

How to Help a Friend

What to Do if Someone Discloses a Sexual Assault Experience to You

BELIEVE them. It is not your role to question whether a rape occurred but to be there to ease the pain. The fact is that false rape reports are no more or less common than false reports for other violent crimes.

HELP them explore their options. Don't take charge of the situation and pressure the rape survivor to do what you think they should. That's what the rapist did. Give them the freedom to choose a path of recovery that is comfortable for them, even if you'd do it differently. Remember, there is no one right way for a survivor to respond after being assaulted.

LISTEN to them. It is crucial that you let survivors in your lives know that they can talk to you about their experience when they are ready. Some may not wish to speak with you immediately, but at some point during the healing process, it is likely that the survivor will come to you for support. When that happens, don't interrupt, or yell, or inject your feelings. Just open your ears to the pain of being raped. Your caring but silent attention will be invaluable.

NEVER BLAME them for being assaulted. No one ever deserves to be raped. No matter what they wore, how many times they had sex before, whether they were walking alone at night, whether they got drunk, if they were married, or whether they went up to the perpetrator's room. Even if the survivor feels responsible, say clearly and caringly that being raped wasn't their fault.

ASK before you touch. Don't assume that physical contact, even in the form of a gentle touch or hug, will be comforting to a survivor. Many survivors, especially within the first weeks after an assault, prefer to avoid sex or simple touching even by those they love and trust. Be patient, give them the space they need, and try your best not to take it personally. One way to signal to the survivor that you are open to giving physical comfort is to sit with an open posture and a hand palm up nearby.

RECOGNIZE that you've been assaulted too. We can't help but be hurt when someone we love is made to suffer. Don't blame yourself for the many feelings you will likely have in response to learning that someone close to you has been raped. Sadness, confusion, anger, helplessness, fear, guilt, disappointment, shock, anxiety, desperation, and compassion are all common reactions for survivors and their significant others. Being aware of these emotions may ultimately help you better understand the survivor's experience and support them more effectively.

GET HELP for yourself. Whether you reach out to a friend, family member, counselor, religious official, etc., make sure you don't go through this experience alone. Most rape crisis centers offer counseling for significant others and family members because they realize that the impact of rape extends far beyond the survivor. Keeping all your feelings inside will only make you less able to be there for the survivor. Remember, getting help when needed is a sign of strength, not weakness.

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