

How to Support a Survivor of Sexual Assault

After a recent assault or disclosure of a past assault, survivors need your support. You can do a number of things to help the person you care about get through this difficult time.

Believe her/him. It is not your role to question whether a sexual assault occurred. In reality, false sexual assault reports are no more or less common than false reports for other violent crimes.

Help her/him explore options. Don't take charge of the situation and pressure the survivor to do what you think should be done. That's what the offender did. Give the survivor the freedom to choose a path of recovery that is most comfortable, even if you would do it differently. Remember, there is no single right way for a survivor to respond after being assaulted.

Listen to her/him. Is it crucial to let the survivor know that s/he can talk to you about her/his experience when ready. Some may not wish to speak with you immediately, but at some point during the healing process, it is likely that the survivor will come to you for support. When that happens, don't interrupt, yell, or interject your feelings. Just listen to the survivor's feelings and experiences. Your caring attention will be invaluable.

Never blame her/him for being assaulted. No one ever deserves to be sexually assaulted. No matter what s/he wore, how many times s/he had sex before, whether s/he was walking alone at night, whether s/he got drunk, or whether s/he went to the perpetrator's room. Poor judgment is not a rape-able offense. Even if the survivor feels responsible, say clearly and caringly, "It wasn't your fault".

Ask before you touch. Don't assume that physical contact, even in the form of a gentle touch or hug, will be comforting to a survivor. Many survivors, especially within the first weeks after an assault, prefer to avoid sex or simple touching even by those they love and trust. Be patient. Give her/him the space s/he needs, and try your best not to take it personally.

Recognize that you've been assaulted too. We can't help but be hurt when someone we love is made to suffer. Don't blame yourself for the many feelings you will have after learning that someone close to you has been sexually assaulted. Sadness, confusion, anger, helplessness, fear, grief, disappointment, shock, anxiety, desperation, and compassion are all common reactions for survivors and their significant others. Being aware of these emotions will ultimately help you better understand the survivor's experience and be more supportive.

Get help for yourself. Whether you reach out to a friend, family member, counselor, or religious professional, make sure you don't go through this experience alone. Most sexual assault crisis centers offer counseling for significant others and family members because they realize the impact of sexual assault extends far beyond the survivor. Remember, asking for help when you need it is a sign of strength, not weakness.

For support and the number to your local sexual assault crisis center, you can call the Virginia Family Violence & Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-838-8238 (v/tty).