorry if you can’t find me,
I’ve been busy hiding.
Hiding behind a headdress of humid steam
created by a mixture of hot coffee and my tears
as I bring the cup close enough to my face
that I can appreciate its heat.
It seems to be the only thing that can calm me
down.
I’ve been hiding for a while now
behind black eyeliner and blue mascara
Hair dye and impulsive styles
I’ve been hiding behind hard sciences
and academic degrees
I’m sorry if you can’t find me.
I can’t find myself.
I’ve been hiding behind memories of you
The ones I don’t let myself think
And can hardly remember anyways
Because, they’ve been reshaped
By my brain’s desire to pretend it never happened
I have had two lives
Pre and Post you.
I see your eyes in every one
Even though I couldn’t pick you out of a crowd
You’re a ticking time bomb,
I’m the missing needle.
I am haunted.
I have ghosts of memories,
And, it’s the apocalypse.
But, I need to put my demons to rest
Because, I’m hiding from my future too
And, I don’t want them to find me

Before I find You
Or before I can find myself
I couldn’t pick you out of a crowd
Perhaps, we’re not so different
Maybe, we’ve blurred into one
I’m sorry if you can’t find me
I’ve been hiding behind my post you life
Which has led to sleepless nights
They say sleep deprivation is a killer
Which maybe I should be concerned about
But, I can’t seem to bring myself to care about self-care
I’ve been hiding behind health fads
and fitness ads
Toned bodies, rock hard abs
I’ve been hiding behind dreams
My life is built off of a wish
That I could have been born in another state
or world
to a different mother
or that I could have never been born at all
So, I could have never known you existed.
But, without you, I wouldn’t have the rest of me
Who I hide from.
But, somehow know I love.
I’m sorry if you can’t find me
I’ve been hiding behind my broken heart.
And, you’ll have to excuse me
for getting choked up
Even while it’s in pieces
My atrophying heart keeps beating
Although, I’ve once heard
The heart has to break to grow.
My Story: by a 30-year-old female

No one ever thinks they’ll get sexually assaulted. I was no different. I did all the right things to protect myself. I locked my door every night – didn’t wander through the city by myself at night – parked under a street light at the mall. But what I didn’t consider was that a person I knew and trusted, a person I let into my home willingly, would hurt me and humiliate me like I never imagined. One of the people whom I trusted most in my life sexually assaulted me. I was terrified at the time and I’m still terrified, though I am making progress. My first introduction to the Sexual Assault Support Services was at the emergency room the night of my assault. One of the volunteers came to support me, answered any questions, and let me know about the services they provided. At that time I was thankful for the help but didn’t think I would need them. I’m a very strong person and I thought I could get through this on my own. But I couldn’t sleep at night. I’d keep all the windows closed even in the heat of summer. I’d check the locks 10 times during the night. Yet I was still sure he’d come back and manage to get me. I’d become hysterical while driving if I thought I saw his truck. I soon realized that this was ruining my life and I was unable to get through such a traumatic experience on my own. Sexual Assault Support Services helped me with that part. I meet weekly with someone to talk about how I’m doing and any problems I’ve encountered over the week. I’ve called the 24-hour hotline and just knowing it’s there is a help to me. Someone has gone to court with me for support. I know I wouldn’t have been able to get through that without them. I have been given outside sources in the community and they took time to find people who they thought I would be comfortable with. They will continue to help me as long as I need them. I really do believe that without the help of Sexual Assault Support Services, I would still be locking myself up in my house and feeling afraid. Anonymous

“I think the best role models for women are people who are fruitfully and confidently themselves, who bring light into the world.” Meryl Streep
Men Also Suffer

I was the youngest of five, 3 older brothers and a sister. My father died of a heart attack at 47 years old. I was only 9 then. I remember not fully understanding what death really was, its permanence.

I felt very lonely and the need for a father figure/role model became very strong within me although I didn’t know that at the time.

When I was 15 years old I met a man thru a mutual organization I had become involved in. He was in his early 30s, married with 3 young children of his own. This man befriended me and began to give me special attention, inviting me to join him on short day trips he had to take. I was very receptive to all of it because for the first time in my life I was getting my needs met being validated because I was “special”. I didn’t realize just how special until the day we went on a day trip and he stopped at a store and picked up a six-pack of beer. I didn’t think much of it at the time. He then took a supposedly short-cut down a dirt road where he stopped and each of us had a can of beer. As we talked I realized that it was hinting towards a sexual encounter. He began to fondle me and I found it very pleasurable. I reciprocated not knowing why because I had never had any sexual feeling or attraction towards him.

That incident led to a year and a half of similar circumstances like it.

I had then begun to label myself as “gay” because I was surely old enough to know better and I thought of myself as an adult, in full and complete control of my life. So because I allowed it to happen and enjoyed the sexual pleasures then there had to be something drastically wrong with me. I just had to be “gay” and to a 15 year old being brought up in a very conservative and prejudiced home anything out of the “norm” was not a good thing.

I grew up into adulthood carrying those feelings in the deepest part of my being so that no one else would ever know what happened or how I was feeling about myself. I got married and had two daughters thinking my life would straighten out and the past be forgotten – ha! If I just didn’t think about it and pretend it didn’t happen I would be “normal”.

When I was in my mid-thirties I started to get some counseling because I just could not let go of the past. It was then I began to understand what happened to me was abuse and molestation that I did not ask for or want to happen. I because involved in a support group for adult men of childhood sexual abuse which gave me the connection of not feeling so alone. I found other men some like myself who shared the same heartache and isolation feelings that I had.
Emerging Disease: by Tori

Maybe it is because I got tested for HIV
Before I ever had my first real kiss.
And, I was walking through the doors of Planned Parenthood
While, my friends were exiting the world of Barbies
and entering that of boys.
Maybe, it's because --
when the nurse asked me why I didn't use protection
I said, "Because, I'm stupid"
And when she asked about the bruises
I lied.
Maybe, it's because as my rib punctured my lung;
I wasted my last gasping breath apologizing to him.
My test results came back negative
But, I still had H-I-M running through my veins
the memories are like a retrovirus,
dormant for months
Or years
Until they appear again
Each time, getting worse
Slowly beating my body and my mind
My poor, innocent, white blood cells
Destroyed.
Hot viral memories
Spewing out of my choking heart
Until my blood is more his,
than mine.
This virus doesn't retrograde,
It retrospects.
Generations

Sometimes I feel like the black sheep, the odd one out
Until I realize that I come from a whole herd of black sheep.

You see, I find it remarkable,
When people say they haven’t experienced sexual violence
When it is literally the bathwater in which I was steeped.

Generation after generation, passed down like bad genes
A stigma that no one wants to talk about, until it’s forced out.
Because secrets spoil, and our bodies and minds revolt
Begging for light, to be audible, to no longer be in the shadows, with shame.

On a bright summer day, I dug through the garden and told an elder
Of the carpenter that lead me down the road when I was a child:
Breaking off a piece of Hershey’s chocolate and driving a little further,
I have no memory after that, but in the subsequent years,
Just the sight of him gave me panic.
Later, as a teen, I would learn that he once taunted my dad with a backward comment—
Something along the lines of, “Well if I had molested [your daughter]...”

She was quiet as I told her this, not appropriate, not inappropriate
Just clearly resigned to the knowledge that this kind of things happens:
Generation after generation.

But I come from a long line of strong women.
Grandmothers who put up with drinking and violence, and disappearing husbands.
A mother and aunt who stomped on the grave, even though I was too young to understand why,
(Because my grandfather ran a brothel out of their home...).
I know to be thankful for my mother, who wept, and believed me
When I told her of my cousin, who sexually assaulted me when I was four,
And my brother, who molested me on and off before he moved away.

She knows all too well the experience of a black sheep: of silence, and shame, and trauma,
And of hopes and prayers that your generation will be the last.
Excerpt from My College Journal:

2nd Semester, Freshman Year

I cut and I cut and I cut. The blood pools and runs down. I clean myself in the sink, door briefly locked to the communal bathroom. Jump out of my skin when two RAs are there in the hall. Surprise. I looked the other way...but they weren’t supposed to be there. Did they see? Did they see the bloody paper towels in my hand? Do they know? Do you see?

I do it because it hurts, but I don’t feel the pain; it’s not there for long. I can feel the razor bite into my skin. It chomps in like Pac Man. It slices through graininess, but it’s just skin; it’s just my body. What’s so important about my body? Why is there so much emphasis on a body? So much lust for a body?”

It has been many, many years, but I still remember the days when I relied on harming myself to soothe and comfort, to allow myself emotional release, and to act out what I felt I deserved. I almost died once, from emaciation, and when that tool of self-destruction was taken from me, I learned to hide my scars in a more literal way.

Today, I hear the words of Audre Lorde and understand that so many of us that experience sexual abuse turn our contempt and anger inward when the violence against us is ignored, denied, or when we simply—erroneously—take on the mantle of blame for the actions of those that intentionally harmed us. And it’s not about lust; it’s another human being disregarding our rights and boundaries, the sanctity of our bodies, for their own design. I remember being a child and wondering if I had some scarlet letter on me, inviting them to hurt me. Why else would this keep happening?

It has taken decades of work to find a place approaching acceptance of my body—this battleground of violation, and hurt, and healing. I have good days and bad days, but mostly they’re on the better side now. I try very hard not to hurt myself anymore, knowing that I have other, more healthy outlets that I have replaced the not so healthy ones over time. It’s taken a lot to claim myself again: to feel like a person that is worthy of love and space in this world, to establish boundaries and give myself permission to maintain them, and to know that it wasn’t my fault. I’m not defective. I’m not damaged. I’m a human being that was hurt, and I deserve to heal.

“I raise up my voice - not so I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard ... we cannot succeed when half of us are held back.” -Malala Yousafzai
My “Dirty Little Secret”

My “dirty little secret” began in 1975, the spring of my eighth-grade year, shortly before my 14th birthday. I was your typical brainy wallflower, taller than most kids, big nose, and glasses. When I was 4 years old, an injury left my eye disfigured and a different color from the other. Although I did manage to have a number of friends and do well academically, I was extremely shy and had very low self-esteem.

That spring I started babysitting for a couple with two children. He was a teacher and coach—a “pillar of the community.” He didn’t smoke or drink and had been a big sports star in high school and college. The abuse started the first time he gave me a ride home. He put his hand on my thigh and said, “It’s OK for me to do this, right?” When I was growing up, children were never taught about sexual abuse, and organizations like SASSMM didn’t exist. I had no idea what was happening to me or what to do about it. As the abuse escalated, he inferred that if I ever told anyone, no one would believe me—I would simply be a young school girl with a crush. He told me all the things an unpopular young girl longs to hear—to believe that someone would be attracted to me, would love me. I recall him asking me why I never said I loved him. My response was honest—I really didn’t know what love was. He equated sex to love. Sex was usually painful, something I learned to endure. Even though I could never bring myself to ever once call this man by his first name, he somehow convinced me I was in love with him. Forty years later I now understand that an adolescent is not capable of comprehending consent—much less true love.

I knew what was happening was wrong but had nowhere to turn. The minute he first touched me I felt dirty and ashamed. There was no way I could ever tell anyone I knew. I could never disappoint my parents this way. At one point I did go to confession. The priest told me I had to end it. I said my prayers, gathered my courage and made up my mind to end it. We were in a car when I told him. He remained oddly calm, reached over and grabbed the soft flesh on the inside of my knee. He squeezed and twisted at the same time, the pain was intense. He refused to let go until I said that I would never again tell anyone, even a priest, about our relationship. I was desperately trying not to cry and was still insisting that I just wanted it to end, that I promised I wouldn’t tell anyone. He released his grip but then moved his hand higher up the inside of my thigh, grabbed and twisted even harder. He made it very clear that I belonged to him, no one else would ever touch me, and he would decide when and if it was over. I was bruised from my knee to my crotch for weeks—and my spirit was broken.

The abuse continued for four years, through my senior year of high school. He tried to manipulate and control almost every facet of my life. I never went on a date—never went to the prom. The shame and guilt were almost unbearable. I cried myself to sleep almost every night. I started binge drinking when I was in the 9th grade and smoking pot a year later. It was the only
way I knew how to cope – escaping from the world. As part of his “game,” we never used birth control, and he monitored my cycles. At one point he thought I was pregnant and wanted to know what I was going to do about it. I think I was 15. I went home, locked myself in the bathroom with a coat hanger, and filled the tub with hot water. All I could do was sit there and cry as I couldn’t bring myself to do it. God must have been watching over me as I learned a few days later that I wasn’t pregnant and never had another scare.

A week before I was to make my escape and leave for college in another state, his wife confronted me. She told me about many other girls and women he supposedly “loved.” If I agreed to admit the relationship, she would make sure my parents wouldn’t find out. All she wanted was a divorce. I couldn’t bring myself to admit to her that it had been going on the entire time I knew her. Instead, I told her it started when I was 16. She got her divorce, he lost his teaching license, and I was left to flounder in the aftermath – a dirty little secret swept under the carpet. He was angry that I disclosed and told me it was my fault that his kids would be growing up without their father. The guilt and shame would follow me for years.

College was a struggle. Boys I met thought I was lying to them when I said I never had a boyfriend as they could tell I was experienced, yet I couldn’t possibly tell them the truth. I drank even more and experimented with more drugs – speed, cocaine, LSD – whatever would help loosen me up so I could laugh and forget what haunted me. I had more one-night stands than I care to admit, but relationships were elusive. I never used protection – I was very reckless with my life.

He somehow tracked me down three times while I was in college after his divorce. The first time I caved into his manipulations and immediately regretted it. The second time was the first time I ever said “NO” to him. He became so angry that I was petrified he may strangle me. Instead, he practically threw me out of his moving car. The last time I saw him was in the spring of my sophomore year. I agreed to meet him at McDonald’s because he said he wanted to apologize for his earlier behavior. I arrived an hour early so he wouldn’t see the direction I came from. When he first saw me he immediately told me I was fat and looked horrible. I’m not sure what came over me, but I became very angry and told him if I looked horrible; it was his fault. I was drinking and doing drugs, trying to forget the misery and hell he had put me through. After he left I stayed for another hour, shaking and worried that he may try to follow me. But the relief I felt was incredible. After all those years, I had finally stood up for myself. He never contacted me again.

I met my future husband that fall but was never able to tell him of the abuse until after we were married. I was still convinced it was somehow my fault – the shame, guilt, and embarrassment continued...thinking about all those years of lying to my family and friends.
In the mid-1980’s sexual abuse was starting to be discussed in the open. I put some of the pieces of the puzzle together, realizing he was a predator and that I had been one of his victims. Even with this realization, I couldn’t bring myself to tell anyone. When I managed to tell my husband, he threatened to kill him, and then just cried, and we never spoke of it again – it was my dirty little secret being swept under the carpet again.

I also felt guilty about my inability to disclose as I knew that he was free to abuse other young girls. I rationalized this by thinking his wife, the attorney, and principal involved were the adults in the situation, and it should have been them that reported him. A few years ago at my mother’s funeral the wife of the principal, who had been a teacher and neighbor of mine, asked me directly if I was “OK.” At first, I didn’t know what she meant, but then I realized she knew my secret. It’s too bad she waited 40 years to show some concern.

In my early 30’s, I went back to confession and told my story to a priest who knew me personally. After a few moments, he looked at me with tears in his eyes and told me he couldn’t give me absolution as I had done nothing wrong. Instead, I needed to learn to forgive myself. His advice helped me to look at my past in a different light, but I still kept it bottled up and tried to forget it. I raised two children and built a career, praying that my past would never surface. My parents both passed away without ever knowing.

A year ago I read an article in the Brunswick Times Record about SASSMM. The Organization was looking for volunteer advocates for their support line. I went to their website to learn more about SASSMM and started reading “Your Voices.” I knew my past was something I needed to deal with before I could move on in my life. It was a few months after my divorce, my children were grown, and I was looking for something worthwhile to fill my time. I attended a SASSMM training this spring. Not only did this training provide me with the education and tools that I could use to help others that have experienced sexual assault, it has been tremendously helpful to me in understanding my own experiences.

Why have I chosen to disclose now, after more than 40 years? I’ve realized the more I talk about my past, the less power it has over me. I’m finally on track to get beyond it and look to the future. I’ve disclosed to my closest friends, those who thought they knew me well in high school and have been like sisters to me over the years. I’ve always felt a need to apologize for not being truthful with them. Their reactions and support have been incredible. Others I have told have also been very supportive, and I treasure their friendship and guidance. My battles have made me stronger. I’m hoping that by reading my story others will learn the power of telling their story and will find peace in the truth.
Dancing in the Darkness...

"It took me quite a long time to develop a voice, and now that I have it, I am not going to be silent." Madeleine Albright

"Whether I am meant to or not, I challenge assumptions about women. I do make some people uncomfortable, which I'm well aware of, but that's just part of coming to grips with what I believe is still one of the most important pieces of unfinished business in human history—empowering women to be able to stand up for themselves."

Hillary Clinton

Dancing in the Darkness...

slowly moving, creeping silently toward the light
leaving the shadows of shame behind.
Remembering no more the pain of you—
-invading my space,
defiling my innocence,
crushing my spirit.
The flashbacks still haunt me...
I am sickened by the smell of your sweat—as the child inside me dies.
Stronger now, I lift up my head—
rising above the fear,
knowing I am worthy of like and love.
Like a caged bird set free, I fly.
soaring toward the light, the hope, the promise of survivorship and a new day.

By: Keisha Hallie Woods
And finally, to girls everywhere, I am with you. On nights when you feel alone, I am with you. When people doubt you or dismiss you, I am with you. I fought every day for you. So never stop fighting, I believe you. Lighthouses don’t go running all over the island looking for boats to save; they just stand there shining. Although I can’t save every boat, I hope that by speaking today, you absorbed a small amount of light, a small knowing that you can’t be silenced, a small satisfaction that justice will be served, as small assurance that we are getting somewhere, and a big, big knowing that you are important, unquestionably, you are untouchable, you are beautiful, you are to be valued, respected, undeniably, every day, you are powerful and nobody can take that away from you.

To girls everywhere, I am with you.

Thank you.

*Emily Doe*

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*Closing paragraph from “Emily Doe’s” victim impact statement in the sentencing of her assailant. The full statement was entered into the Library of Congress.*
Mindfulness
Grounding
and
Self-Care
**What is Grounding**

When you are overwhelmed with emotional pain, you may need a way to detach so that you can gain control over your feelings and stay safe. Grounding “anchors” you to the present and reality. Many people with PTSD and substance abuse struggle with either feeling too much, like overwhelming emotions and memories, or too little, such as numbing and disassociation. In grounding, you attain balance between the two conscious of reality.

Grounding is a set of simple strategies to detach from emotional pain (ex: drug craving, self-harm impulses, anger, sadness) by focusing onward on the external world – rather than inward toward the self. You can also think of it as distraction, entering, a safe place, looking outward, or healthy detachment.

- Grounding can be done any time, any place, anywhere and no one has to know.
- Use grounding when you are faced with a trigger, having a flashback, dissociating, having a substance craving, or when your emotional pain goes above 6 (on a 0-10 scale).

Grounding puts healthy distance between you and these negative feelings.

- Keep your eyes open, scan the room, and turn the light on to stay in touch with the present.
- Stay neutral—no judgments of "good" and "bad". For example, "The walls are blue; I dislike blue because it reminds me of depression." Simply say, "The- walls are blue" and move on.

Source: Lisa Najavits, PhD

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**Grounding Techniques**

Grounding techniques can help you to relax and focus if you are faced with extreme stress or have experienced trauma in your life.

**Describe your environment with your five senses.**

- Sight
- Touch
- Hearing
- Smell
- Taste

**Play Categories with yourself.**

- Cities
- Songs
- Athletes
- States
- Words that begin with A
- Colors

**Describe an activity in great detail.**

- Cooking a meal
- Morning routine
- Evening routine
- Work day
- School day
- Directions for a trip

**Repeat this statement multiple times:**

“My name is ____, I am safe right now. I am in the present, not in the past. I am located in ____” and the date is:____. I am safe right now.”

Source: Lisa Najavits, PhD
Lower your gaze or close your eyes, if you feel comfortable doing so. Position your body in a way that is comfortable, perhaps with your feet flat on the ground and your hands palm up or palm down on your lap.

Notice a place in your body where you have discomfort or know as a place where you hold stress. Imagine that a bright and healing light has begun to form overhead. This light can be whatever color you want it to be—whatever you associate with healing, happiness, goodness, or any of the other attitudes of mindfulness. If you don’t like the idea of a light, you can think of it simply as a color or an essence.

Now, think about this light beginning to move through your body or over your body (whichever you choose), from the top of your head, moving inch by inch, slowly, until it reaches the bottom of your feet.

Spend a few moments just hanging out with the presence of this light or essence in or around your body.

Notice if it has any other qualities besides color, like a texture, or a sound, or a smell.

Draw your attention back to where you noticed discomfort or stress earlier. What has happened to it?

If the distress is still there on some level in your body, think about deepening your breathing so that it makes the light or essence more brilliant and intense…so brilliant and intense that the discomfort can’t even dream of existing within it.

This exercise might take some repetition or practice before you notice subtle, or not so subtle, shifts in yourself.
“Leaves on a Stream” Exercise

♦ Sit in a comfortable position and either close your eyes or rest them gently on a fixed spot in the room.
♦ Visualize yourself sitting beside a gently flowing stream with leaves floating along the surface of the water. Pause 10 seconds.
♦ For the next few minutes, take each thought that enters your mind and place it on a leaf... let it float by. Do this with each thought – pleasurable, painful, or neutral. Even if you have joyous or enthusiastic thoughts, place them on a leaf and let them float by.
♦ If your thoughts momentarily stop, continue to watch the stream. Sooner or later, your thoughts will start up again. Pause 20 seconds.
♦ Allow the stream to flow at its own pace. Don’t try to speed it up and rush your thoughts along. You’re not trying to rush the leaves along or “get rid” of your thoughts. You are allowing them to come and go at their own pace.
♦ If your mind says “This is dumb,” “I’m bored,” or “I’m not doing this right” place those thoughts on leaves, too, and let them pass. Pause 20 seconds.
♦ If a leaf gets stuck, allow it to hang around until it’s ready to float by. If the thought comes up again, watch it float by another time. Pause 20 seconds.
♦ If a difficult or painful feeling arises, simply acknowledge it. Say to yourself, “I notice myself having a feeling of boredom/impatience/frustration.” Place those thoughts on leaves and allow them to float along.
♦ From time to time, your thoughts may hook you and distract you from being fully present in this exercise. This is normal. As soon as you realize that you have become sidetracked, gently bring your attention back to the visualization exercise.
Physical Grounding Techniques

1. Alternate between running cool and warm water over your hands
2. Touch various items with different textures, weights, and temperatures
3. Stretch
4. Carry a "grounding object," something small, to touch when you feel triggered such as a rock, ring, or coin.
5. Jump up and down
6. Walk slowly, as you move each foot, say "left foot, right foot"
7. Eat something and describe the flavors to yourself
8. Focus on your breathing. With each inhale, repeat a comforting word such as "safe"
9. Dig your heels into the ground. Notice the tension.

Qigong Exercise: Accordion

In this, you feel the Qi energy by using your hands like the bellow of an accordion or a bicycle pump.

1. Close your eyes halfway. Clear your mind and concentrate your attention on your palms.
2. Allow your breath to become slow, easy, without force. In a way, you are creating the very lightest trance.
3. Bring your hands together, palms touching and fingers pointing upward. The palm chakras, called Laogong, located in the center of the palms, should be touching. These chakras are areas where Qi can be felt emanating from the body.
4. Slowly move your hands, keeping the chakras aligned. When they are about 12 inches (30 cm) apart, slowly move them together using the least amount of physical effort possible.
5. You will be compressing the air between them like an accordion would.
6. Feel a warm or tingling sensation at the Laogong points on your palms.
7. Move your hands slowly back and forth, varying the range of the bellows. Repeat the accordion technique in different directions: horizontally, vertically, and diagonally.

This exercise cultivates Qi, builds awareness, and sensitizes you. When you feel Qi energy for the first time, it changes your mindset.

http://www.consciousslifestylemag.com/qigong-exercises-healing-energy
Bilateral Stimulation Techniques and Variations

Below are some bilateral stimulation (BLS) techniques that can be incorporated into grounding and daily life. Although BLS is a term and activity used in Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy for people who have experienced trauma, it provides some transferrable skills as part of overall mindfulness practice. These types of activities help with expanding one’s personal toolkit for coping skills.

Doing an action on the left side of the body, then on the right, alternating between the two, causes both sides of the brain to engage (essentially crossing the brain’s center line). The association of slow, short sets of tapping (particularly with a positive stimulus) helps promote stabilization and intentional self-regulation of the body. You may notice that there are activities you engage in naturally that create bilateral stimulation or self-soothing.

For the simple BLS skills below, the level of tapping is meant to be noticeable but not distracting. There should be enough speed to create some level of activation in the body. Slow, short sets are used to help promote stabilization/self-regulation.

Skill: Tapping Meditation
Can do this activity as a group (creates a nice sense of group cohesiveness, connection).
Sitting with feet flat on the ground, alternate taps on the tops of legs with full palms down.
Leader will set the alternating speed.

Butterfly Hug, Monkey Tap, Angel Wings
This technique has several different variations, so people can be presented with options and choose the one that feels most comfortable to them.
- Variation 1: Arms crossed at the upper arms (feels comforting to some, can feel constrictive to others)
- Variation 2: Arms crossed on the forearms, below/near the elbows
- Variation 3: Wrists crossed and then brought to chest (e.g. over heart), Palms and fingers are lifted, alternating to create tapping

An Aromatherapy BLS Technique
Put a drop of an essential oil or fragrant lotion on the palm of the hand.
Put palms together and bring to chin level.
Slide palms up and down, alternating while breathing in the aroma (e.g. lavender for calming; peppermint or citrus for awakening, etc.)

Sufi Grinder
This technique incorporates simple bilateral movements (e.g. physically crossing one’s center line). It is great for kids on the autism spectrum who tend to self-soothe from front to back because it helps approximate a left-right movement.
Take the right hand, cross over in front of the left side of the body and make a movement in the air like half of an infinity symbol, repeat the same action with the left hand; repeat.

Noodling
While standing, float arms slightly away from the body. Imagine that you’re uncooked spaghetti that’s just been put into a pot of boiling water. As the hot water begins to soften the noodles, alternate your weight on your left and right feet. As you continue to cook, begin to sway the rest of the body gently, more and more.
One of the goals of boxed square breathing is to bring the respiratory system back into alignment and end the shallow breathing that results from the fight or flight response mode the body enters when feeling stressed. Researchers with the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine report that in addition to reducing stress, controlled breathing is used to treat insomnia, anxiety, depression and pain control.

- Sit straight up in a comfortable chair. Put your feet flat on the floor and relax your hands in your lap. You may overlap your hands or let them lie separately with palms facing up. The important factor is to maintain an aligned posture and to be at ease.
- Close your eyes or let your vision blur.
- Close your mouth and breathe in slowly through your nose. Count to four as you inhale. Hold your breath for four seconds. You are not trying to deprive your body of oxygen, but need to allow a few seconds for the air to fill your lungs. Concentrate on your belly and notice how it also moves when you inhale deeply.
- Open your mouth slightly and slowly exhale to a count of four. Hold the exhale to another count of four. Ideally, you should repeat the exercise for four minutes, but two or three times will help you to achieve a more relaxed state, relieve tension and settle your nerves.
- Allow the air to fill your belly and notice how it passes over your chest.

**Box/Square Breathing:**

1) Breathe in to a count of four.
2) Hold to a count of four.
3) Breathe out to a count of four.
4) Again hold to a count of four.
Body Scan

Begin by bringing your attention into your body.

You can close your eyes if it is comfortable for you.

You can notice your body seated wherever you’re seated, feeling the weight of your body on the chair, on the floor.

Take a few deep breaths.

And as you take a deep breath, bring in more oxygen enlivening the body. And as you exhale, have a sense of relaxing more deeply.

You can notice your feet on the floor, notice the sensations of your feet touching the floor. The weight and pressure, vibration, heat.

You can notice your legs against the chair, pressure, pulsing, heaviness, lightness.

Notice your back against the chair.

Bring your attention into your stomach area. If your stomach is tense or tight, let it soften. Take a breath.

Notice your hands. Are your hands tense or tight? See if you can allow them to soften.

Notice your arms. Feel any sensation in your arms. Let your shoulders be soft.

Notice your neck and throat. Let them be soft. Relax.

Soften your jaw. Let your face and facial muscles go soft.

Then notice your whole body present. Take one more breath.

Be aware of your whole body as best you can. Take a breath. And then when you’re ready, open your eyes.
“Tapping In” to Reduce Anxiety

When using resource tapping you are imagining or remembering good qualities and experiences, real or imagined, and then adding bilateral stimulation through left-right tapping to strengthen your associations with these qualities or memories. You can do this for yourself, or you can do it for someone else by guiding them through the exercises and then doing the tapping for them. When using this technique it’s important to remember or imagine good things with enough sensory detail to get a felt sense in your body and/or your emotions. Details can include how it feels in your body, what you see, hear, smell, taste, etc.

1. Find a comfortable place to sit or lie, where you will not be disturbed. Close your eyes. Take several long, slow breaths, fill the belly, and exhale slowly. Let yourself relax.

2. Bring up the imagined resource or positive memory. Bring it up with as much sensory detail as possible: sights, sounds, smells, sensations, and the emotional feeling that goes along with it.

3. When you have a sense of the resource, begin to tap on your knees or shoulders right-left, right-left. The taps can be quick or slow, just find a speed that feels best to you. Do this 6 to 12 times (tapping both the right and the left equals one time). If you’re tapping your knees, tap with the left fingers on the left knee and with the right fingers on the right knee. If you’re tapping your shoulders, cross your arms over each other in front of your body as though you’re hugging yourself. Then tap with the left fingers on the right shoulder and the right fingers on the left shoulder.

4. Pause and check in with yourself and see how you’re feeling. You may keep tapping as long as it feels good and positive, but usually not more than 15 taps on each side.
Ocean Breathing

This type of breathing can feel strengthening and empowering, especially for men. You can nickname this "Darth Vader breathing" or hot soup breathing.

- Inhaling and exhaling will both be through the nose.
- Breathe in through your nose. Your belly should expand.

- Exhale through your nose. Although some air may flow out of your mouth, think about doing the work with your nose. Push the breath out through the chest/neck as your belly contracts. Your body should make a deeper noise (like an ocean wave coming ashore against the beach or stones).
- Attempt to keep the inhales and exhales even, especially while you're first learning this technique; eventually, begin to work towards a longer exhale.
- Do not attempt more than five full sets if you are new to this (to avoid possible lightheadedness).

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Clench and Release

- Make fists.
- Focus on your clenched fists. Really notice the contraction of your muscles. Feel your fingernails dig into your palms.
- Continue clenching until you can't tighten your fists anymore.
- Whenever it feels too uncomfortable to keep holding on, know that you can slowly, mindfully let go at any time.
- When you choose to begin releasing your grip, notice your fingers uncurling, and feel the trickle of letting go (perhaps even in your arms and shoulders).
- Notice how good it feels to let go!

NOTE: Any muscles group can be clenched and released (stomach and feet are popular choices). For help with sleep and deeper relaxation, clench and release one muscle group at a time, holding each clench for 20-30 seconds and then slowly releasing. This can be done from top to bottom of the body (or vice versa) and should take about 20 minutes to complete.

You can also clench and release bilaterally, meaning one side of your body at a time. For instance, clenching just your right hand for 20-30 seconds, then slowly releasing. Then clenching just your left hand for 20-30 seconds, then slowly releasing.
WELCOME!

Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine (SASSMM)'s mission is to help empower, support, advocate for and inspire hope for survivors of sexual violence. Over the 34 years that SASSMM has provided support and prevention services, it has advocated for and assisted thousands of Midcoast residents, who are often unseen.

Sexual violence happens to 1 in 5 Mainers, it happens to 1 in 4 female children, and 1 in 6 male children. Regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, or ability, each survivor's experience is unique; their narratives personal.

A few years ago SASSMM compiled booklets entitled "Your Voices," which contained victim impact statements, articles, poems, art, and letters written by survivors and concerned others impacted by sexual violence. The majority of these stories spoke of sexual abuse in their youth. Many of the authors were high school and college age when they authored their experiences. These individual stories have a strong and powerful message for each of us. They allow us to understand the presence of sexual violence in our lives, to recognize that it exists, that it happens here, and that it happens frequently between people who know each other.

In spite of that pain, the authors of "Your Voices" want us to hear them, to respect them, and more importantly, to believe them and speak out against sexual violence. In this most current edition of "Your Voices," SASSMM has been able to build upon the narratives and articles and poems that have been gathered to date, to diversify the stories shared by different survivors, and to add new reflections from community members and partners. We have also included a mindfulness self-care component to the compilation. This section will assist readers in their healing and processing of the material, as well as their own individual experiences.

These materials are also readily available on our website: www.sassmm.org.

Arian G. Clements
Executive Director, SASSMM

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69 Coping Skills

1. Ask for help
2. Inspire yourself
3. Leave a bad scene
4. Persist
5. Honesty
6. Cry
7. Choose self-respect
8. Take good care of your body
9. List your options
10. Create meaning
11. Do the best you can with what you have
12. Set a boundary
13. Compassion
14. When in doubt, do what's hardest
15. Talk yourself through it
16. Imagine
17. Pace yourself
18. Stay safe
19. Seek understanding, not blame
20. If one way doesn't work, try another
21. Alone is better than a bad relationship
22. Create a new story
23. Avoid avoidable suffering
24. Ask others
25. Get organized
26. Healing above all
27. Try something, anything
28. Discovery
29. Create a buffer
30. Say what you really think
31. Listen to your needs
32. Move toward your opposite
33. Replay the scene
34. Structure your day
35. Set an action plan
36. Soothing talk
37. Think of the consequences
38. Trust the process
39. Expect growth to feel uncomfortable
40. Replace destructive activities
41. Focus on now
42. Praise yourself
43. Observe repeating patterns
44. Self-nurture
45. Practice delay
46. Let go of destructive relationships
47. Take responsibility
48. Set a deadline
49. Make a commitment
50. Detach from emotional pain with grounding
51. Learn from experience
52. Solve the problem
53. Use kinder language
54. Examine the evidence
55. Plan it out
56. Identify the belief
57. Reward yourself
58. Create new "tapes"
59. Find rules to live by
60. Setbacks are not failures
61. Tolerate the feeling
62. Actions first, and the feelings will follow
63. When in doubt, don't
64. Notice the source of discomfort
65. Make a decision
66. Do the right thing
67. Prioritize healing
68. Reach for community resources
69. Notice what you can control

Source: Lisa Najavits, PhD
Recommended Reading

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<td>Judith Lasater</td>
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<tr>
<td>Breaking the Habit of Being Yourself</td>
<td>Joe Dispenza</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Provided by a Melissa Roberts Certified Trauma Trained Yoga Teacher

If Grounding Doesn’t Work

1) Practice often. Even when you are not feeling triggered or activated.
2) Try grounding for a long period of time (20-30 minutes).
3) Continue to repeat the practice and switch techniques.
4) Observe what works best for you. Is physical grounding or mental grounding more effective?
5) Create your own method of grounding. A personal technique that works for you is the most beneficial method.
6) Start grounding early. Try to being before you feel overwhelmed as a way to remain balanced.

Source: Lisa Najavits, PhD

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Want to Support SASSMM?

Would you like to help but don’t have the time to volunteer? Did you know that you can donate directly to SASSMM to support the vital programs, client services, and community outreach that Sexual Assault Support Services provides to the Midcoast and surrounding communities? Gifts can be sent to:
SASSMM, P.O. Box 990, Brunswick, ME 04011

Other ways to support this work is to make a donation online:

www.sassmm.org

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Just Give:
https://www.justgiving.com/sexualassaultsupportservicesofmidcoastmaine

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Want to Contribute to Future “Your Voices” Narratives?

SASSMM is always looking for new additions to the publication. Submissions can be authored as anonymous, with a first name or alias, or other descriptors (e.g. ‘From a 30 year old trans woman’) - it’s up to you!

You are welcome to mail submissions to SASSMM at P.O. Box 990, Brunswick, ME 04011 or email them via the contact form at www.ssassmm.org. If you or someone you know would be interested in submitting work or has any questions, you can also contact SASSMM by phone (207-725-2181) .
Your Voices

SASSMM
Sexual Assault Support Services of Midcoast Maine
P.O. Box 990, Brunswick, ME 04011
Office Telephone:
(207) 725-2181
Statewide 24-Hour Confidential Support Line:
1-(800) 871-7741