

How to Help a Friend or Family Member who has been Sexually Assaulted

When someone you know is sexually assaulted, it can be a frightening and confusing time for them and for you. There are some things you can do to help. Here are a few suggestions. Keep in mind that there is not one “right” way to deal with sexual violence; each person has to make his or her own decisions.

1. **Believe them.** The most common reason many people choose not to tell anyone about sexual assault is the fear that the listener won't believe them. People rarely lie or exaggerate about sexual assault; in fact, survivors of sexual assault are much more likely to downplay the violence against them. If someone tells you, it's because they trust you and need to talk to someone.
2. **Don't blame them.** Another common fear in telling someone about a sexual assault is that the person will think it was somehow their fault. NO ONE deserves to be sexually assaulted, no matter what. Sexual assault is always the fault of the assaulter, not the survivor.
3. **Offer shelter.** If possible, stay with the person at a comfortable, reassuring place.
4. **Be there and give comfort.** The survivor may need to talk a lot or at odd hours at the beginning. Be there as much as you can and encourage the survivor to talk to others. Thank the survivor for feeling like he/she could talk to you. It's not easy to tell someone about a sexual assault and you, as a listener should feel grateful that the survivor feels you are a safe person to talk to about the incident.
5. **Be patient.** Don't try to rush the healing process or “make it better.” Individuals do not heal at the same pace.
6. **Validate the survivor's feelings: their anger, pain and fear.** These are natural, healthy responses. They need to feel them, express them, and be heard.
7. **Express your compassion.** If you have feelings of outrage, compassion, pain for their pain, do share them. There is probably nothing more comforting than a genuine human response. Just make sure your feelings don't overwhelm.
8. **Resist seeing the survivor as a victim.** Continue to see them as a strong, courageous person who is reclaiming their life.
9. **Accept the person's choice of what to do about the assault.** Don't be overly protective. Ask what is needed, help the survivor list some options, then encourage independent decision-making, even if you disagree. It is very important that the survivor make decisions and have them respected, as it can go a long way in helping them regain a sense of control in their lives.
10. **Stay friends.** Don't pull away from the friendship because it's too hard for you to handle: that will make the person feel like there is something wrong with them. You can always help them find other support people –don't try to do it alone.
11. **Respect their privacy.** Don't tell anyone who doesn't have to know. Don't gossip about it with mutual friends.
12. **LISTEN.** Try to be supportive without giving advice. You really can't know what is best for someone else. In sexual assault, a survivor's power over body and feelings has been temporarily taken away; the person needs support to take that power back, beginning with make his or her own decisions.
13. **Get help.** Sometimes a person needs medical attention or other emergency help or support from other people besides friends. You can help your friend find the resources that are needed.
14. **Help yourself.** When someone you care about is sexually assaulted, it affects you in a very deep way. You have your own needs and feelings which are probably somewhat different than your friend's. Find someone you can go to without violating your friend's confidence.
15. **Educate yourself about sexual assault and the healing process.** If you have a basic idea of what the survivor is going through, it will help you to be supportive. Talk with other survivors and supporters of survivors. Many are willing to share what has helped them, or can give ideas on how to deal with a certain situation.

IT IS UP TO EACH PERSON WHO WAS ASSAULTED TO DECIDE WHO TO TELL AND WHEN.