

Impact on Supporters

Sexual assault deeply affects survivors, their family, friends, partners, and everyone who cares for them. For this reason, those helping a survivor will often come to the Sexual Assault Centre for support and information. Accessing services at the Centre provides an opportunity to learn how to expand your supportive skills, and to check-in with yourself.

Supporters can have a profound impact on a survivor's recovery. These supporters are also more helpful to survivors when they have accurate knowledge about sexual assault, including recognizing prevalent myths surrounding sexual assault.

The following are some key aspects a supporter needs to understand:

- **The survivor is in no way responsible for the assault** or for the decisions they made leading up to the assault. Regardless of the clothes they were wearing, where they were, whether they were drinking, knew the perpetrator or not, or fought back or not, **the survivor is never to blame for the assault.**
- **It is common for people in terrifying situations to “freeze up” or become too frightened to fight back.** There are many ways to say “no” or to show resistance that are often overlooked by supporters.
- **Sexual assault is a frightening experience that takes time to recover from.** It is a normal part of the recovery process for someone to still be affected by some part of their sexual assault experience, even years after the assault or abuse.
- **Sexual assault is an act of violence.** It is not a consensual sexual activity or “cheating” on one's partner.
- **It is more common for survivors to choose not to report to police than it is for them to report.** Some of the reasons why survivors may choose not to report the assault include fear (e.g., of retaliation, people finding out, not being believed, not wanting to hurt the perpetrator if known to them, or court processes).¹

In some cases, you might not be the first person the survivor has told about the assault, and they may disclose to you some time after the assault has taken place. There are many different reasons why a survivor may not disclose right away. For instance, a survivor may feel comfortable disclosing to their friends if the perpetrator is also a friend of theirs, or may not tell a partner because they fear they will be accused of cheating or viewed as “damaged.” Moreover, a survivor might not tell their parents due to feelings of shame or self-blame, or because they fear their parents will retaliate against the perpetrator or force the survivor to report the assault to the police.

¹ McEvoy, A. & Brookings, J. (1991). *If She is Raped: A Guidebook for Husbands, Fathers, and Male Friends*. Florida: Learning Publications Inc.

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How to Respond to a Disclosure and Support a Survivor

For more information on how you can best support a survivor and respond to a disclosure, review the following helpful approaches:

Listen

- **Be patient and approachable.** The survivor will express their feelings as they feel safe, comfortable, and ready.
- **Let the survivor talk without interruptions.**
- **Do not pressure the survivor to talk about the sexual assault,** including details or specifics of the experience. Sometimes the survivor will be willing to talk about it and other times they may not. This is a normal part of recovery, and survivors will tell you when or if they are ready to disclose more information.
- **Demonstrate empathy.** Speech that relays tones of empathy may help the survivor to feel safe enough to share their experience with you. (You may also demonstrate an empathetic and caring touch, but only if the survivor is comfortable with it.)
- **Be aware of the parts of the survivor's experience which seem to come up repeatedly.** They may represent areas that need special attention and understanding from you.

Believe

- Believe the survivor's experience and description of the assault. **It is important for the survivor to know their feelings about the incident are valid.**
- **Tell the survivor that they are not responsible for the crime that was committed against them and avoid asking them "why" questions.** For example, asking questions like "Why didn't you fight back?", "Why did you go for a drink with them?", or "Why

didn't you tell someone?" can make the survivor feel as though they are being judged. The survivor needs to know that you do not blame them for the assault.

Support

- **Let the survivor know they have your unconditional love, support, and availability.**
- **Ask the survivor how they would like to be supported.** Are they comfortable with you bringing up the sexual assault, or only when they bring it up first?
- **Convey to the survivor that they are not "damaged" or any less moral than before the assault.**
- **Encourage the survivor to make their own decisions** about further proceedings regarding the incident. For example, let the survivor choose whether or not to tell others or report to the police, and avoid giving advice to the survivor. Instead, provide and explore options with the survivor, while supporting the choices the survivor makes. (It is also important to remember that "doing nothing" at this time is an option the survivor is allowed to choose.) Allowing the survivor to make their own decisions will help them to gain back some of the power and control they lost during the assault. You will be most helpful when you are supporting the decisions the survivor makes, even if they are not the ones you believe they should be making.
- **Consider sharing your feelings with a counsellor or close friend** about the effects of the sexual assault on your relationship with the survivor. You may also want to consider relationship counselling to help deal with the sexual assault.

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How to Respond to a Disclosure and Support a Survivor *continued*

Feel

- **Recognize and accept the survivor's feelings as well as your own.** All feelings are normal after a sexual assault. However, it may be best for you to share your own feelings with someone else who is also supporting the survivor. This can provide the survivor more opportunity to cope with their own feelings before hearing yours.
- **Do not contact or threaten the perpetrator.** It is normal for a supporter's initial reaction to be one of anger towards the perpetrator. But, threats may result in a legal action by the perpetrator against you at a time when the survivor needs your strength and support. As well, keep in mind that anger can shift attention away from the survivor to you or to the perpetrator. In addition, the survivor may feel guilty for burdening you, or frightened by your rage.
- **How you respond may also impact the survivor's comfort level in sharing information.** If a survivor believes you may become further upset, they might be reluctant or stop talking to you during a time when they need your support.
- **Remember that only the survivor can "fix" themselves, and your role is to support the survivor through this process.** You may feel as though it's your responsibility to "fix" the survivor or "make right" what has happened, or you might get frustrated when the survivor does not heal as quickly as you would have hoped for. However, it's important for you, as a supporter, to view your role as supportive rather than through a prescriptive lens.

There are also some additional supportive approaches you can take to help a survivor:

- **Learn from other supporters who are helping the survivor.** It's important to understand that the survivor needs a safe, accepting environment where their feelings about the assault will not be judged.
- **Do not let the survivor abuse you or themselves** verbally, physically or sexually. Suffering trauma does not excuse the survivor from abusing others. Allowing the survivor to be abusive does not help with their recovery process and may lead to them feeling worse about themselves.
- **Acknowledge the specific issues the survivor might face.** In addition to the trauma, a survivor may experience a number of challenges that will impact their recovery, including self-doubt, self-blame, betrayal of trust, and lack confidence in their own ability to judge.
- **Refrain from criticizing the survivor for their symptoms,** and avoid blaming all of the problems in the relationship on the survivor's trauma or symptoms.
- **Try not to take it personally if the survivor needs to withdraw or be alone.**
- **Know what to expect from the survivor after the assault.** Learn about sexual assault and its aftereffects. Talk to someone at the U of A Sexual Assault Centre, or read a book on the impact of sexual assault (e.g., *I Can't Get Over It and Trust After Trauma* by Aphrodite Matsakis).

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If You are the Survivor's Partner

A partner of a survivor may be surprised by their own reactions of grief, anger, frustration, and devastation. In these instances, it is helpful for partners to learn how to cope with their own feelings and with the survivor's feelings. However, there is often no outlet for these feelings of frustration and sometimes a supporter may transfer their anger to the survivor.

The following examples demonstrate how/when, as a supporter and partner, you might be offloading your own feelings onto a survivor.

- Feeling taxed or burnt out emotionally because the need for their understanding and patience (to the survivor) seems unending. For this reason, it is crucial for you to connect to your own support system.
- Thinking that "the survivor should put the assault behind them now and move on with life." In these instances, it may be important for you to review

further resources to understand that it takes time to heal (e.g., U of A *Rape Trauma Syndrome* handout, *The Spiral of Recovery*).

- Judging and feeling anger towards the survivor for decisions you feel allowed the incident to occur. As previously mentioned, debunking the myths about sexual assault and talking to someone at the U of A Sexual Assault Centre can help you navigate these frustrations.
- Knowing the perpetrator or mutual friends involved in the survivor's assault. For example, the perpetrator may be telling others a different version of the incident, which can lead you to feel anger, rage or doubt about the survivor's story.

As a supporter, it is important to understand that these feelings are normal. It is also imperative to be accepting and supportive of the survivor.

Sexual Difficulties

Difficulties and/or changes in sexual activity and sexual feelings are very common after a sexual assault. For instance, a survivor may experience fear, flashbacks or difficulties with their own sexual response. However, as a partner, you can help a survivor with these difficulties by:

- **Giving the survivor the opportunity to make sexual decisions and advances.** This will help them to feel more comfortable and empowered sexually.
- **Respecting that the survivor may need a period of abstinence from certain sexual acts, sexual intercourse or all sexual activity.** You can best support the survivor during this period of abstinence by continuing to express your intimacy

with nurturing and loving contact that is acceptable to the survivor.

- **Being patient.** Sexual difficulties are quite normal and usually do not last forever. If the survivor feels loved and unconditionally accepted, they will again be ready to explore sexual intimacy with you.
- **Working with the survivor to identify triggers,** and avoiding the activities that lead to them. For example, develop a plan on how to handle a trigger if one happens while being intimate, including signs that the survivor is triggered, words or phrases that can be used to stop intimacy, and the survivor's needs after being intimate (e.g., do they want to be held, or do they need to be left alone?)

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Self-Care

Self-care is an important part of supporting a loved one. You will provide the best support when you develop a support system for yourself, and when you take time to rest and relax. It is also critical to continue

interacting with your partner in fun, lighthearted ways that give you both a break from thinking about the sexual assault.

How will I know when the survivor is healed?²

Healing can be a lifelong process, but that does not mean positive things can't happen while on the journey to recovery. Most survivors do not know when they are healed; they only know when things begin to seem more manageable.

Some of the signs a survivor is progressing through their healing journey include:

- Greater control over behaviours, emotions, and memories
- Increased ability to manage overwhelming emotions or symptoms
- Heightened desire and ability to extract meaning out of the trauma
- Growth in self-respect and self-care
- Interested in forming safe, human relationships

²Matsakis, A. (1998). *Trust After Trauma: A Guide to Relationships for Survivors and Those Who Love Them*. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications.