

A
Guidebook
for PARENTS
and FRIENDS
of the Sexual Assault
Survivor

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Introduction

Although every sexual assault survivor's experience is unique, there are certain things all family and friends of survivors should know to aid in the process of recovery. The survivors who shared their thoughts and ideas with the University R.A.P.E. Center to produce this pamphlet want people in supportive roles to benefit from their insights so the survivor has space in which to go through the healing process.

One of the most fundamental facts about rape is that rape is an act of violence. It is the exertion of power and control over another human being. Many sexual assaults involve threats of bodily harm or other forms of intimidation. In some cases, the person suffers severe physical injury.

Even in the context of a dating relationship, where a majority of assaults occur, rape is still a violent assault and not something the survivor invites or enjoys. It is never appropriate to imply that the survivor somehow deserved or benefited from being assaulted.

The survivor is absolutely not responsible for her/his assault. People often mistakenly assume that the survivor could have prevented the assault by doing something differently. Some people also believe that if the survivor did not actively resist the attack, then she/he must have given tacit

consent. This unfairly suggests that the survivor is responsible for the assault. The truth is that no one knows how she/he will respond when placed in a life-threatening situation. One person might fight back and another might become paralyzed by fear.

Implying that the survivor bears some responsibility for her/his assault will potentially create distance between the survivor and the person trying to support her/him. Survivors need unconditional support. Blame will only strain a relationship and delay the recovery process.

What You can Do

There are some basic things that may be helpful if someone close to you has been sexually assaulted. By acting with thoughtful understanding and support, you can help to minimize the trauma.

The remainder of this booklet is broken into sections for parents, friends, and partners. Although there are many similarities in the way people who are close to survivors respond, there are also many differences based on the particular relationship with the survivor.

Parents

- ❖ As a parent, your instinct may be to take control and right this situation for your daughter or son. It is important for you to understand that control has been taken away, and the greatest gift you can give to your daughter or son is the freedom to make her/his own decisions and choices about how best to proceed.
- ❖ Respect her/his boundaries. Don't press for details. She/he will disclose to you what she/he is comfortable with.
- ❖ Understand that the recovery process is as individual as your daughter or son. The length of time it requires will depend greatly on her/his personality and support system.
- ❖ Do not project your own fears onto her/him.
- ❖ Understand that any time a disclosure happens or begins to happen, the survivor is carefully watching for your reaction, verbal or non-verbal. If there is any indication that what she/he is saying is not accepted or believed, this will greatly diminish her/his ability to continue.

- ❖ Do not blame your daughter or son regardless of the circumstances. She/he is looking to you for support. Blame has no place in support.
- ❖ Recognize that a time lag may have occurred between the incident and the disclosure to you. Don't let this become an issue. "Why didn't you tell us sooner?" will not be heard as a supportive statement. Her/his very reason for not telling you may have been fear of your reaction.
- ❖ Don't ask WHY? Why didn't you...? Why did you...? All "why" questions have the ability to back someone into a defensive corner. This will not be conducive to your child's recovery or to your relationship with her/him.
- ❖ Know that recovery is possible, although it may seem remote at present.
- ❖ Be positive in your approach.
- ❖ Take your daughter or son's lead.
- ❖ Tell her/him you will support the decisions she/he makes and then do so.
- ❖ Have the discussion about what other family members will be told and respect your child's decision about this matter.

- ❖ Make the offer of support, create the environment, and then allow the survivor to come to you.
- ❖ There are a variety of ways your daughter or son may react. None will speak to the amount of trauma she/he has experienced. Her/his reaction is a direct parallel to her/his coping skills.

You may want to seek support for yourself.

Some Reasons for not Disclosing a Sexual Assault to Family Members

- ❖ Fear
- ❖ Blame/Judgment
- ❖ Family is already in crisis with other issues
- ❖ Not wishing to cause worry
- ❖ Emotional attachment
It's always easier to tell a stranger rather than a family member because the emotional attachment isn't present.

Moms

- ❖ Rape or sexual assault may have been your daughter's or son's first sexual experience. She/he needs to hear that you are sorry this has happened to her/him and that although this was a horrible experience, she/he has the capacity for a loving and sexually intimate relationship.
- ❖ As a woman, you realize the scope of the personal violation that has occurred. Therefore, be mindful of passing along your own interpretation of what it must have been like.
- ❖ The need TO DO SOMETHING may be great. Be careful that you're not forcing your daughter or son to take action she/he is not ready to take (e.g., counseling).
- ❖ Let your child know you love and support her/him.
- ❖ Don't solicit support from close friends, clergy, co-workers, or friends for your daughter or son. Your child needs to take the lead in how she/he will reach out to others.

- ❖ Resist overprotecting. Trying to convince your child to move back home, or to another apartment or housing arrangement, may reinforce the view that she/he is vulnerable and powerless. This can discourage the survivor from mobilizing her/his own resources for coping. You do not want to promote an unhealthy dependence on others. What your child needs is help in rebuilding the self-confidence and independence that has been temporarily taken away.
- ❖ Understand and respect her/his need for privacy.
- ❖ If you have experienced a sexual assault, be mindful of the reactions you are feeling and careful not to project them onto your child.
- ❖ Make the offer of support, create the environment, and then allow the survivor to come to you.

Dads

- ❖ Your feelings of anger and helplessness may be very high right now. Be careful this doesn't get conveyed as anger, because your child may feel this is directed at her/him.

- ❖ If your child was assaulted on a date or by someone she/he knew, she/he may fear you are holding her/him responsible for using poor judgment. She/he is likely to fear you will take matters into your own hands. Assure your child that she/he is not responsible for “causing” the assailant to lose control. Let her/him know that she/he is not responsible for another’s aggressive actions.
- ❖ If your daughter was assaulted by a male, let her know her assailant is not representative of all males. If you are in a relationship and your relationship with your partner is good, point to that as a case example of a trusting, healthy relationship.
- ❖ If it was your son who was assaulted, know that males very much need the support of other males. Your son will need your support.
- ❖ It is important for you to keep track of your own reaction. If your son has been assaulted, don’t jump to the conclusion that he might be gay. The majority of assaults are perpetrated along sexual orientation lines, i.e., heterosexuals assault heterosexuals, gays assault gays, etc. The primary fear and obstacle to reporting for males who have been sexually assaulted is the fear of others projecting a sexual orientation onto them.

- ❖ Encourage your child to resume her/his regular lifestyle. Don't limit her/his emerging independence by making decisions for her/him. Respect your child's judgment concerning dating, seeing friends, going out, etc. If she/he is overprotected or permitted to avoid a normal routine, she/he will have a more difficult recovery and readjustment.
- ❖ Do not isolate yourself or your child from friends who are aware of the sexual assault. True friends will be supportive and understanding.
- ❖ Let your child know that you love and support her/him.
- ❖ Make the offer of support, create the environment, and then allow the survivor to come to you.

Friends

- ❖ Be a good listener. If you hear your voice more than your friend's, you're talking too much and not listening enough.
- ❖ Don't feel as though you have to have all the answers. That is not your role.

- ❖ Support the decision your friend makes regardless of whether you agree with her/him.
- ❖ Know that each experience is unique. If you've had other friends who experienced a sexual assault, avoid making comparisons.
- ❖ Do not judge your friend, regardless of the circumstances.
- ❖ If your friend is not taking control over her/his situation, it doesn't mean you have to jump in to do it. Let your friend sort out where she/he is heading and be there to support the decisions.
- ❖ Take care of yourself and continue with your life and routine as usual. This may seem very difficult to do, but it allows both you and the survivor to broaden the perspective beyond this experience.
- ❖ Don't let the focus of every discussion you have with your friend revolve around this topic. There was more to both of you prior to this experience and there will be again.
- ❖ Know that there is no set period of time for recovery. It is an individual process that cannot be predetermined.

- ❖ Be mindful of the survivor's timetable for socializing again.
- ❖ Make the offer of support, create the environment, and then allow the survivor to come to you.

Partners

- ❖ It is not uncommon to feel an intense anger and strong desire to seek revenge against the person who did this. This is normal and understandable and yet, not the best way to respond. Right now, reasonable judgment and calmness are most beneficial. Threatening to take care of the situation only adds to the emotional burden the survivor is already carrying.
- ❖ Making threats against the perpetrator is only shifting attention away from the survivor's needs to your own. This is a time when the survivor most needs support and understanding. If you focus on your anger rather than her/his well-being, the end result will be a cutoff in communication between the two of you, as she/he will fear your response.
- ❖ At no time should you judge or accuse the survivor, regardless of the circumstances. It is vitally important that you maintain calm and

give her/him the opportunity to share the experience with you if she/he chooses. You may find the only thing your partner needs from you is a gentle word and calming touch.

- ❖ Let your partner know you do not blame her/him for the assault. “Why” questions such as why didn’t you fight back, why were you there so late, or why didn’t you leave with everyone else? only convey a blaming tone, causing her/him to feel guilty and possibly resentful of you for not understanding.
- ❖ Do not ever suggest that the survivor secretly enjoyed the experience. It is important that you reassure the survivor that the sexual assault is not being equated to promiscuity or cheating.
- ❖ Let the survivor begin to regain control over her/his life. Do not make decisions for her/him or demand she/he follow a particular course of action. Wanting to take charge of the situation will not help the survivor or your relationship with her/him.
- ❖ Do not press for details of the assault. You can unintentionally humiliate her/him by requesting the sexually intimate details of the assault.

- ❖ Assure the survivor that you will endure this crisis with her/him and that your friendship and/or love will remain intact.
- ❖ Make the offer of support, create the environment, and then allow the survivor to come to you.

What to say when you don't know what to say

- ❖ “I don't want to force you to talk about this when you don't want to. I just want you to know I'm willing to listen.”
- ❖ “You don't seem like you want to talk about it, and that's fine. I just want you to know I'm here if you need to later.”
- ❖ “You seem to be having a real rough time with this. If you want to talk about it, I'd be glad to just listen.”
- ❖ “I want you to know I don't know what to say, but I'm your friend. I believe you, and I will support whatever decisions you make.”
- ❖ “As your parent(s), I(we) want to make things better and I(we) can't. I(we) love you and will support you through this.”
- ❖ “Tell me how I can help you.”

MEDICAL ATTENTION

Medical attention is an important component of care provided to a sexual assault survivor. The medical exam, **first**, gives attention to any physical injuries that may have occurred. Since not all injuries are visible or obvious, examination by a medical professional is strongly advised. **Second**, health care providers can discuss preventive treatment for sexually transmitted infections, HIV, and pregnancy. It is recommended that survivors of sexual assault, including assaults that occurred in the past, have testing for HIV and sexually transmitted infections. **Third**, it is important to collect physical evidence within a few days of the assault to increase the chance of successful prosecution should the survivor choose to report the assault immediately or in the near future.

For more information, call the
**Syracuse University R.A.P.E.
Center at 315-443-7273.**