



DISCLOSING SEXUAL VIOLENCE: TELLING LOVED ONES ABOUT SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Some people who have experienced of sexual violence choose to tell someone right away about what they've experienced; some choose to tell someone weeks, months, or even years after the experience; and some never tell anyone. The reasons for disclosing sexual violence, or not, are as unique and personal as each individual person. For some people, it can take a short or long period of time until they are able to remember, learn, or admit to themselves that what they experienced was sexual violence. A wide variety of factors and circumstances can impact this decision, such as how someone's body or brain respond to trauma, the extent to which the person feels ready, has the need for support, desire to act towards healing or justice related processes, the presence of fear, shame or embarrassment, and the depth and quality of support systems (family members, chosen family, friends, acquaintances, etc.).



THINKING ABOUT DISCLOSING?

There are possible benefits and risks of disclosing sexual violence to loved ones. Often the largest benefit of telling someone is that the survivor gains much-needed emotional support and practical assistance. Feeling believed and supported by someone who is compassionate, non-judgmental, and patient can be validating, especially if that that person is closely connected within the survivor's life. Disclosing sexual violence can also provide information to someone in the survivor's life, who can acknowledge and assist them with immediate or long-term needs, such as medical care, mental health support, housing resources, educational or work assistance, spiritual and or religious support and more. Telling someone else can also be supportive if a

survivor is looking to create physical boundaries between them and the person or people who harmed them and need assistance.

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. It's impossible to know exactly how any individual will react to a disclosure of sexual violence. Sexual Violence in particular, has the tendency to elicit strong emotions in those who learn 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, or feeling that they failed to protect you. Sometimes people do not fully understand what sexual violence is, how it's a range of experiences, or how it can impact people. Additionally, many people do not know that sexual violence can happen to anyone regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, nationality, disability, religious or spiritual beliefs, socio-economic status, and additional factors. At times, people can intentionally or unintentionally blame the person who experienced the violence rather than acknowledging it was not their fault. This type of reaction can invalidate the survivor's experience and may cause them to internalize blame, experience shame, or make it difficult to tell people moving forward. The presence and intensity of these possible reactions and more can impact the survivor's recovery process in a variety of ways.

Another factor to consider when deciding to tell someone about sexual violence is if they are someone with a responsibility to report the information to someone else, or if they're able to keep this information confidential. If you are under the age of 18, over 65, or have a particular disability, some people are legally required to report what you tell them. Who is a Mandated Reporter can vary by state, but often includes teachers, social workers, childcare workers, eldercare workers, some religious leaders, and more. To learn more about mandated reporting laws for people [under the age of 18, over the age of 65, or for people with some disabilities](#). Additionally, within K-12 schools, Colleges and Universities, staff and or educators are often required to report instances of sexual violence, due to [Title IX](#). One way to learn if someone can keep the information confidential is by directly asking them if there are certain topics they are required to report, and to whom. That way a survivor can know up front what can and cannot be kept confidential and who it is reported to, before deciding if they want to continue sharing.



HOW CAN I PREPARE?

Before disclosing sexual violence to a loved one, some survivors find it helpful to practice by themselves, by writing it down, or with a trained sexual violence advocate. To connect with an advocate, you can call the Ohio Statewide Helpline, available 24/7, or find a Rape Crisis Center near you. Ohio Rape Crisis Centers are recognized sexual violence programs that provide comprehensive support for survivors of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and additional types of sexual violence. You can remain anonymous, or share as little or as much as you'd like with an advocate. In addition to practicing for disclosing, connecting with an advocate can be another resource to help identify your immediate or long-term needs, discuss reporting/accountability options or resources for healing.

To learn more about sexual violence services in Ohio, or find a Rape Crisis Center near you, [visit oesv.org](https://www.oesv.org).

A few things to you can consider when preparing to disclose sexual violence:

- Why do I want to disclose my sexual violence? This question can help you clarify your needs and goals, and what kind of support you're looking for in this moment.
- Who do I want to tell? I can be helpful to think about who has been supportive or helpful to you when you've experienced difficult times in the past, or who you feel that you can trust to keep this to themselves.
- How do you want you want to prepare yourself and the person for the disclosure? This can look like setting some time aside to take care of the emotions that may arise for you. Or prepare for the conversation by explaining to the other person that this is something difficult for you to talk about and requesting that they listen carefully, offer patience, or do not interrupt you.
- What details do I want to share, and which do I want to keep private? This can change overtime, or depend on the person you are disclose to and also what you're able to remember. Due to increased understanding of trauma-response, it's not uncommon for people who experienced sexual violence to have difficulty remembering what occurred, or to be able to recall them in chronological order. Your story experience regarding sexual violence is valid, no matter how much you are or are not able to remember.
- What might be the best method for me to be able to share my experience? What might be the best method for this person to be able to receive my experience? This could be in-person, over the phone, via text message or video calling, or even in writing.
- When do you want to disclose? It can be helpful to think of a time you can be alone with this person, without distractions, feel pressured or rushed.
- What could I do after disclosing to help me feel safe, cared for, and comforted, regardless of the response



HOW MIGHT SOMEONE RESPOND?

You deserve to be heard, believed, and supported when you choose to tell your story. Although, it's important to prepare for the likelihood that hearing about sexual violence you've experienced may be difficult for another person. Even with the best intentions, someone may not know how to react. It is common for loved ones of a survivor to experience a range of emotions when learning that someone they care about has experienced sexual violence.

- Anger: They might express anger towards the person who harmed you or even share they want to seek revenge on your behalf.
- Shocked: Some people might experience shock and feel disturbed that someone they care about has experienced sexual violence, however sometimes this can come across as not believing the survivor's experience.

- Confusion: Sometimes the person you tell will feel unsure how to respond, and in-turn ask questions about the violence and what led up to it. Being asked questions about the violence can be clarifying, or they can feel like they're blaming you, or suggesting that you could have avoided the violence by doing something different. If that's how it's coming across to you, you can let them know and remind them that the best thing they can do to help is to just support you.
- Protective: Loved ones may fear for your safety and feel extremely protective.
- Helpless: Someone who cares about you may feel powerless to help. But healing is different for each survivor and may take a long time, and it is important for those supporting you to be patient.
- Guilty: Someone close to you may feel guilty or responsible for what happened to you, even if they are not. They may be trying to think of how they could have prevented this from happening.



THINGS TO REMEMBER

Having someone react in a supportive way can be an important step toward healing and may help you feel comfortable sharing your story with more people. But even if disclosing goes well, it can still be an emotional or draining experience. Sometimes talking about sexual violence experiences can bring back painful memories, or survivors may end of providing emotional support to those they are disclosing to. Remember, every survivor has a unique healing process and it's okay to reassess your needs and boundaries over time.

The way *anyone* reacts in no way changes or diminishes the significance of what has happened to you. It can feel hurtful when someone you trust reacts in an unsupportive way. If you don't receive a supportive reaction, it's important to remember that this is reflective of you, but rather a reflection of their beliefs or lack of knowledge about sexual violence. Some people need time to adjust, to learn more about sexual violence, or resources to learn how to be more supportive of survivors. If someone is not supportive, it does not mean that others will be the same. Each survivor gets to determine who you tell and if you want to share your experiences again. Do your best to continue finding ways to care for yourself and find more affirming and validating resources for your needs.

When sharing your experiences and emotions in the aftermath of sexual violence, it's important to remember each and every survivor's experiences are unique. You might assume that loved ones should know what you need from them. Although, the best way is to directly communicate your needs and desires for support. Especially because not everyone understands how sexual violence can impact survivors' overtime. You can encourage your loved ones to read our [factsheet](#) especially for them. If your loved ones have this information, they may feel better equipped to support you in the way you need, especially as this may change overtime.

If you would like to connect with additional resources regarding sexual violence, or find additional support, you can find more information at oaesv.org. To connect with an advocate, you can call the [Ohio Sexual Violence Helpline 24/7](#), or [find a sexual violence program closest to you](#).

Note:

In this resource, the term survivor is used to refer to a person who has experienced sexual violence and is still here. While many people use and identify with this term, we understand that it may not feel validating for everyone. Some people prefer the term victim, which emphasizes that the violence was not their fault and is used more commonly within the criminal legal systems. Some people prefer the term survivor, as it describes the strength required to persevere beyond sexual violence. It's important to acknowledge that the term survivor, through a disability justice lens, is deeply personal and may not fully encompass the physical or emotional long-term impacts of trauma. The terms victim or survivor are up to an individual to decide to use, what feels validating to them, and can be thought of as a continuum overtime. (Hassan, 2019)