

How to Support an Adult 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. It is 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.

Suggest calling the Women's Resource Center. Calling the Women's Resource Center does not mean that they must report the assault to the police. We will provide trained workers to guide the survivor, significant others and family members through the first critical hours, and the days, months and years beyond. All contacts are confidential.

How to Handle a Disclosure of Abuse by a Child

A parent, grandparent, guardian, foster parent or other concerned adult close to an abused child experiences a number of feelings and often does not know how to respond.

- Children usually report the abuse to someone they feel won't overreact. It is heartbreaking to hear, but try to remain calm and not show any shock, disgust or anger.
- Inform the child that it is understandable how hard it was to tell. You can respond by saying:
 - *"You were very brave to tell me what happened."*
 - *"It was probably hard for you to tell me this."*
 - *"I am so glad that you trusted me and I will do all that I can to protect you."*
 - *Do not make promises that you cannot keep.*
- Be careful not to use expressions that will cause the child to feel as if s/he is damaged for life, such as: *"You will never be the same."*
- Assure the child that what happened to them was not their fault, no matter what the circumstances are, or how long it took the child to disclose.
- Threats made about the offender could make the child fear even more retaliation from the offender or fear harm to the offender. Remember, in many cases, the child may feel love for the offender.
- Keep in mind that you, as the adult, need to take the burden from the child. Do not look to the child as your source of support—find family members, friends, or professionals.
- Respect the child's privacy. Don't ask for details unless they are offered. Be sure to discuss with him/her and let s/he help decide who should and should not be told. However, if you need to tell someone s/he doesn't want told, explain why you must.
- If a child discloses to you, encourage the child to talk, but do not ask leading questions.