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How To Help A Friend Who's Been Sexually Assaulted

At some point a friend may reveal to you that they've experienced sexual assault. This article outlines helpful tips for responding with sensitivity and grace.

If the assault happened within the last few days, you should also read [What Should I Do If I Am Sexually Assaulted?](#)

Adapted from an article in *Everyday Feminism Magazine* by Sarah Ogden Trotta 1/21/2013

We have a societal notion that only women can be assaulted but the truth looks much different. Women, men, and people of all genders can be violated. So if your friend isn't a woman and tells you they were raped, don't dismiss it simply because they're not female.

Before you help a friend, you must try to truly understand how awful the experience must have been for them. That intention is possibly the most healing intervention that anyone can provide.

Sexual assault is a violent act that cuts people to the core. It strips away a person's sense of dignity, autonomy, and control. It is violence against a person's most inner and personal self. It is devastating, in every possible way.

How To Support Your Friend

Regardless of when the assault took place, these tips will be useful in supporting your friend:

1. Listen

Of course, listening is the first on the list. We've all heard it before. We usually want so desperately to "get it right" that instead of staying present and really, truly hearing our friend's words, we're planning what to say next. But our minds can't simultaneously hear, process, and plan. We need to listen fully and stay completely present in the moment, without planning our next move or fixating on what we want to hear.

Your friend deserves to be truly heard – we all do, but there is an extra layer of need after surviving a violent crime.

There is nothing wrong with silence. When your friend is finished speaking, take a moment to gather your thoughts before saying anything. That will ensure that you have a moment to process what you heard, and allows you to avoid planning ahead for your next words.

2. Remind Them That It's Not Their Fault

There was nothing they could do to deserve or ask to be raped. The responsibility always completely lies on the rapist and not them.

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Just like if someone is robbed, the robber is the only one responsible. Even if the person robbed was wearing fancy clothing, walking alone at night, holding a purse with money in it – i.e. just going about their business – it's not their responsibility to not get robbed.

At most, they can try to reduce their risk of being robbed. But it's always the responsibility of the perpetrator to not commit the crime.

Here are some examples of what you should NEVER say to a survivor:

- What were you wearing?
- What did you do to lead them on?
- Were you drunk?
- Were you flirting with him? Did you give him the wrong impression?
- Why didn't you fight back?
- Are you lying?

3. Ask Questions in a Sensitive Way

It's essential to ask questions without judgment. Of course, you may want to ask questions so that you can get a better sense of what happened, but be honest about that.

"I'm going to ask you these questions because I want to really understand your experience, not because I think you did anything wrong, is that okay?" is a great way to communicate your intention before asking a question.

It's generally a good idea to avoid asking questions that start with, "why", because it seems so loaded with judgment. There is always a better way to reframe the question.

4. Honor Your Friend's Autonomy

It is so very important to honor your friend's autonomy and ability to make decisions about their life.

At the time of the assault, your friend was denied their ability to make decisions, to be a full and complete human with control of their life. It isn't your intent, but when you say that they "need" to do something, you are taking away their power, just as their perpetrator did.

If you feel strongly that your friend could benefit from talking to a trained listener (and you're probably right), there are really great ways to have that conversation that avoid saying what they "need" to do. Asking with genuine curiosity if they have ever considered talking to a therapist is a great place to start, but make sure you are open to whatever answer they give you.

5. Understand that How a Survivor Responds is Complex and Varied

Everyone experiences sexual assault in different, complex ways. Your friend's response will be multi-layered and their recovery will not be linear. Your friend may seem fine in June and then be completely devastated in August. They may feel completely numb one day and angry the next.

This is okay. And it's super important that both you and your friend understand this and that any reaction is a perfectly normal reaction.

It is essential to understand the complexities of this experience. Listen to why your friend may be devastated by this experience, even beyond the typical, healthy, and appropriate responses to a horrendous crime.

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6. Help to Establish Safety

Physical safety will become a major factor in the way that your friend is able to re-navigate their life. Are they afraid to walk to class or work alone? Can they feel safe getting in and out of the car, on the bus, in a crowd, or alone?

One of the most crucial parts of establishing safety is finding ways to continue about life. If fear of everyday tasks becomes overwhelming for your friend, there may be ways for you to help.

Offer to accompany your friend on whatever errand or task seems daunting or scary. When you walk your friend home, turn on the lights in their apartment before they walk in.

7. Offer Resources

But only if your friend wants them! Ask! If they aren't interested, don't offer resources.

If your friend is interested, here are a few to get started:

- YWCA of West Michigan ([616](tel:6164549922)) 454-9922 www.ywcawmi.org
- Calvin's Center for Counseling & Wellness (616) 526-6123 counseling@calvin.edu
- Rape Abuse & Incest National Network www.rainn.org
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center www.nsvrc.org

8. Take Care of Yourself

Self care is an essential part of helping others. You can't show up fully to your friend, as much as you'd like to, if you haven't shown up fully to yourself. Of course, taking care of yourself will mean different things to different people.

For you, this may mean learning how to be around the perpetrator if they are known to you. (Ask your friend how they want you to respond!)

This could mean learning how to feel safe in your own life. Or it could mean exploring how to hear how awful the world can be while still appreciating the beauty of this life.

Whatever self-care means to you, it's important you figure out how to do it.

Caring for a loved one who has survived a trauma of any kind can be exhausting. You're dealing with really real, scary, and raw emotions.

In order to truly help your friend, you need to be emotionally healthy. You can't help a friend if you are struggling more than they are. Calvin's Center for Counseling & Wellness can help.