

Impact on Supporters

Sexual assault deeply affects survivors, their family, friends, partners, and anyone who cares for them. For this reason, those supporting a survivor will often come to the Sexual Assault Centre for support and information. As a supporter, coming to the Centre provides an opportunity to ensure that you are taking care of yourself and doing okay, and also to learn how to become an even better supporter to the survivor. Supporters can have a profound impact on a survivor's recovery. They are best able to help when they have accurate and non-blaming information on sexual assault and can support the survivor's choices in her/his healing.

To be a good supporter, it is important that you know the myths about sexual assault, and understands why they are false. Some elements of sexual assault that a supporter should understand include:

1. The survivor is in no way responsible for the assault or for the decisions she/he made leading up to the assault. Regardless of the clothes she/he was wearing, where she/he was, whether she/he was drinking, knew the perpetrator or not, or fought back or did not, the survivor is never to blame for the assault.
2. It is very common for people in terrifying situations to "freeze up" or become too frightened to fight back. There are many ways to say "no" or to show resistance that are often overlooked by supporters.
3. Sexual assault is a frightening experience that takes time to recover from. It is a normal part of the recovery process for someone to still be affected by some part of their sexual assault experience years after the assault or abuse.
4. Sexual assault is an act of violence. Sexual assault is not consensual sexual activity, and is not "cheating" on one's partner.
5. It is more common for survivors to choose not to report to police than it is for them to report to the police. Some reasons survivors may choose not to report are fear of retaliation, fear of people finding out, fear of not being believed, not wanting to hurt the perpetrator (if known to her/him), or length of the court process.¹

In some cases, you are not the first person the survivor has told about the assault, or you have not been told until some time after the assault. There are many different reasons why the survivor may not have told you right away. For example, a survivor may not tell a best friend because the perpetrator is a friend of his or hers. A survivor may not tell a partner because she/he does not want to be seen as "damaged," she/he wants to pretend everything is "normal" or she/he may be afraid the partner will accuse her/him of "cheating." A parent may not be told due to feelings of shame or self-blame, or fear the parents will retaliate against the perpetrator or force the survivor to report to the police.

¹Adapted from If She is Raped. McEvoy, Alan and Brookings, Jeff. Learning Publications Inc. Holmes Beach, Florida. 1991, 1984.

Some ways you, as a supporter, can respond to a disclosure and support a survivor include:

Listen

- Be patient and approachable. The survivor will express her/his feelings, as she/he feels safe, comfortable and ready.
- Let the survivor talk without interruptions.
- Do not pressure the survivor to tell details or specifics of the assault, she/he will tell the supporter when or if she/he is ready.
- Do not pressure the survivor to talk about the sexual assault. Sometimes the survivor will be willing to talk about it and other times she/he may just want to forget about it for awhile. This is a normal part of recovery.
- Empathetic and caring touch (if the survivor is comfortable with it) and empathetic speech may help her/him to feel safe enough to share her/his experience with the supporter.
- Become aware of the parts of the survivor's experience that seem to come up repeatedly. They may represent areas that need special attention and understanding from the supporter.

Believe

- It is important that the survivor understands that the supporter believes her/him and her/his description of the events, and that the feelings she/he has about the incident are valid.
- Tell the survivor that she/he is not responsible for the crime that was committed against her/him. Avoid asking her/him "why" questions like, "why didn't you fight back?", "why did you go for a drink with him/her?" or "why didn't you tell someone?" She/he may feel judged by such questions and may stop talking to the supporter. The survivor needs to know that the supporter does not blame her/him for the assault.

Supportive responses

- Have the supporter let the survivor know she/he has the supporter's unconditional love and support and that the supporter will be there when she/he needs them.
- Ask the survivor how she/he would like to be supported: does she/he want the supporter to bring up the sexual assault, or only bring up the topic when the survivor brings it up first.
- It is very important that the supporter conveys the message that they do not see her/him as "damaged" or any less moral than before the assault.
- Encourage the survivor to make her/his own decisions about further proceedings on the incident; for example, let the survivor choose whether or not to tell others or report to the police. Avoid giving advice. Instead provide the survivor with options, explore all of these options, and support the choices she/he makes. (It is important to remember that "doing nothing" at this time is

an option.) Letting the survivor make his/her own decision will allow him/her to take back some of the power she/he lost during the assault, and it can help her/him feel more in control. You will be most helpful when you are supporting the decisions the survivor makes, even if they are not the ones you believe they should make.

- Consider sharing your feelings with a counsellor or close friend about the effects of the sexual assault on your relationship with the survivor. You may also want to consider relationship counselling to help deal with the sexual assault.

Feelings

- Recognize and accept the survivor's feelings as well as your own. All feelings are normal after a sexual assault, however, it may be best for the supporter to share their feelings with someone else that supports them, at least initially until the survivor is better able to cope with her/his own feelings and will be more able to hear about the supporter's.
- Do not contact or threaten the perpetrator. It is normal for supporters' initial reactions to be anger towards the perpetrator. Threats may result in a legal action by the perpetrator against the supporter at a time when the survivor needs the supporter's strength and support. Keep in mind that anger can shift attention away from the survivor and towards the supporter or the perpetrator. The survivor may feel guilty for burdening their supporter, frightened of the supporter's rage or may be reluctant to upset the supporter further at a time when she/he needs their support. The survivor may even stop talking to their supporter because of these feelings of burdening the supporter.
- Supporters may feel it is their job to "fix" the survivor or "make right" what has happened to her/him in the past, and they may get frustrated when the survivor does not heal as quickly as they would have hoped. Remember that only the survivor can "fix" her/himself, and your role is to support the survivor through this process.

Other ways the supporter can help

- Spend some time helping others involved with the survivor to learn ways to support her/him. They need to understand that she/he needs a safe, accepting environment where her/his feelings about the assault will not be judged.
- Do not let the survivor abuse you or themselves verbally, physically or sexually. Suffering trauma does not excuse the survivor from abusing others. Allowing the survivor to be abusive does not help with her/his recovery process and may lead to her/him feeling worse about him/herself afterwards.
- It may be helpful to be aware of the specific issues that the survivor might face. In addition to the trauma, the survivor may experience self-doubt, self-blame, betrayal of trust, lack of confidence in her/his own ability to make judgments, making the recovery process more difficult.
- Refrain from criticizing the survivor for his/her symptoms, and don't blame all

- the problems in the relationship on the survivor's trauma or her/his symptoms.
- Try not to take it personally if the survivor needs to withdraw or be alone.
 - Know what to expect from the survivor after the assault. Learn about sexual assault and its after effects. Talk to someone at a Sexual Assault Centre or read a book on the impact of sexual assault. Two such books are, I Can't Get Over It and Trust After Trauma by Aphrodite Matsakis.

If you are the survivor's partner:

Partners of a survivor may find that they have reactions of grief, anger, frustration, and devastation that may be surprising to them. It is helpful for partners to learn how to cope with both their feelings and with the feelings of the survivor.

Unfortunately, often there is no outlet for these feelings of frustration, and sometimes a supporter may transfer their anger to the survivor. This can especially happen when:

- a) The partner is feeling taxed or burnt out emotionally because the need for understanding and patience seems unending. It is important to connect the supporter to their own support system.
- b) The partner may feel that "the survivor should put the assault behind her/him now and move on with life." It may be important to learn about Rape Trauma Syndrome or the Spiral of Recovery to better understand that it takes time to heal (To learn more about these recovery models you can talk to someone at the Sexual Assault Centre or read the pamphlet on Rape Trauma Syndrome).
- c) The partner feels anger towards the survivor for decisions the partner may feel "allowed the incident to occur". As discussed earlier, debunking the myths about sexual assault and talking to someone at the Sexual Assault Centre is a better way to deal with that frustration.
- d) The partner knows the perpetrator or when mutual friends are involved. The perpetrator may be telling others a different version of the incident that can cause the partner to have feelings of anger, rage or doubt about the survivor's story. It is important to understand that these feelings are normal, and also to remember to be accepting and supportive of the survivor.

Sexual difficulties

Difficulties and/or changes in sexual activity and sexual feelings are very common after sexual assault. A survivor may experience fear, flashbacks or difficulties with her/his own sexual response. A partner can help with these difficulties by:

1. Giving the survivor the opportunity to make sexual decisions and advances. This will help her/him to feel more comfortable and empowered sexually.
2. Respecting that the survivor may need a period of abstinence from certain sexual acts, sexual intercourse or all sexual activity. The partner can best support the survivor during this period of abstinence by continuing to express

their intimacy with nurturing and loving contact that is acceptable to the survivor.

3. Being patient. Sexual difficulties are quite normal and usually do not last forever. If the survivor feels loved and unconditionally accepted, she/he will again be ready to explore sexual intimacy with the partner.
4. Work with the survivor to identify triggers, and avoid those activities that trigger the survivor back to the sexual assault. Develop a plan of how to handle a trigger if one happens while being intimate. For example, are there signs that the survivor is triggered, is there a word or phrase she/he can use to stop intimacy, does the survivor want to be held afterwards or does she/he need to be left alone?

Self-care

Self-care is an important part of supporting a loved one. You will provide the best support when you develop a support system for yourself, and when you take time to rest and relax. It is important to try to continue to interact with your partner in fun, light-hearted ways that can give you both a break from thinking about the sexual assault.

How will I know when the survivor is healed?²

Healing can be a life long process, but that does not mean positive things can't happen while on the journey to recovery. Most survivors themselves don't know when they are healed; they only know when things begin to seem more manageable. Some signs of progress that you can look for in the survivor are:

- Increased power or authority over memories
- Experiencing memory with manageable emotions
- Increased ability to manage overwhelming emotion or symptoms
- Greater control over behaviour
- Increased self-care
- Growth in self-respect
- Formation of safe, human relationships
- Desire and increasing ability to extract meaning out of the trauma

² Trust After Trauma: A Guide to Relationships for Survivors and Those Who Love Them. Matsakis, Aphrodite. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 1998.