

How to Support Someone Who Has Been Sexually Assaulted:

Understanding what the survivor is going through:

Sexual assault is any unwanted sexual contact, which may include kissing, touching, grabbing, and/or forced sexual activity. This crime is a traumatic experience and each individual responds to and deals with sexual assault in different ways. During a sexual assault the survivor may experience a loss of control, feel powerlessness, and may fear serious injury or death. After the shock of the event wears off, confused feelings may follow. The survivor may experience fear, shame, depression, anger, guilt, self-blame, sadness or numbness. These are all normal and common feelings to have after a sexual assault.

A sexual assault survivor may face many difficult decisions that need to be considered after the assault. Decisions include: Do they want or need to see a doctor? Do they need to go to the hospital? Who should they tell? Should they report to police? Could they have a sexually transmitted infection or be pregnant from the assault? It is important the survivor feel they are able to choose what to do in response to the sexual assault and that the decisions they choose are listened to and respected.

The importance of the supporter's response:

If a survivor chooses to share with you what happened to them, it means they trust you to support them through this very traumatic and personal experience. What you say and do makes a big difference in how they feel and respond to the trauma of being sexually assaulted. Sexual assault violates a survivor's sense of self, their sense of safety, and the way they see the world around them. It is normal for a survivor to experience a range of emotions after a sexual assault. It is helpful to validate these feelings. Remember, survivors are never at fault. It is essential for you, the supporter, recognize these are all normal reactions to a sexual assault and healing from this trauma is a different process for each individual.

When a survivor shares with you that they have been sexually assaulted believe what they tell you. Do not blame them in any way for what happened. Sexual assault is a crime committed against the survivor and is an act of aggression and violence. Understand that whatever the survivor did during the assault was the safest choice they could make for themselves at the time.

Some supporters may be interested in the details of the assault or in the sexual aspects of the crime. Never ask a survivor probing questions. The survivor may not feel comfortable speaking in depth about the assault. Sexual assault is not sex... it is violence. . Let them know you care about them and you will be there for them. It is common for the supporter to feel the need to protect the survivor. Try not to be overprotective. Remember, a survivor needs to regain control of their life, meaning they need to make their own decisions and ask for help as and when they need it.

Taking care of yourself as the supporter:

Those close to a survivor may also experience confusing emotions. Feelings may include disbelief, depression, anger or guilt. You may feel anger at what happened and towards the person who committed the crime. It is normal to be overwhelmed by the situation and feel helpless. Seek the support you need from someone other than the survivor, perhaps a friend or a sexual assault counsellor. Talk to people you trust and be respectful of the survivor's confidentiality and right to privacy. You can contact VictimLINK at 1-800-563-0808 to find out about resources in your community or call the Sexual Assault Service Counsellor at 604 875-3225.