

How Family and Friends Can Support a Sexual Assault Survivor

When someone you care about has been sexually assaulted, it can be difficult to know what to say or do. You may experience any number of feelings, including fear, anger, sadness, anxiety, or disbelief.

However, there are many ways you can help. The most important thing that you can do from the beginning is to believe them. One of the most significant factors in a survivor's recovery is how those around them respond to their disclosure. By understanding the impact that sexual assault can have on your loved one and being supportive, you can play an important role in their healing process.

How Sexual Assault Can Impact a Survivor

- Strong emotions; feeling depressed; having intense, sudden emotional responses to things; feeling angry or irritable all the time
- Feelings of numbness; feeling emotionally “flat”; trouble feeling love or happiness
- Trouble sleeping; trouble falling or staying asleep; bad dreams or nightmares
- Trouble with attention, concentration, and memory; trouble staying focused; often finding their mind wandering; having a hard time remembering things
- Problems with alcohol or other drugs; drinking to excess or using drugs daily; getting drunk or “high” to cope with memories or unpleasant feelings; drinking to fall asleep
- Trouble with reminders of the sexual trauma; feeling on edge or “jumpy” all the time; not feeling safe; going out of your way to avoid reminders of the trauma; trouble trusting others
- Problems in relationships; feeling alone or not connected to others; trouble with employers or authority figures; trouble functioning in social situations
- Physical health problems; sexual issues; chronic pain; weight or eating problems; stomach or bowel problems

Source: Sources: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MCASA), and the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN)

Resources

DoD Safe Helpline – Understanding Sexual Assault
(www.safehelpline.org/understanding-sexual-assault.cfm)

CNIC Headquarters Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) Program
(<http://go.usa.gov/vUq>)

Fleet and Family Support Program
(www.ffsp.navy.mil)

Department of Defense Sexual Assault Prevention and Response
(<http://www.sapr.mil/>)

Military One Source
(<http://www.militaryonesource.mil/>)

National Sexual Violence Resource Center
(<http://www.nsvrc.org/>)


Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN)
(<http://rainn.org/get-help/help-a-loved-one>)

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Military Sexual Trauma
(<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/military-sexual-trauma-general.asp>)



How to Support a Victim of Sexual Assault

A Guide for Friends and Family



How Family and Friends Can Help a Survivor

- Believe them. It is important to remember that, no matter what the circumstances of the assault, there was no way your loved one could have known that she or he would be assaulted.
- Be understanding. The survivor needs to feel comfortable in sharing what happened or may not want to discuss the event at all.
- Listen to what they have to say about what happened, and be there for them. Remind them that it is not their fault.
- Be supportive. Ask what you can do to help. Do not assume you know what is best. Support their right and ability to make their own decisions.
- Be patient. Remember that it will take your loved one some time to deal with the crime.
- Become educated about the impact of sexual assault, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other related subjects.
- Encourage them to contact the DoD Safe Helpline (877-995-5247) or visit www.SafeHelpline.org for more information about reporting options, local resources and crisis intervention. [Note: OCONUS callers may incur a charge for accessing the DoD Safe Helpline when off base or when using a cell phone.] They also can contact the National Sexual Assault Hotline (1-800-656-HOPE) or the local rape crisis center.
- Encourage them to obtain medical care to treat possible injuries, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), or address pregnancy concerns.
- Check in with them to see if they feel safe staying at their home and if they need assistance in finding a safe place. Offer to stay with them or have them stay with you.
- Recognize your own anger. It is not the survivor's responsibility to address your anger. Be patient, and remind the survivor to be patient with themselves.
- Accompany them to various appointments (doctors, police, lawyers, and courts).
- Encourage them to engage in self-soothing activities as a way to cope (e.g., meditating, yoga, breathing exercises).
- Remind them that the assault is something that happened to them; it doesn't define them as a person.

What to Avoid

- Avoid taking control of the situation. Allow your loved one to have control over their own decisions.
- Not taking care of your needs. Your loved one is not in a position to take care of you, so it is important for you to practice good self-care.
- Avoiding the topic. It can be helpful for your loved one to repeat the story several times, though it is important that you not ask prying questions.
- Treating the survivor as if they're broken or damaged.
- Avoid predicting timelines for the survivor's recovery (i.e., three months, six months or one year).

Self-care

When someone you care about has been sexually assaulted, hearing their story and helping to support them can impact you as well, resulting in secondary trauma. By staying tuned in to and addressing your own feelings and needs, you can provide more effective support to your loved one.

- Understand that you will feel helpless at times and may have strong emotional reactions over your concern for your loved one. Work to manage your feelings by keeping a journal or practicing relaxation exercises.
- Speak to a counselor if you frequently feel overwhelmed, angry or sad.
- Keep physically active.
- Eat healthy.
- Engage in activities that you enjoy and that lower your stress and worry.
- Find time for yourself.

NBSD CONTACT INFO:
24/7 HOTLINE- (619) 279-2904

SAPR VA- (619) 985-8157

SARC- (619) 261-3991

