

## How to Help a Victim-Survivor

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This section has information on helping and supporting victim-survivors, including information regarding common victim-survivor responses to sexual violence, reporting options, as well as campus and community resources.

Supporting a victim-survivor may be difficult, especially when someone you care about has experienced sexual violence. It is important to be cognizant of both the victim-survivor's emotions and reactions as well as your own. If you are not comfortable supporting the victim-survivor, please contact the Victim Advocate at the Women's Resource Center for additional help and resources.

Listed below are a few things to remember when supporting a victim-survivor:

**BELIEVE** the survivor. It is not your role to question whether violence occurred. The fact is that false reports of sexual violence are no more or less common than false reports for other violent crimes.

Never blame the survivor. No one deserves to be a victim of sexual violence. No matter what they wore, how many times they had sex before, whether they were walking alone at night, whether they got drunk, if they were married, or whether they went up to the perpetrator's room. They did not cause the sexual violence to occur. Even if the survivor feels responsible, say clearly and with caring, "It wasn't your fault."

Respect his or her time and space. Ask the survivor before you touch him or her. Do not assume that physical contact, even in the form of a gentle touch or hug, will be comforting to a survivor. Many survivors, especially within the first weeks after an assault, prefer to avoid sex or simple touching even by those they love and trust. Be patient. Give the victim the space he or she needs.

Do not overshadow the survivor's feelings, but don't hold back from expressing relevant feelings. You may be feeling outrage, compassion, sadness, and a lot of other feelings, but you cannot provide support to the survivor if you only focus on your own feelings. Don't let your emotions take center stage, but express your compassion and understanding if it will help the survivor.

Help the survivor explore his/her options. Do not take charge of the situation and pressure the survivor to do what you think he/she should. The perpetrator took his or her power of choice away. Give the survivor the freedom to choose a path of recovery that is most comfortable, even if you would do it differently. Remember, there is no one right way for a survivor to respond after being assaulted.

Listen to the survivor. Most survivors will tell a friend at some point. When that happens, do not interrupt, yell, or interject your feelings. Just open your ears to the pain of being assaulted. Your caring but silent attention will be invaluable.

Avoid any re-victimization. Do not coddle, patronize, or treat him or her as weak or less than capable of taking care of themselves. Don't assume control without permission or push for a particular outcome. Don't judge how the survivor handled the situation or ask questions just to

satisfy your own curiosity. Do NOT make any excuses/explanations for the perpetrator's actions. Offer the survivor options and relevant information, and provide support if needed.

Supporting a victim-survivor through the aftermath of sexual violence can be victimizing to you as a friend. Make sure you are taking care of yourself as you listen and support the victim-survivor.

Recognize and accept your own triggers and feelings. We cannot help but be hurt when someone we love is suffering. Do not blame yourself for the many feelings you will have after learning that someone close to you has been sexually violated. Sadness, confusion, anger, helplessness, fear, guilt, disappointment, shock, anxiety, desperation, and compassion are all common reactions for survivors and their loved ones. Being aware of these will help you better understand the survivor's experience and allow you to get the help that you need.

Know your own limits. You may need some time to acknowledge and deal with your own feelings. Give yourself space to do that, and recognize what you can and cannot do.

Don't be afraid to ask for help. Seek support and resources for you and the survivor. Most rape crisis centers offer counseling for significant others and family members, because they realize that the impact of assaults extends far beyond the survivor. Suppressing your feelings will only make you less available to support the survivor. Remember, asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.