

## RESPONDING TO DISCLOSURES OF A RECENT INCIDENT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

### A Reference Sheet for Community Members

Everyone can play a role in supporting sexual violence survivors! The Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one in five women and one in 71 men will be raped at some point in their lives<sup>1</sup>, and other types of victimization are even more common; with this high rate of prevalence, it is likely that everyone knows someone who is a survivor. You should consider it a great honor if a survivor chooses to disclose information about their experience with you, as it is often difficult to share these personal and intimate details. Especially if you are the first person a survivor tells, your response will have a tremendous impact on their recovery. You do not need to have all the answers, but a supportive, encouraging response will have a positive impact on the way the survivor processes the experience of sexual violence. Any time a survivor discloses information about their experience, it is important to believe them and offer to assist them in locating desired resources. The information below is intended to provide a guide for responding to someone who has recently experienced sexual violence.

#### 1. Assess Safety/Seek Immediate Help if Needed

- Immediate Danger
 

Emergency:	911
Non-Emergency:	Local Law Enforcement number: _____
- Emergency Medical Treatment      Local Hospital number: \_\_\_\_\_
- Threat of Suicide and/or Threat of Harm to Others
- Seek assistance from your local rape crisis center – hotline staff & advocates are available 24/7

#### 2. Listen

- Allow the survivor to share as much or as little as they want at their own pace; do not pressure them to talk about something if they are not comfortable doing so.
- Only ask questions that are necessary for assessing safety & related concerns; do not interrogate them by asking specific, intimate questions.
- Employ active listening skills; let the survivor know you are available to them & not distracted by other issues.

#### 3. Support

- Validate the survivor's story/feelings/willingness to share. Speak encouraging words such as:

*"I believe you."*

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<sup>1</sup> Black, M. C., Basile, K. C., Breiding, M. J., Smith, S. G., Walters, M. L., Merrick, M. T., ... Stevens, M. R. (2011). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2010 summary report. Retrieved from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control: [http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/NISVS\\_Report2010-a.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/NISVS_Report2010-a.pdf)

*“Thank you for sharing with me.”*

*“What happened to you is not your fault.”*

*“You are very brave.”*

*“Regardless of what anyone says, you are not to be blamed for this experience.”*

*“It takes a lot of courage to talk about what happened.”*

- Normalize the survivor’s response. Speak encouraging words such as:

*“You are not alone.”*

*“It is ok to feel this way.”*

*“Your reaction to this situation is common.”*

#### **4. Provide Resources**

- Local Rape Crisis Center: \_\_\_\_\_ (office number)  
*Local 24/7 Rape Crisis Hotline* \_\_\_\_\_ (crisis hotline number)  
\_\_\_\_\_ (website)
- Local Resource: \_\_\_\_\_ (office number)  
\_\_\_\_\_ (website)
- Local Resource: \_\_\_\_\_ (office number)  
\_\_\_\_\_ (website)
- Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence (*Resource Line*) 888.886.8388 (office hours)  
[www.oaesv.org](http://www.oaesv.org)
- Ohio Sexual Violence Helpline 800.OHIO.HELP (24/7 crisis hotline)  
[www.ohiosexualviolencehelpline.com/](http://www.ohiosexualviolencehelpline.com/)
- Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) 800.656.HOPE (24/7 crisis hotline)  
[www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)

#### **5. Maintain Privacy**

- Choosing to disclose about an experience of sexual violence is often not an easy decision, but the survivor will be reassured in seeking support if they trust that you will not share their information with others.
- Always remember that the survivor’s story is theirs alone and they should be the one who gets to choose when, where and how to share it.
- If you are professionally or legally required to adhere to policies regarding confidentiality, privilege or mandated reporting, explain this to the survivor in a caring way.

#### **6. Seek Support for Yourself as a Responder**

- Hearing about sexual violence and supporting someone who has recently experienced an incident of sexual violence can be traumatic for responders as well. Do not underestimate the potential need for support for yourself in this difficult time.
- Resources such as local rape crisis centers, state coalitions and state/national hotlines can provide support for responders, co-survivors, and loved ones as well.

## 7. Remember

- Empower the survivor to make their own choices; avoid pressuring them to make a specific decision or persuading them toward a particular option.
- Do not touch the survivor unless you are given permission to do so.
- Help the survivor to preserve evidence of the assault, if applicable and desired.
- Prioritize the survivor's feelings above your own; keep the focus on them.
- Do not make promises to the survivor.
- Do not share incorrect information; it is better to say, "I do not know, but we can find out" than to guess.
- Be confident in your ability to provide a compassionate response to a survivor of sexual violence; you do not need to know everything – rely on your empathy skills and common sense.

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