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Hello and welcome back to the SACIS podcast, Making Adjustments, where we take a thoughtful dive into different cultural topics that could benefit from a few healthy adjustments. If you're new here, SACIS is the Sexual Assault Counseling and Information Service and we serve survivors of sexual violence as well as their significant others in the Eastern Illinois area. We also have a sister organization, CAISA, Counseling and Information for Sexual Assault and Abuse, which covers portions of central and southern Illinois. Together it is our mission to end sexual violence in society and we recognize that intersections of identities and different backgrounds and experiences all contribute to a culture of violence and oppression.

So Happy December everyone! Whether you're a survivor, a significant other, or just a listener of our podcast we hope this month is life-giving for you and we are so thankful you have taken time out of your day to spend with us here on the podcast. In lieu of our general format, where we discuss a specific current event or hot topic related to sexual assault, we thought it would be timely and helpful to take this month's episode and talk about something that might seem very basic, but is actually a stressor each and every one of us face every year- and that is making it through the holidays. We won't be discussing any specific holiday persay, but more just addressing the general stress that comes with preparing for any celebration or gathering this time of year... or for the lack of those things if you don't celebrate anything. Holiday seasons can be riddled with loneliness, grief and reflection of the past year- especially for survivors of trauma such as sexual assault or abuse. For a lot of folks, the holidays are a time when survivors may have to come face to face with their perpetrator or someone who was complicit in their abuse, especially in the case of family members.

Making it through the holidays, or any difficult time really, a lot of the messaging we hear has to do with healing, resilience, and self care... and that's all great, except, it's hard to know how to do those things or where to start when we're already struggling and we feel alone or helpless or powerless or anything else like that.

One thing I remember hearing and believing for a long time was "Do whatever feels good to you." At face value, that's a great plan. But just in my own personal experience, doing what I thought would feel good when my mental health was in a state of emergency, was absolutely not what was best for me. It's nothing I feel ashamed about and it's nothing you should feel ashamed about either... my mind was working against me, and I just literally wasn't capable of making a good decision for myself at that point. When I didn't want to do anything or be anyone in the world, what I thought would feel good was staying home alone in my pajamas, eating a whole package of break-and-bake cookies, and binge watching Netflix for hours on end. And don't get me wrong, I think every once in a while we all need those days- Coping with your anxiety or depression or anything else with food or comfort shows is- it's okay and it's a normal reaction. But what I found was that the days I spent doing what I thought "felt good" were the days I went to bed feeling even more numb, empty and gross. They didn't really actually do anything as far as helping me to feel better goes.

The thing is, when our minds aren't in the best shape or our bodies are feeling tired or weak, we have a tendency to believe lies in our head about ourselves and healing, and it's just easiest to doubt our own power to change or get better. For the majority, no one is choosing to stay in a bad place. I think we all want to heal and live better lives, but after an experience of trauma it becomes much easier to slip, most times unconsciously or unwillingly into unhealthy habits or ways of thinking.

So i've had to challenge myself to stop believing those lies in my head and to face that truth that i am totally capable and that resilience and strength don't build up in us when we do what we feel like doing, and have those lazy days all the time, and when we just check out of our lives- it happens when we make the active choice to participate and connect with other people and rest well. And when i say rest well i mean instead of just laying on the couch or in bed all day like i usually want, we can think about what actually brings peace or a sense of reassurance when we're struggling and make the difficult decision to do those things and see them through.

So on the topic of finding good ways to rest and take care of yourself- a huge topic over the past few years has been self care. There are a lot of ideas about self-care and maybe some of them aren't as helpful as others for survivors specifically. So Recently the Cleveland Rape Crisis Center released a list of self care ideas submitted by actual survivors of sexual violence that helped them either cope, move forward in their healing journey, or feel like they regained a sense of self and power.

One category I loved was self-expression as self-care-

Survivors shared some things that got them through were just taking the time to write through their experiences- to write down their story, others said it helped to just talk to someone about how they were feeling-whether it was a counselor or a trusted friend. One survivor shared that she got a tattoo to remind her of her strength. I loved that idea. It could be just a little drawing that inspires you, a message in the handwriting of someone you love, a mantra, a song lyric, anything. And if you're not into tattoos, something you could also do is just jot that down on your arm on a rough day and roll up your sleeve for the little reminder when you need it. Someone else said that they used a bullet journal instead of just a regular journal because it allowed them to be more creative and helped them take things one day and one step at a time.

Another category was therapeutic practices-

One person said they took 30 min a day to focus on deep breathing and being present in the moment. Being present in the moment seems like something we shouldn't have to try at, because technically we are always actually living in the present moment- but when you have experienced violence or trauma it's hard not to get stuck in that past within your mind, or to fixate on the unknowns of the future and have fears and anxiety about that. So grounding techniques to stay in the moment are really important & helpful for a lot of folks, and we actually have been sharing several of these exercises on our TikTok page this month, so you can head over there to check those out- our handle is @team_sacis. A lot of people also said that therapy including EMDR, art therapy, support groups and more helped. Some people found it helpful to read books about the consequences and after-effects of trauma so they could better identify how it was impacting their life.

A lot of survivors found that their pets or animals provided a lot of comfort, several animals mentioned were their dogs, cats, or even horses. A lot of self care messaging about physical self care focuses on exercise or like having a spa day or something, but a lot of times if someone isn't feeling safe or isn't feeling like themselves they don't have the motivation to get up and do something, and things like a spa day usually cost a lot of money, so one thing I loved that a survivor suggested was on tough days, wearing the softest outfit you can find. I love that because I know how great cozy pajamas or a soft sweatshirt can feel on a bad day- it's warm, it's safe and it's such a simple idea. Another said that getting outside, even if it's just a few minutes, always helps them feel better.

Another common self care act is saying affirmations or positive messages, but instead, one survivor said that they like to listen to other survivors' stories because it reminds them they aren't alone and, I especially liked this, that "watching them win gives me strength"

These are just a few ideas that have helped actual survivors and we will list the link to the full article in the show notes.

It takes a lot of strength and time and energy to pull yourself out of a dark place mentally or emotionally so if that is a journey that you are pursuing, good for you. We are proud of you regardless of how it's going or how you're feeling right now in this moment, because deciding to try, to put your best foot forward, to do the work, is half the battle- just getting started is one of the hardest parts. So we commend you for whatever steps you've taken. And if you haven't started or are stuck in a cycle of behaviors that are harmful- just know that you're not alone. There are so many people in the same boat- you don't have anything to feel guilty or ashamed about because the way that trauma and different triggers in the aftermath of traumatic events have an effect on your life is something that is so difficult to point out and name and control.

Resilience is built over time. So don't be discouraged if you do try a time and two and you don't feel completely healed. It's a journey, and one built with a community of supporters backing you- family, friends, counselors. We all want to be healthy individuals without doing the work but unfortunately that's not how healing is, and we just want you to know that we're here for you, and if SACIS or CAISA is not the right place for you, we will do our best to get you connected to other resources that are.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I truly hope that this was helpful, thought-provoking, or at least a bright spot in your day. We appreciate all of our supporters and listeners so so much. And as always, our 24 hr hotlines are always available, even on holidays: you can contact the SACIS hotline at 888-345-2846 and the CAISA hotline at 866-288-4888. That's all for this episode of Making Adjustments and we will see you in the next one.