

DoD Safe Helpline

Safe HelpRoom Overview Moderated Online Peer Support for the DoD Community

Introduction

Safe HelpRoom is a groundbreaking group chat service that allows military victims of sexual assault to connect with peers in a moderated and secure online environment at SafeHelpline.org. Safe HelpRoom is a component of the DoD Safe Helpline, the anonymous and confidential crisis support service available to members of the DoD community since early 2011.

Why Safe HelpRoom?

Safe HelpRoom provides a secure and private environment for positive and supportive discussions for military survivors of sexual assault. It was created in response to Safe Helpline users who identified a need for peer support services and designed with unique safeguards in place to ensure a safe and welcoming environment for survivors to connect. Additionally, studies show that technology-enhanced interventions are effective in maintaining treatment gains¹.

Benefits

The benefits of accessing peer support include survivors feeling less lonely, isolated or judged. Speaking with peers can lead to improved coping skills, a greater sense of adjustment and reduced stress, depression and anxiety. Survivors report that they appreciate receiving practical advice and information about treatment options from peers. Also, an online forum overcomes barriers to assistance that some victims face because it is free, anonymous, and available anywhere there is an internet connection.

Session Structure

Safe HelpRoom sessions are held twice weekly in two-hour online sessions. The session schedule can be found at SafeHelpline.org. Sessions are limited to 10 participants to ensure positive and productive conversations. In addition to a moderator, each session is managed by a reviewer who ensures that participant comments are respectful.

¹ Stephanie Bauer, Markus Wolf, Severin Haug & Hans Kordy (2011): The effectiveness of internet chat groups in relapse prevention after inpatient psychotherapy, *Psychotherapy Research*, 21:2, 219

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Chat Room Safety

Prior to Safe HelpRoom, survivors had been using online social networking to disclose and connect to peers in an unsecure manner. In order to make Safe HelpRoom safe for survivors, extensive research was undertaken and it revealed that while there were relevant online chat rooms, all were unmonitored and often hosted inaccurate information on their message boards posing risks to a user's emotional health² and privacy, even potentially interfering with criminal prosecutions.

- ▶ Safe HelpRoom is the first chat room to require participants to commit to behavioral ground rules; that is:
 - All participants must be respectful and abstain from using graphic, abusive or inappropriate language.
 - All participants must abstain from revealing personally identifying information (PII) about themselves, a perpetrator, or other individuals.
 - All participants are asked to participate and post messages in the discussion.
- ▶ All participants create a display name prior to entering the discussion (they are not allowed to display their full name).
- ▶ No PII is collected to enter the discussion or shared during the chats, and no PII is stored on servers after the sessions.
- ▶ Safe HelpRoom is the first chat room to enlist a moderator and comment reviewer.
- ▶ The moderator of each session is a licensed clinical social worker. They kick-start the discussion and provide correct/factual information when appropriate.
- ▶ Each session is also managed by a reviewer. They quickly assess all participant comments prior to being made visible to the group. The reviewer has the capability to remove a participant from the discussion if the participant is abusive or continues to disregard the ground rules.

About DoD Safe Helpline

Safe HelpRoom augments the support provided by the Safe Helpline, which is available to members of the DoD community in accordance with the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Policy. As part of the Safe Helpline, victims can access support services by "click, call or text" and the free, anonymous and confidential resource can be accessed worldwide, 24-hours a day, every day to connect with live sexual assault support professionals.

² Jerry Finn: Victimization Online: The Downside of Seeking Human Services for Women on the Internet



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When users visit Safe Helpline, the staff provides one-on-one tailored assistance and offers a variety of up-to-date service referrals for resources on and off military bases and installations. Service referrals include information for Sexual Assault Response Coordinators, along with legal, medical, mental health, and spiritual military resources. The referral database also houses information for local civilian and Department of Veterans Affairs resources for helpline users seeking information and crisis support away from the military response system.

Service Operator

DoD Safe Helpline and Safe HelpRoom are administered by DoD and operated by the non-profit Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization, through a contractual agreement with DoD SAPRO.