



SASARI.org

Students Abroad Sexual Assault
RESOURCE INITIATIVE

Helping a Loved One

It is good to have an understanding on how to respond to a disclosure of sexual violence. The way that a victim/survivor is treated by the support people around them when they disclose a sexual assault greatly affects their healing. Every interaction with a survivor is either helpful or hurtful. There is no neutral interaction. Every victim behaves differently. They may be expressive or they may be controlled. Remember that the healing process is fluid. Everyone has bad days. Don't interpret flashbacks, bad days, or silent spells as "setbacks." It's all part of the process. Here are tips for helping a loved one.

- **#1 Show the victim/survivor compassion and empathy.** Speak from your heart and treat them with humanity. Be warm and consistent.
- **Acknowledge and validate their feelings.** Encourage them to express their feelings.
- Offer words of encouragement. Convey hope.
- Provide a nonjudgmental safe space.
- **Listen.** Be there. Be a friend. Be considerate.
- Let them talk, cry, tell their story or whatever they need to do. Let them share as much or as little information as they want to.
- Be **supportive** and understanding. Mitigate (make less painful) the impact of the event.
- If you **empower** victim/survivors they will start to regain control.
- **Do not judge, make assumptions, criticize, or imply blame.**
- Do not give advice unless they ask for it.
- Enable/facilitate decision making. Let them make their own decisions.
- Be gentle.
- Give them time and be patient. Remember, there is no timetable for recovering from trauma. They deserve to have control of coping and healing in their own time.
- Stand by your friend and tell them they are loved.
- Assist them in any way you can think of. If you are near them offer to drive them to an advocate, for medical attention or to report. Your presence can offer the support they need.
- Encourage them to practice good self-care during this difficult time.
- Help establish a safety plan.
- Check in periodically. Remind them you still care about what happened to them, care about their well-being, and believe their story.
- The victim deserves action, engagement, and remembering.

How to respond to a disclosure:

- Do you feel safe?
- I believe you.
- **You are not alone.** I am here for you. I will listen. There are others who care.
- I am (so) sorry this has happened to you.
- This must be really tough for you.

- I'm so glad you are sharing this with me.
 - It's not your fault. You did not deserve this. You are not to blame. You are not responsible for this.
 - That's terrible! What can I do to help?
 - I'm here to support you.
 - Would you like to talk about it?
 - If you want to talk about this later, I am here for you. I'll be thinking of you and be ready to support you. Come to me as many times as you need. Healing is a process, so when things change and coping gets challenging I am here for you.
 - Are you open to seeking medical attention/care? Even if it happened a while ago.
 - Would you like me to help you find resources? **You have options.** Let me help you find an organization/professional help and support available to you. Service providers are able to support you as you recover. (Encourage)
 - You are being heard.
 - You can trust me. I will respect your privacy.
 - I support you and trust your decisions. Only you can make the decision to get help.
 - This doesn't change how I think of you.
 - It is important to take care of your health.
- Avoid asking too many questions at once.
 - Avoid "why" questions. (They can make people feel defensive.)

Resources:

- rainn.org/articles/help-someone-you-care-about
- rainn.org/articles/how-respond-survivor
- nomore.org/how-to-help/what-to-say/#help

It is very possible that when you are trying to help a survivor you actually trigger them.

When You Trigger a Survivor

1. Take accountability.
 - "I'm sorry for causing you pain." - own the pain
 - "I'm sorry for the sexist thing I said." - own the wrongs
2. Offer choices on how you might make things better. State what you can't do, if necessary.
3. Ask the survivor how you can make it right. "What can I do to make things right?"
4. Follow through on what you agree to.

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It is very stressful to care for someone who has been sexually assaulted, be a secondary victim. Listening to their story can be traumatic (secondary traumatization). Take care of yourself and your own needs so that you can be at your best for the victim. Relax. Talk to someone about the feelings you are experiencing and recognize denial. Sexual assault advocates, hotlines, and counseling professional are there to help you so utilize your resources. Your feelings need to be validated too. Recognize your limits and be honest with yourself. Helping yourself in turn helps the victim/survivor.

Resource: rainn.org/articles/self-care-friends-and-family

Make sure to let your loved ones know that you've read this!