

10 WAYS TO SUPPORT A VICTIM OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

- 1** Believe them. One of the most common fears victims face is that no one will believe them. This fear may affect who the victim talks to about the assault and what they share. Remind them that you believe them and are there for them.
- 2** Listen without judging or giving advice. The victim may be feeling many different emotions – it's important to support them in expressing any feelings they're experiencing.
- 3** Remain calm, although it may be difficult. How you respond will affect further reactions and responses from the victim.
- 4** Avoid pressing for information. Give the victim the opportunity share what they would like to with you. They may not feel comfortable providing certain details of the assault. Respect their privacy and boundaries.
- 5** Give the victim as much control as possible – the very thing that was taken from them during the assault. Let the victim set the tone by supporting if they choose to tell you about the assault or not. It is the victim's experience to share, not yours.
- 6** Don't touch the victim unless you receive permission first. Physical contact without permission can cause anxiety or flashbacks.
- 7** Provide support. Keep in mind that recovering from sexual assault doesn't happen within a specific timeframe. The support your loved one receives can affect them throughout the entire recovery process, however long that may be.
- 8** Encourage your loved one to talk to a professional about their experience. Provide information to contact the nearest sexual assault program, staffed with professionals trained in working with sexual assault victims.
- 9** Don't attempt to confront the perpetrator or tell the victim you are going to "get" the perpetrator. Doing or saying things like this can cause the victim additional trauma. It may also create a dangerous situation for you and the victim.
- 10** Don't make any promises. Avoid telling the victim that "everything will be OK." These statements minimize the incident and are things you have no control over.



HOW YOUR LOVED ONE MAY REACT

A sexual assault is a serious life crisis. After a sexual assault, people experience a wide range of reactions and emotions. It's extremely important to note that there is no one pattern or order of responses. This is also true with friends and family of the victim. The following are common reactions many sexual violence victims experience:

- Denial
- Helplessness
- Dislike of sex
- Anger
- Self-blame
- Depression
- Shame
- Nightmares
- Rationalization
- Anxiety
- Flashbacks
- Dissociation
- Promiscuity
- Fear
- Mood swings
- Numbness
- Guilt
- Loneliness
- Social Withdrawal
- Difficulty with intimacy
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty trusting themselves or others
- Crisis of faith

RAPE TRAUMA SYNDROME

Immediately following an incident (days to weeks), many survivors report ongoing symptoms.

- Physically, they may have somatic (body) complaints, eating disturbances, anxiety, difficulty concentrating, and physical symptoms related to areas on their body affected by assault.
- Emotionally, they may be very expressive (anger, sadness), disoriented (disbelief, denial), or controlled (distant, calm).
- Cognitively, they may be unable to block out thoughts of the assault or forget entire parts of it. They may constantly think about things they should have done differently; emotion and intellect may be conflicted.

- Nightmares are common. So are flashbacks related to the assault.

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Long-term reactions include healthy and unhealthy coping mechanisms, which may be beneficial (social support) or counterproductive (self-harm, substance abuse, eating disorders).

Immediate reactions may persist and change the survivor's lifestyle. This adjustment stage (months or years) may include:

- Continuing anxiety, poor health
- Sense of helplessness, persistent fear, depression, mood swings, sleep disturbances, flashbacks, dissociation, panic attacks
- Phobias, relationship difficulties, withdrawal/isolation, paranoia, localized pain

RETHINKING RAPE CULTURE: ARE THEY A VICTIM OR A SURVIVOR?

"There are differing opinions on the use of the terms victim and survivor. Some individuals who experienced a sexual assault refer to themselves as victims because they were victimized by a violence crime. It also stressed the fact that the assault was not their fault. Other sexual assault victims,

however, embrace the term survivor because it highlights the strength it takes to survive sexual violence and reach out for help. The transition from victim to survivor is a personal self-identified continuum. It is up to the individual to make their own decision. Be careful not to impose a

label on the individual or become frustrated when they move back and forth between terms. Typically, a person who was recently assaulted is referred to as a victim, while someone whose assault happened further in the past is referred to as a survivor." (Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape)

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For more information or confidential help with a crisis 24 hours a day, call RAINN at 1-800-656-HOPE.