



DISCLOSING SEXUAL VIOLENCE: TELLING OTHERS ABOUT THE CRIME

Should I tell anyone?

Some survivors of sexual violence choose to tell someone right away about what they've experienced; others choose to tell someone weeks, months, or even years after the crime; and some never tell anyone. The reasons for speaking up or keeping quiet are as unique and personal as each individual survivor. A wide variety of factors and circumstances can impact this decision, such as the extent to which the survivor feels fearful, ashamed or embarrassed; the presence or absence of a desire for justice; the need for support; and the depth and quality of one's support system (family members, friends and acquaintances).

There are benefits and risks of disclosing the experience of sexual violence to others. Often the biggest benefit of telling is that the survivor gains much-needed emotional support and practical assistance. Feeling believed and supported by one or more individuals who are compassionate and non-judgmental is highly beneficial, especially if that person or persons are part of the survivor's life. Often the biggest risk is in not being able to predict how the person you tell will react and what they will do with the information you share.

If you are struggling with questions, concerns and emotions that are impacting your daily life, it is important that you tell someone. If you are concerned about telling a loved one, you can anonymously call the hotline at your [nearest rape crisis center](#). Sharing your feelings and expressing your needs are far more beneficial to the healing process than struggling in silence.

Who should I tell, and how will they react?

It's impossible to know exactly how any individual will react to a disclosure of sexual violence. This particular crime has the tendency to elicit strong emotions in those who hear about it happening to someone they know and care about. Someone close to you, such as an intimate partner, family member or friend, may experience a variety of feelings. These can include anger, sadness, a desire for justice or retribution, and/or feeling that he/she failed to protect you. Sometimes loved ones are upset with survivors for being in a particular place or engaging in a particular activity when the crime occurred. The presence and intensity of these and other reactions can impact the survivor's recovery process in positive and negative ways.

In deciding who to tell, it may be beneficial to ask yourself the following questions:

- Whenever I've experienced a difficult time in the past, who was most supportive/helpful?
- Who would best be able to listen to something of such a personal nature?
- Who in my life can I trust to keep things that I share confidential?

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How do I tell a loved one about this?

Telling even the most trusted and caring person is often a frightening and anxious prospect for survivors. The experience of sexual violence is traumatic and overwhelming, so it is normal to feel that discussing it will be difficult. How you choose to disclose is entirely up to you. A face-to-face disclosure is best; however, if telephone or written communication is the most comfortable method for you, or necessary due to distance, that's perfectly fine. A few things to consider when preparing to tell:

- What details about the crime do I want to share, and which do I want to keep private?
- How will I respond if he/she wants to know more, or challenges anything I've said?
- What do I want from this person (i.e. emotional support, assistance with reporting and/or accessing additional resources, etc.)?

It's important to prepare for the likelihood that hearing about the crime you've experienced may be difficult and emotional for your loved one. While this person may want to support you as much as possible, he/she may also struggle to understand and come to terms with the news. If it's been a while since the crime occurred, your loved one may express sadness or frustration about not being told sooner. Always remember that how *anyone* reacts in no way changes or diminishes the significance of what has happened to you. Allow your loved one time to adjust, but if he/she is not supportive, don't be discouraged from telling someone else.

Before disclosing the crime to a loved one, some survivors find it helpful to practice with a rape crisis advocate first. Discovering the words and methods of communication that are best for you can help make the process of telling a loved one easier and more satisfying.

Communicating your needs

When sharing your experiences and emotions in the aftermath of sexual violence, it's important to remember that no one is a mind-reader. You might assume that your friends, family members and acquaintances should know what you need from them, but they likely don't or they are nervous about saying or doing the wrong thing. Not everyone understands how sexual violence happens and how it impacts survivors. (You can encourage your loved ones to read our [factsheet](#) especially for them). Each survivor's experiences and needs are unique. Directly communicating your needs and desires is empowering and it is the best way to ensure that your needs are met. If your loved ones have this information, they will feel less nervous, more capable, and they will be better equipped to support you in the way you need.

Special circumstances

There are certain circumstances in which the survivor's ability to control who knows about the crime is limited. These include when the survivor is a minor, or when the survivor has certain developmental or cognitive disabilities. Additionally, if the survivor is threatening to harm him/herself or someone else, a disclosure to a mental health professional or law enforcement official may be necessary. Such disclosures are not meant to further traumatize the survivor, but rather protect him/her from further harm.

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Should I tell the police?

Whether or not to report the crime of sexual violence to law enforcement is a personal decision that each survivor must make for him/herself. Reporting and participating in the criminal justice process is empowering and satisfying for some survivors, while others find it to be difficult and traumatizing. Those in the survivor's life who know about the crime often have strong opinions about whether or not to report it, and they may attempt to persuade or even force the survivor to take a certain course of action. Everyone wants perpetrators of sexual violence to be held accountable for their crimes, but the multiple needs of survivors are equally important. With certain legal exceptions, the decision of whether or not to report sexual violence and participate in the criminal justice process is (and should be) the survivor's decision.

When deciding whether or not to report to police, it may be helpful to contact your nearest rape crisis center, where an advocate can explain the process in greater detail and help address questions or concerns you may have. In general, it may be helpful to consider the following questions:

- What, if anything, do I want to see happen to the perpetrator(s)?
- What, if anything, would help me to feel a sense of justice?
- If I were to report the crime, what is the ultimate result or outcome I would want to see?
- How might it affect me if that outcome doesn't happen?
- If I don't report the crime, how might that affect my sense of safety and/or justice?

What will happen if I report to police?

The police department in the jurisdiction where the crime occurred will be responsible for handling the case. You will be asked to make a formal statement, which is usually in writing and includes as much detail as possible about the crime. The police will then investigate and decide if an arrest can be made, which may involve the police speaking with anyone who has knowledge of the crime (including the perpetrator). You may also be asked to provide additional information or clarification at a later date. If and how a criminal case is pursued is unique to each case and each jurisdiction. Please read our factsheet on the [criminal justice process](#) for more information. Many rape crisis centers have advocates who can accompany survivors to police interviews and court proceedings. These advocates can help explain the process, ensure that victim rights are upheld, and help you to feel supported.

Will my name and the details of the crime be made public?

The media operates under the general policy that survivors' names and identifying information are not published. If you report the crime to police, it is possible that certain details of the crime may be published without identifying you as the survivor. It's important that you exercise caution in sharing any information about the crime online (such as email or social media), as online information cannot be fully contained or controlled. Some survivors find it empowering to speak publicly about the crime, however this is an option that each survivor must think through and consider carefully. If speaking out is something you are interested in, please consult with your nearest rape crisis advocate, or contact OAESV.

This publication was supported by Victims of Crime Act Grant Award #2013VASAVE915, administered by the Ohio Attorney General's Office.

To find a rape crisis center near you, click here: <http://www.oaesv.org/rape-crisis-centers-in-ohio/>
For more information, email info@oaesv.org or call 216-658-1381 or 888-866-8388