

Supporting Someone you Care About after a Sexual Assault

If someone discloses a sexual assault to you, it usually means that you are someone they trust. Often, they just want to be heard. This is a general guide for how to respond to someone you care about that has been sexually assaulted.

Understanding your reactions

When you find out that someone you know has been sexually assaulted, you could start to feel emotional. You may be feeling shocked, angry, sad, guilty, confused and much more. These feelings are normal and okay.

"I feel so helpless because I wasn't able to protect ... (him/her). I feel like I have let them down."

"I feel so angry at everyone ... I don't understand why it happened."

"Is there something I could have done to stop my friend from getting hurt?"

"I want to help, but I don't know what to do or say. I'm afraid that I'll make it worse."

What happened is not your friend/family member's fault. Try not to ask questions that make the person feel like you are blaming them for what happened, for example;

"Why didn't you scream?", "What were you wearing?" or "Did you do something to encourage it?"

It is the person who sexually assaulted them that is 100% to blame.

No one asks or wants to be sexually assaulted.

Sexual assault is a crime.

A range of strong feelings is common soon after a traumatic event. It may take time to heal after they have been sexually assaulted. Most people will recover with the support of family and friends. Be patient with them and let them ask you for help – be available to them.

How can I help?

Partners, family and friends can assist by:

- Believing the person – this is extremely important
- Listening and allowing them the opportunity to talk about the event in their own time and in their own way
- Not judging them
- Spending time with them
- Allowing them some private time
- Reassuring them that they are safe
- Asking them what you can do to help – don't just assume what you do is okay
- Allowing them the opportunity to express their feelings if they want to
- Not taking the person's anger and feelings personally
- Assisting with some tasks such as minding the children or cooking, if this is what they want
- Avoid saying things like "lucky it wasn't worse", or "time to move on". People who have experienced a trauma do not usually find these kinds of statements to be helpful

It's also very important for you to take care of yourself. Even though you were not the victim of the assault, hearing your loved one's story and helping to support them can impact you as well. Make sure that you take care of yourself. It can be easy to get caught up in their needs and to forget about your own.

Remember that you cannot help them unless you are taking care of yourself

Your friend/family member's reaction to the sexual assault might be causing problems in your relationship.

"He/she doesn't like me touching them anymore. I feel like they're pushing me away."

"Why won't he/she talk to me about what happened?"

"I feel like they don't trust me anymore. Why? I didn't do this to them"

You may feel hurt and upset because they are mistrusting or detached from you. You might also feel angry that this situation has occurred at all. Try to be patient and support his/her efforts to come to terms with the assault.

The assault was not your fault either and you can't blame yourself for what has been done by someone else.

DO believe your friend/family member and offer unconditional support. Sometimes the most useful thing you can do is listen and believe. You do not have to understand the entire assault or emotional response to offer your support.

DO acknowledge the experience. You are not a counsellor and therefore should not be trying to 'fix' everything. Your responsibility is to show your understanding at this confusing time for the person you care about.

DO ensure their safety. Make sure they feel comfortable and safe. Understand they may need some time to be alone.

DO educate yourself. If you need help understanding what you or the person you care about is going through, seek a counsellor; find articles to read to educate yourself. You do not have to deal with this alone.

DO discuss options with them:

- Injury – seek medical help from doctor or nearest hospital if needed
- Pregnancy concerns - contact sexual health clinic for options asap
- STI – contact sexual health clinic for options and testing asap
- Forensic - contact SARC asap
- Police – contact your local police station or 000 for emergencies
- Counselling – contact SARC
- Safety of others – contact Department for Child Protection and Family Support if children are at risk or 000 for emergencies

For more information about these options go to: www.kemh.health.wa.gov.au/services/sarc

The Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC)

SARC offers support services for both recent and past sexual assault and sexual abuse.

The SARC 24-hour Emergency Telephone Line provides access to an experienced counsellor and doctor for people who have been sexually assaulted during the past 14 days.

Free counselling is available for past sexual assault and sexual abuse



Government of Western Australia
North Metropolitan Health Service



Tel: (08) 6458 1828
Or Freecall 1800 199 888