

Advice to Gynecologists (written by an anonymous survivor)

Because of my sexual abuse/rape, the work you have to do is full of possible triggers for me. I know this, and so I begin to feel anxious before I even arrive at the appointment. But you don't know my history, so my reactions may be puzzling to you. I realize you are aware of a certain level of anxiety about OB/GYN care, but unless you know my story you might not understand my strong reactions.

If I ask for time to talk privately with you at first, please do not resent that as "valuable time" lost that you could have used to do your job—this *is* part of your job. Because you went into this field to assist women with our health, it is important that this part of my health be considered too. If I choose to inform you about my sexual abuse, please remember that I am telling you this for information, not for pity; I want you to use that disclosure to help guide your technique.

Even small talk and friendly visiting can help me during the process. It keeps me grounded and comfortable to interact with you, and to know that you see me as a person who needs patience and understanding.

If I do begin to "stress out," please be kind with me. I am so used to people scolding me to "settle down" and "cooperate," and if I could, I would. What will help me more than instructions is kindness. Here is what you can do to help me.

Please arrange a "pause" signal with me. For example, if I tap a finger a few times, it means I need a breath-catching break. During that break, don't just sit and watch me; that would make me feel exposed and humiliated. Instead, redirect your eye contact to me—my eyes—and talk with me. Explain what you are doing, and what will happen next, and please use a soothing tone. I may want a reassuring pat on my hand from you, or I may not. But please ask, because for some of us it helps to have human contact.

We feel embarrassed that we react this way. It's as if we "can't handle it" in front of an educated, skilled, stranger. Let us know continually that it's okay, that you understand. Our embarrassment can sometimes keep us from returning, so talk to us in future-tense, such as assuring us that during our next visit we won't feel nearly so anxious, which you know because you've seen this before, and we're not the only ones, and this is common, and you look forward to being able to help us again, etc.

Watch my breathing. If I begin to hyperventilate or take shallow breaths, please stop and talk us through the anxiety. I know it's not your job to be a therapist, and I'm not asking you to be, but it will help your patients immensely to have the emotional comfort as well as your medical skill.

During the exam, keep one point of physical contact with us at all times. It is during the "gaps" where you are not touching us that our anxiety returns

because we know that the awkward touching will resume, and we're not sure where, how, or at what point on our bodies. By having one hand or fingertip remain gently on an ankle, foot, or arm, we can mentally "map" where you are, and it doesn't feel as much like a "start-stop-start-stop" process. If hygiene prevents you from doing this, then substitute verbal cues and tell us you're ready to resume touch, and how you will do it.

Offer us a blanket to use to cover our bodies. This can help keep us from feeling so exposed and unguarded.

Explain each part of the process to us. Some of us do not know that the normal routine of this exam is
the external exam;
the speculum exam;
the bimanual exam; and
rectovaginal exam.

Since these are pretty embarrassing to us, go ahead and explain in advance what you are doing. Use matter-of-fact language because anxiety is "contagious" and we want to feel that *you* feel totally comfortable with this process. Random, ambiguous comments like "Hmm." and "uh...huh!" during an exam freak us out.

Praise us frequently! We need supportive feedback! It lets us know you aren't frustrated because of our tension, and encourages us that we *can* do things like this.

Above all, please let us know that our fears are familiar to you, and very normal. We don't want to be "the big dope" who "spazzed out on you." If you can assure us that this is common, and we're just fine, it alleviates a lot of the embarrassment.

Thank you!