



SUPPORTING A LOVED ONE WHO'S BEEN VICTIMIZED



The experience of sexual assault/abuse impacts not just the survivor, but also their friends, family members, intimate partners and acquaintances. Loved ones are often referred to as “secondary victims/survivors” because the crime has a significant impact on them as well. Secondary survivors commonly feel sadness, anger, shock, self-blame, fear, a desire for retaliation, wanting to protect your loved one, and wanting to “do something” or “fix things.”

Whatever thoughts and feelings you’re experiencing as a secondary survivor, it’s important to recognize them and how they may be influencing the way you react to and treat your loved one. While it’s important for you to support your loved one who’s been victimized, it’s also important for you to recognize your needs and to seek support if needed. Rape crisis centers are available to help you as well.



THE IMPACT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE ON YOUR LOVED ONE

Sexual assault is a type of violence in which sex is used as a weapon to harm and or humiliate the survivor. It is experienced by the survivor as a traumatic event. Like survivors of other traumatic events (ie. Combat survivors, survivors of natural disasters, etc.), survivors of sexual assault may experience intense physical and psychological reactions. These can be difficult and confusing for both the survivor and their loved ones.

Recovering from the trauma of sexual assault is uniquely difficult, as sexual assault violates a survivor's most personal space. Survivors who were assaulted by someone they know may come to question their judgment and their trust in others. Additionally, sexual assault survivors are routinely blamed for their own victimization. Nearly all survivors fear not being believed, being blamed for the assault, and being made to feel ashamed by loved ones and authorities. Unfortunately, these fears are too often realized.

In the immediate aftermath of sexual assault, any of the following reactions are possible and are a normal response to a traumatic event:

- Physical: body aches/pains, fatigue, upset stomach/bowels, changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- Mental: difficulty with concentration and comprehension, confusion
- Emotional: disbelief, sadness, anxiety, anger, fear, irritability, neediness, feeling numb, mood swings
- Behavioral: hyper-vigilance, avoidance of people or places, desire to change appearance, surroundings or tasks, difficulty maintaining intimate relationships



HOW TO SUPPORT YOUR LOVED ONE

When supporting your loved one, there are helpful things to say and things to avoid saying. However, there is no perfect blueprint or script to follow. Each survivor is unique, as is their recovery process. Supporting your loved one is a process that will take time and will include some trial and error, some good days and bad. No one expects you to have all the answers, nor should you expect to.

Helpful things to say:

- "I believe you": This may seem unnecessary, but it's an important message to convey. Even if you have questions or doubts about the circumstances surrounding the assault, it's vital that you interact with your loved one as though you fully believe them.

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- “It’s not your fault”: Nearly all survivors question their own actions before, during and even after the assault. It’s important that you let your loved one know that the only one responsible for the assault is the person who committed it. Your loved one neither caused nor deserved what happened.
- “I’m here for you”: Even if your loved one does not want to talk to you about the assault or their feelings about it, it’s important that you let them know that you are available anytime for support.
- “What can I do? /What will help you?” Many love ones are afraid of saying or doing something wrong. It’s often helpful to simply ask your loved one what would be helpful for them.

Helpful things to do:

- Treat your loved one the same: Survivors need to know that their loved ones still love them, care about them, and think of them the same as always.
- Empower your loved one: Sexual assault can result in the feeling of, or actual loss of power and control over one’s body, safety and well-being. One of the most impactful things you can do to help restore your loved one’s sense of control by allowing them to make decisions.
- Maintain your focus: Many loved ones feel very strongly about seeking justice or even retaliation for the assault. While anger at an offender is understandable, focusing on the offender takes your focus away from where it needs to be – your loved one.
- Follow their lead: Allow your loved one the time and space they need to regain a sense of control and begin the recovery process. This will require an open mind and patience on your part.

When to seek outside help:

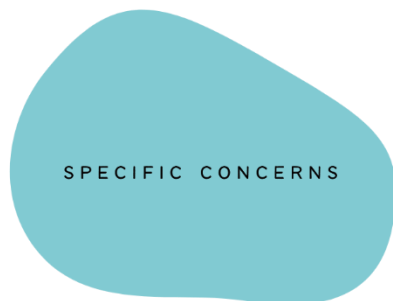
- If your loved one threatens to harm or kill themselves, you must intervene. If the threat is imminent, call your community’s first responders right away (people who have experience supporting in that area). If it is less urgent, contact your local crisis hotline or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).
- Similarly, if your loved one is threatening to harm or kill the offender (or anyone else), you should intervene by contacting the first responders in your community that are trained in helping in these situations.
- If your loved one is experiencing prolonged symptoms of distress that are interfering with their quality of life, ask what support they need, or encourage them to seek assistance.

Things to avoid saying or doing:

- Don’t try to force your loved one into a certain course of action. Not all survivors wish to press charges or see a counselor. Forcing a survivor into a course of action may further traumatize them and does not allow for the survivor to have self-determination
- Don’t hold your loved one responsible for “stopping” the person who assaulted them. If your loved one does not want to report the assault, it doesn’t mean they are letting the person who harmed them “get away with it,” or that they are giving them the freedom to assault someone else. Only the individual who assaulted them can stop further harm.
- Avoid overwhelming your loved one. It’s common and understandable to want to protect loved ones who have been victimized, but it’s important not to overwhelm them, unfairly restrict their activities,

or make decisions for them. Survivors need to feel in control of their lives and bodies as much as possible.

- Don't try to minimize or change your loved one's recovery process. There is no specific timeline for a survivor to follow. To tell a survivor that they should be "over it by now" is not helpful.
- Avoid dwelling on hindsight. Do not tell your loved one what they should or should not have done before, during or after the assault. This can be challenging if your loved one was engaging in behavior that you don't agree with, does not align with your values, or is illegal when the assault happened. Although your intention may be to protect your loved from future harm, they may interpret it as blame for the assault.



The impact on physical and sexual intimacy:

If you are an intimate partner of a sexual assault survivor, you likely have concerns about how the assault will impact aspects of your relationship, including but not limited to physical and sexual intimacy. You may be concerned about potential exposure to sexually transmitted infections, how your partner will respond to physical touch, as well as their comfort level with sexual contact. Each survivor responds uniquely to sexual assault – there is no right or wrong way to respond. Your partner needs to know that you are not afraid to touch them. Avoiding all physical contact may make your partner feel as though you're afraid of them, or that you no longer find them desirable because of the assault. At the same time, you don't want to be aggressive in initiating physical or sexual contact. As with all other aspects of an intimate relationship, it's important to communicate with each other. It's helpful to say, "I love you and want to be with you. That has not changed, but I want you to be comfortable. Tell me what you'd like me to do and not to do, and I will respect that." Keep talking to each other throughout your partner's recovery process.

The assault happened a long time ago:

Some survivors never tell anyone about sexual assault/abuse, some only tell certain individuals, and others only disclose the assault years later. If a loved one tells you about a sexual assault that they suffered a long time ago, it's important that you don't judge them or be upset with them for withholding this information. It's very difficult for survivors to talk about their victimization, especially with loved ones who are most affected by knowing about it. Tell your loved one that you're glad they told you and be available to listen if they want or need to talk about it. Also understand that even though the assault may have happened a long time ago, it is likely still a painful and emotional event for your loved one to think or speak about.

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