



# Supporting someone who has been sexually assaulted

It can be extremely confronting seeing someone you care about struggling after a sexual assault. It is important to know that their recovery is possible and that support from other people, such as you, is critical for them to heal from their trauma experience.

## Take care of health and safety first

- ✔ **Get medical assistance** for physical injuries, sexually transmitted infections (including HIV) and pregnancy as soon as possible.
- ✔ **If the person is still in danger**, it is crucial to help them find safety through an emergency service.
- ✔ If choosing to **report the assault to police**, it is best to do this as soon as possible.
- ✔ The **Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC)** provides 24-hour medical, forensic and counselling services. These services can be provided whether the person decides to report to police, or not. See the SARC website for further information about services.

## Common reactions after a traumatic experience

A traumatic experience can have enormous impacts on a person. It can impact their body, thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Every person will be impacted differently and there is no right or wrong way to react. Common impacts include:

- ▶ headaches
- ▶ nightmares
- ▶ confusion
- ▶ flashbacks
- ▶ loss of confidence
- ▶ difficulty concentrating
- ▶ avoiding people
- ▶ easily startled
- ▶ withdrawal
- ▶ loss of interest in things
- ▶ feeling angry
- ▶ self-harming
- ▶ feeling ashamed
- ▶ anxiety
- ▶ depression
- ▶ feeling worthless
- ▶ afraid to form relationships.

*One of the most important aspects of their recovery is how others respond to them, and the amount of support they receive. This is why you, and your role as a support person, is so important.*

## How to support a survivor

Many survivors of sexual trauma recover in a few weeks or months on their own, or with the help of friends and family. Some people struggle with the effects of the trauma for a long time.

To be an effective support person, it is important that you don't believe or support any myths, or 'blame the victim' attitudes, that exist in the community. These beliefs can make the experience harder for survivors and hinder their recovery. Even victims themselves might believe some of these myths.

*Remember - the victim is not responsible in any way for the sexual assault.*



## How to help

- ▶ Believe them.
- ▶ Stay calm.
- ▶ Give them time to talk, when they are ready.
- ▶ Don't force them to talk or tell you details.
- ▶ Listen to what they say with complete openness.
- ▶ Validate their feelings and reactions.
- ▶ Don't judge them, their thoughts or actions.
- ▶ Let them know you are there to support them.
- ▶ Ask them what they need.

- ▶ Let them know that the experience was NOT their fault.
- ▶ Reassure them that their reactions are normal.
- ▶ Assist them with everyday tasks if this is what they want.
- ▶ Be patient, as they are likely to have good days and bad.
- ▶ Support them to find information and options for help.
- ▶ Show hope for their recovery.
- ▶ Maintain confidentiality and don't break their trust.
- ▶ Stick by them and encourage them.
- ▶ Help them to feel safe.

## Other things to consider

### Give them control over decisions that affect them.

An important part of healing is for the survivor to gradually take back power and control over their own life.

**Offer distractions.** When they feel ready, you may want to plan gentle outings. Remember to let them have a say in the plans.

**Reassure them** that they are still the same person, you still love/care for them, they will recover, their reactions are normal, and your relationship with them is the same.

**Be patient.** Their moods and emotions may vary enormously, and it may take time for them to stabilise.

**Monitor their coping.** Check in with them. Let them know it is okay and normal to feel low after their trauma. If they are struggling to cope, provide details of support options available and give positive messages about speaking to a trained counsellor.

**Listen** whenever they are ready to talk.

## Resources and services in WA

A **Care Package** with lots of information and tips about coping and recovery can be viewed or downloaded from the SARC website.

A **Supporter's Guide** providing information to parents, family and friends on how to support someone who is recovering from sexual trauma can also be viewed or downloaded from the SARC website.

The **Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC)** is a free 24-hour emergency service providing medical and counselling services for people who have experienced a recent (within 14 days) sexual assault. Counselling for any sexual assault/abuse experienced recently or in the past is also available to people of all genders aged 13 years and above. Call SARC on (08) **6458 1828** or Freecall **1800 199 888**.

Sexual assault can be reported to police at your **local police station**, or by calling **131 444**, or reporting online through the **Crime Stoppers Safe2Say website** (anonymously if you prefer).

Police assistance and reporting  
(not emergencies)

**Call 131 444**

**Emergency Call 000** Police, Fire, Ambulance

### Telephone support services:

#### 1800RESPECT

Freecall 1800 737 732

**Lifeline Australia** 13 11 14

#### Beyond Blue

1300 224 636

#### Crisis Care

(08) 9223 1111; 1800 199 008

#### The Samaritans Help Line

135 247

#### Women's Domestic Violence Helpline

9223 1188; 1800 007 339

#### Men's Domestic Violence Helpline

9223 1199; 1800 000 599

#### WA Mental Health Emergency Response Line

1300 555 788 (metro)  
and 1800 676 822 (peel)

#### QLife support for people who identify as LGBT+

1800 184 527

#### Rurallink mental health support for people living in rural WA

1800 552 002