How To Help A Friend Who Has Been Sexually Assaulted

Adapted from article in
Everyday Feminism Magazine
January 21, 2013 by Sarah Ogden

One day, you may find yourself in a situation where a friend reveals to you that he/she has been sexually assaulted. This article seeks to outline some tips to handle the situation with sensitivity and grace.
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.

Many rape survivors are not believed, are blamed, and are further shamed for this violent crime that was committed against them. Unfortunately, these are real barriers that your friend may face in speaking about their experience.

How to Support 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
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?

•I can't believe he would do something like that, I consider him a friend!

Avoid any variation of those phrases that puts the blame on them and be sure to remind them it is NEVER 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.

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.

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. That's why I argue that despite your best intentions, it is never appropriate to tell a friend that they need or have to get therapy, to tell the police, to tell their parents, etc.
At the time of the assault, your friend was violently stripped of 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.

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.

You will have helped to establish emotional safety by listening to your friend and by not saying the wrong thing to them, but there is another critical component of safety, as we all know. Your friend may need help feeling safe in their life, and there are a million small ways that you can do that, depending on your friend and the relationship that you two have.

7. Offer resources

But only if your friend wants them! Here's the best way to find out if your friend is interested – Ask!
If they aren't interested, don't offer resources.

8. Take care of yourself

Self- care is an essential part of helping others. You can't show up fully for 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. (Tip: 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 that 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. Friends often seek the support of a therapist or campus counselor in order to be the best support to a struggling friend. Call 526c 6123 to schedule an appointment at Broene Counseling Center. For more information about services available at the Broene Counseling Center, go to: http://www.calvin.edu/broene/

In order to truly help your friend, you need to be emotionally healthy. You can't help a friend if you are struggling more that they are.

What To Do Immediately after a Friend has experienced Sexual Assault:

If your friend told you within seven days after the sexual assault, there are a few practical things to consider related to collecting evidence in the case your friend wants to file a report with the police or the college.

Now, your friend may want to, may be unsure, or may not be interested in pressing charges. That's completely their choice to make. Sometimes, it takes time to make this decision and your friend may not want to report it now but later decide that they do want to make a report.

Remember, evidence can only be collected at that time but the decision to press charges can come later.

So if your friend is interested or is unsure, it is a good idea to call and make an appointment at the YWCA West Central Michigan RAPE crisis center (appointments available on 24c 7 basis) because it leaves that option open later for them. For YWCA contact and services information, go to: http://www.ywcawcmi.org/sac services.php

If evidence is collected soon after the assault, your friend still has the option to decide whether or not to file a report. If your friend agrees to go to the YWCA here are a few things to know:

- The YWCA services are available on a 24-7 basis but you do need to call for an appointment because the staff are scheduled on an on-call basis.
- The Nurse Examiner can perform a forensic medical exam (at no cost) and will collect evidence against the perpetrator. This can happen up to seven days after the time of the assault.

- In order to gather the most evidence, it is recommended that the survivor not shower, use the restroom, eat, brush teeth, or change clothes after the assault.
- The survivor also has the option of providing any other evidence that may support their case, such as sheets, blankets, or anything that may have DNA from the perpetrator.
- The hospital will keep the evidence so bring a change of clothes for your friend if necessary.

Students are encouraged to report sexual assaults to the college. For information about reporting sexual assaults to the college and for information about ways the college can assist you after a sexual assault go to: http://www.calvin.edu/judicial/sexualmisconduct.html

Students can also seek personal and emotional support through Calvin College's Broene counseling center. Call 616-526c 6123 to schedule an appointment with a counselor. For more information about Broene services, go to: http://www.calvin.edu/broene/