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Tips for Working With Your Doctor If You Are a Trauma Survivor

To live in the body of a survivor is to never be able to leave the scene of the crime.

I cannot ignore the fact that I live here. – Blythe Baird

1. Bring someone to your appointment: Bring a trusted friend or partner to medical visits whenever possible who can help advocate for you when you feel anxious or scared.
2. Write a script beforehand: If there are important things you want your doctor to know, but are difficult to talk about, write them down beforehand and hand the paper to your doctor or their nurse before your visit starts. You can also email sensitive information to the office before your visit. Sometimes working with a therapist or trusted person who knows your history of trauma well can help write a most effective script for your doctor.
3. Ask to Avoid Triggers: If you have known triggers from previous visits, ask to have these modified if possible. For example, if feet in stirrups during a pelvic exam is stressful, ask if your exam can be done without stirrups. If sitting more upright feels less vulnerable than laying flat on your back, ask if the exam table can be modified so you feel more in control of your position. Some people with trauma want to have every step of an exam or procedure explained to them, others prefer less talking and prefer getting the task done as quickly as possible; try to communicate beforehand what your preference is.
4. Schedule Longer Appointment Time: Many doctor offices are rushed, even though doctors do not want to be rushed. If you know it may help you to



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have extra time with a doctor or their staff, ask the receptionist if scheduling a longer appointment time is possible. You can also ask to schedule the first appointment of the day when doctors are less likely to be running late. Scheduling at the end of the day on a Friday can be the worst time to be seen because doctors and staff are at the end of a busy week, and many offices manage last minute urgent needs before a weekend at that time making their office potentially more hectic.

5. Prioritize Self Care Day of Your Appointment: Do not skip meals or drink too much coffee the morning of your appointment, as low blood sugar and too much caffeine can make anxiety worse. Prioritize time for restful sleep the night before, and exercise or meditate the morning of your visit if possible to reduce stress. If you take medication for your mood, be sure not to miss a dose on the days leading up to your appointment. If you have been prescribed anxiety medication for high stress situations, you can plan to take this medication before your appointment if you feel like you need it. If you do not have a prescription for high stress medication use, consider asking your psychiatry provider for this prescription and making sure it will not interact poorly with your other medications. Some medications for high stress use will require someone to drive you to and from your appointment, so be sure to make this arrangement if needed.
6. Schedule Extra Visits: If you need to have a medical procedure and are worried about pain or having a panic attack, consider scheduling a talking only extra visit beforehand to review pain and anxiety management options in detail. Many doctor offices offer video visits, if being inside a doctors office is a panic trigger for you, ask if a video visit beforehand to meet your



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doctor and discuss your concerns from the comfort of your own home is available. If you have experienced high levels of pain or anxiety for previous procedures you were told usually aren't painful, let your doctor know this and ask for any additional pain management options that may not typically be offered. However, also know if a procedure is not considered usually painful and medical guidelines do not recommend pain care or anesthesia, insurance will not cover it and there may be cost out of pocket to have extra pain management care. Also know that many routine exams and in office procedures may not have any additional pain management options available. If this is the case for what your medical care needs are, strategize with a therapist or support team how to best prepare for brief discomfort if this is expected, as well as aftercare for taking care of yourself when the appointment is done.

7. Have a Test Visit: If pelvic exams have been painful or traumatic in the past and you know your office visit or procedure will include one, you may want to schedule a 'test run' visit beforehand to practice having a speculum inserted on a different day than your procedure. It's ok to ask your doctor to use the smallest speculum they have. Specialist offices will usually have what is called a 'pediatric speculum' which is the smallest size. Not all medical procedures can be done with this sized speculum, but you can ask your doctor if they are willing to try.
8. Give Feedback: If you have a bad experience with your doctor or their staff, submit written feedback after you have time to talk to trusted friends, family, or a therapist about what happened for you, and suggestions for the office of how to be more sensitive or specific advice for what would have



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been helpful that didn't happen for you. You can also ask to have a conversation with your doctor at a later date, or you can speak with the office manager to share your experience and submit requests for office policy changes to make things better for future people who have trauma.

9. Be Understanding Best You Can: Try to be compassionate with your doctor or their nurse if you had a bad experience with them, and remember no doctor wants you to experience unnecessary pain or trauma in their care. One person who has trauma may need very different things than another person with trauma. Even specialists who work routinely with trauma survivors may not say or do the best thing that you need because everyone with a trauma background has a unique set of needs to feel safe and cared for in a medical office.

