



A GUIDE FOR HELPING SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

Sexual assault can happen to anyone. It can be very difficult and overwhelming to hear that your friend or loved one has been sexually assaulted. At times like these, it is often hard to know how to act or what to say. The most important thing you can do is help your friend or loved one feel safe and supported. Faculty, staff and midshipmen at the U.S. Naval Academy have a number of resources available to assist them in dealing with the wake of a sexual assault.

Every person responds differently to sexual assault. Frequent responses include feelings of fear, distress, humiliation, anger, confusion, numbness, and guilt. It is important that your friend or loved one be allowed to experience and process through these feelings without the fear of having them invalidated or dismissed

Overview of Steps to Take

1. First and most importantly, believe your friend or loved one when they confide in you. Do not place blame on them for the sexual assault, and don't pressure them to talk. It is better to go slowly and let them set the pace. Focus on their needs, and remember that every person's healing process is unique.
2. Take the necessary steps to protect and ensure his or her safety.
3. Seek medical attention, but understand that your friend or loved one has the right to decide what medical attention is necessary, if any at all. It's important that they regain control of their body.
4. Discuss their options and ask them what they want to do next. This may or may not include contacting an advocate and/or the police. Reporting a sexual assault crime can be a very difficult, long, and painful process for survivors. It is not an appropriate option for everyone, but a trained advocate can help you both navigate through your friend or loved one's options.
5. Make sure they get the professional care and support they may need. Counseling can be very helpful in assisting your friend or loved one and even yourself through the healing process of coping with the sexual assault.

Key Phrases Okay to Use When Talking about the Sexual Assault

- Thank you for trusting me with this information.
- I am here for you.
- No matter how you were dressed, how much you drank, if you were flirting, etc., there is no excuse for sexual assault. No one deserves to be assaulted. It is not your fault.

- Whatever you did to survive the situation was the right thing to do.
- That must have been a very disturbing/ scary/ confusing/ uncomfortable/ frightening experience.
- You are not crazy. You are reacting normally to a very difficult and scary situation.

Do's

- Listen and try to understand. Reassure them that they have your love and support.
- Help them distinguish between “if only” and guilt. It is common for survivors to blame themselves for what happened. Reassure them that it was not their fault and that the only person responsible is the perpetrator.
- Listen to their reasons if they didn't tell you immediately. They may have been scared of your reaction, felt shame or embarrassment, or tried to protect you. It is very common for survivors to wait before sharing with people they love.
- Give control to the survivor. This means allowing them to speak for themselves unless they specifically want you to speak on their behalf. Sexual assault is a crime that takes away an individual's power. It could make them feel invaded, changed, or out of control. It is crucial for survivors to be able to make their own decisions in order to regain power over their own lives.
- Encourage your friend or loved one to see themselves as a strong, courageous survivor who is reclaiming their own life.

Don'ts

- Do not criticize them for being where they were, not resisting more, etc. The only person responsible for the sexual assault is the perpetrator. Everyone has the basic human right to be free from threat, harassment, or attack. Whatever they did to survive the situation was the right thing to do.
- Do not over simplify what happened by saying it wasn't that bad or that they should forget about it. Let them say exactly how they feel.
- Do not sympathize with the abuser. Your friend or loved one needs your absolute support.
- Do not blame your loved one, spouse or partner, or yourself. Avoid asking “why” questions as much as possible because these often imply blame.

During this critical time, your focus needs to be on supporting your friend/loved one, not taking on the role of detective, judge or jury. Realize that “legal justice” and “emotional healing” are two different things; for many survivors, legal justice is not the primary goal. It’s okay to have doubts about what to say or how to react when your friend or loved one tells you they have been sexually assaulted. Recognize your own needs, and accept that there will very likely be changes in your relationship with your loved one as they heal.

How to Help Your Loved One

- Most importantly, believe what they tell you (*even if they sometimes doubt themselves, their memories are vague, or if what they tell you sounds extreme*). Don’t become frustrated if the story changes. The details will likely come out in bits and pieces.
- Listen and help them process through all of the confusing and painful feelings. Validate their anger, pain, and fear. These are natural responses that need to be felt, expressed, and heard. Validate the damage (*all sexual assault can be harmful, even if there are no physical scars or visible indicators of struggle*). There are no positive or neutral experiences of sexual assault.
- It is okay to tell your friend or loved one that this is a difficult topic for you to talk about. Let them know that you are open to talk about anything, even if it is uncomfortable.
- Control your own emotions. Don’t panic. If you show great emotion, your friend or loved one may find it harder to talk with you and may even feel guilty for upsetting you. Share your feelings, but make sure your feelings don’t overwhelm theirs. As a loved one of a survivor, you may have reactions of anger, sadness, and shame. Find a supportive person or counselor with whom you can share your strong feelings with so that your conversations with your friend or loved one can focus on their needs.
- Separate the anger you may feel for your friend or loved one having broken any rules or using poor judgment from the anger that you feel at the perpetrator. The perpetrator is the only one responsible for the assault. No matter how badly you need to vocalize your anger, don’t vent it with the survivor.
- Recognize your friend or loved one’s need for privacy. Their boundaries have been violated and reclaiming personal space is important. Respect the time and space it takes to heal after a sexual assault.
- Call 911 and seek immediate professional help if they display any suicidal behaviors or if you are worried about their emotional or physical well-being.
- Take care of yourself. Educate yourself about sexual assault and the healing process. Realize when you’ve reached your own limitations, and encourage them to talk to a professional.