

Facebook and Survivor Issues

By Ash © Pandora's Project 2009

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

Setting appropriate online boundaries

Learning how to set your own personal boundaries online can be an important first step. Pandy's discourages everyone from giving out any kind of personal information (which includes real names, phone numbers, emails, IMs, addresses) to anyone online. While it is natural to form bonds with others, we remind you that your personal safety is extremely important and you should be careful about sharing your personal information.

If you use Facebook, ensure that you take a close look at your privacy settings and that you do not approve anyone you do not know personally. Do not feel guilty about denying a friend request from someone you do not know or do not want to see your personal information. This is your profile and this is your decision.

When you seek out your abuser

You may find yourself wanting to search for your abuser on Facebook. You may have questions like What is he/she up to? Is he/she successful? Is he/she hurting other people? You may find yourself wanting to tell your abuser's friends what he/she has done or to contact him/her to have your say.

All of these feelings are normal and many survivors have struggled with the same things. It is always a good idea to think through any decisions and to not act spontaneously. If you find yourself feeling like this, give yourself time to process these feelings and to think about why. You might ask yourself:

- *Why do I want to contact him/her?*

- *What do I hope to accomplish?*
- *What will I do if I do not get the reaction I was hoping for?*
- *How will this affect me and my healing?*

Giving a decision like this proper thought can help you. You need to make sure you aren't damaging your own well-being in order to find out more about your abuser's current life or exposing them to others. It's important to take time to think about what you hope to achieve and why you have this urge to make contact. You may well find that actually having contact with them is not at all what you want and discover other ways of releasing the things you want to say to your abuser or their friends, through letter writing (sent or unsent), art, therapy and so on.

When your abuser contacts you

You may find that your abuser uses Facebook to try to make contact with you, which can be something very difficult for a survivor. If this happens, you should consider immediately blocking this individual. Please see below for how to block someone.

If your abuser is sending you harassing or threatening messages, you might consider reporting them. You can find information on reporting them to Facebook here:

<http://www.facebook.com/help/?page=798>

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

Some survivors have reported being contacted by an abuser who acts friendly or acts like nothing has happened. This can be particularly confusing, as it may bring up some difficult memories and others might not understand why you are upset, particularly if he/she hasn't said anything threatening or if no one else knows about the abuse.

If the abuser is on your friend list, see below for some tips. If the abuser is not on your friend list, you might consider checking your privacy settings to ensure that you can only receive messages from people who are in your friend list. You might also consider blocking the abuser so that you no longer receive messages from him/her.

Allow yourself to process any difficult feelings that come up. Talk to a trusted friend or therapist about how you are feeling and about how difficult this is. Know that you are not alone

and that it is natural to feel upset and confused. Keep reaching out for support as you work through this.

Safety and how to block/report someone

Remember that your personal safety is of utmost importance and that you can control what information you choose to share online. Although it is possible to choose your own privacy settings, we recommend not sharing anything online that you wouldn't be comfortable having someone else (including non-friends) see. This includes photos, contact information, school/employment information, etc.

Facebook is constantly updating its privacy settings, so it is your responsibility to ensure that your profile is secure at all times and that you are careful about revealing your personal information.

You should also remember that you are in control of your own profile and that you have the ability to choose who can view your information. If you are receiving harassing messages or do not want to be contacted by an individual, we strongly encourage you to block them via Facebook. You can find more information about blocking someone here:

<http://www.ehow.com/...e-facebook.html>

You might also consider reporting this individual to Facebook:

<http://www.facebook.com/help/?page=798>

What to do if you are Facebook friends with an abuser and are scared to remove him/her

If your abuser is or was a friend and is currently on your Facebook friend list, you may not feel comfortable removing him/her, either for safety or for personal reasons. If your other friends are not aware of what happened, removing the abuser could bring up questions that you do not want to answer.

If you are concerned about your safety, it is possible to block an individual's posts without removing them from your friend list. You can also prevent certain people from viewing your profile content. You can find more information on doing that here:

<http://www.facebook...lp/?search=hide> ("How do I hide profile content from specific people?" and "How do I hide stories from a particular application (eg., a quiz) from appearing in my News Feed?")

You may be in a situation where you have friends who maintain a Facebook friendship with

your abuser, or engage in conversation online with your abuser. This can feel incredibly hurtful as a survivor, particularly if the friend/s in question know about what happened to you. In this kind of situation, it's important to take time to really think about what is right for you. You may want to consider things such as:

- *How does the contact between my abuser and my friend make me feel?*
- *Is it in my own best interests to keep up the relationship with this person, or am I able to maintain the friendship and keep their relationship with my abuser separate?*
- *Delve into why you think your friend is continuing to talk to your abuser can be important - are they doing it in order to hurt or dismiss you, or do they have their own personal reasons for wanting to maintain the friendship/relationship?*
- *What are things I can do to help make this situation more bearable for me? For example, you might try blocking your abuser completely on Facebook so you won't see when friends of yours have had an online interaction with them. Depending on the level of your friendship and how comfortable you feel, you might feel the need to talk to your friend and explain what happened, or talk to them about how their friendship with your abuser makes you feel.*

There's really no hard set rule on how to handle situations like these. All you can do is assess how their contact makes you feel and decide whether it is something you can cope with, or if you need to end the relationship with the friend for your own well-being.

Friends posting inappropriate comments

Many survivors often struggle with knowing what to do when they see their friends post inappropriate or rape-related comments on their Facebook walls.

You may choose to deal with this in different ways:

You might consider speaking out on their wall or contacting them privately to let them know why their statement was inappropriate. Often, these statements are made out of ignorance and are not meant to be hurtful. Providing accurate statistics or a personal perspective can sometimes be helpful. If this is something you choose to do, we recommend that you always be respectful and that you take time to think through your response before posting. You should also consider who has access to your profile and who may be reading your comments.

Sometimes ignoring the comment is the best option. Some people just aren't in a position to

hear what we have to say and it unfortunately is not worth it to try to reason with them. This can be frustrating, but it is also important to take care of yourself and to consider your own well-being. You may also not be in a position to say anything because no one is aware of the abuse.

Regardless of how you choose to react, it is important to process your frustration and to talk about it with someone who understands. Often, venting about an insensitive comment can help give you perspective and allow you to feel better.

Some resources:

Safety with Social Media (Womenslaw): http://www.womenslaw...G&open_id=13887

Facebook setting tips (PC World): http://www.pcworld.c... tweak_now.html

Reclaim Privacy (online program to scan your profile for potential security concerns):
<http://www.reclaimprivacy.org/facebook>