

LGBTQ Survivors of Sexual Violence

Sexual violence affects people of every gender identity, and sexual orientation. People who identify as part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities also experience sexual violence, and may face different or additional challenges in accessing legal, medical, law enforcement or other resources than other populations.

Effects of sexual violence

As an LGBTQ survivor of sexual violence, you may face many of the same emotions and challenges as other survivors, but also might encounter additional hurdles. Below are some common reactions to experiencing sexual violence that both LGBTQ survivors and others may experience.

- **Wanting to be believed.** Not feeling believed or worrying that you won't be believed.
- **Wondering if it's your fault.** Feeling shame, guilt, or like it is your fault. You may be going over the assault in your mind many times to try to figure out if you did something wrong. It was not your fault.
- **Feeling alone.** You may feel that you are the only person who has been through sexual assault, or you may worry that others will judge or misunderstand if you tell them.
- **You may face disbelief that sexual violence affects LGBTQ people.** You may encounter people who mistakenly believe that this doesn't happen to LGBTQ people, which may make it harder to feel that your story is believed.
- **It can be hard to self-identify as a survivor.** For many survivors it can be difficult to identify an experience as sexual violence. However, it can be harder to identify as a survivor if the assault does not fit your idea of what sexual violence looks like or who may be involved with it.

- **Telling someone might be harder if you are not out yet.** If you have not yet come out to friends or family about your gender identity or sexual orientation, you may feel less able to disclose sexual assault to them.
- **You may not find support in some faith communities.** Many survivors find strength and healing in their faith, but you may encounter difficulty finding the support you deserve if your faith community does not affirm your sexual orientation or gender identity.

Ways you can support LGBTQ survivors

Sometimes it's hard to know what to do when someone you care about tells you they have experienced sexual violence. The reaction of the first person a survivor discloses to can affect if they choose to tell others or seek additional resources. Remember to listen without judgement, acknowledge the difficulty of what they went through, and tell them that you care about them.

- **Listen.** Many people in crisis feel as though no one understands them and that they are not taken seriously. Show them they matter by giving your undivided attention. It is hard for many survivors to disclose an assault, especially if they are not out yet and by disclosing would have to come out at the same time, so drop what you are doing and be there for them.
- **Validate their feelings.** Avoid making overly positive statements like "It will get better" or trying to manage their emotions, like "Snap out of it" or "You shouldn't feel so bad." Make statements like "I believe you" or "That sounds like a really hard thing to go through."
- **Express concern.** Tell them in a direct way that you care about them by saying something like "I care about you" or "I am here for you."
- **Use inclusive language that affirms the survivor's gender identity and sexual orientation.** Rather than assuming someone's gender identity or sexual orientation, use neutral language like "partner" or "date" instead of "boyfriend/girlfriend." Try not to assume what someone's gender identity or preferred pronouns are; it's a better idea to let them tell you, or you can ask what they prefer. You can always use "they" instead of "he/she" if you are unsure.
- **Do not ask about details of the assault.** Even if you are curious about what happened and feel that you want to fully understand it, avoid asking for details of how the assault occurred. However, if a survivor chooses to share those details with you, try your best to listen in a supportive and non-judgmental way.

Supportive things to say to a survivor

“I believe you” and “It took a lot of courage to tell me about this.” It can be extremely difficult for survivors to come forward and share their story. They may feel ashamed, concerned that they won’t be believed, or worried they’ll be blamed. Be careful not to interpret calmness as a sign that the event did not occur—everyone responds to traumatic events differently. The best thing you can do is to believe them.

“It’s not your fault” and “You didn’t do anything to deserve this.” Survivors may blame themselves, especially if they know the perpetrator personally or were under the influence of alcohol or drugs when the assault occurred. Remind the survivor, maybe even more than once, that they are not to blame.

“You are not alone” and “I care about you and am here to listen or help in any way I can.” Let the survivor know that you are there for them and willing to listen to their story if they are comfortable sharing it and that you do not judge them for what happened. Ask them if there are others in their life they also feel comfortable going to, and let them know about the help that is available through the National Sexual Assault Hotline.

“I’m sorry this happened” and “This shouldn’t have happened to you.” Acknowledge that the experience has affected their life. Phrases like “This must be really tough for you,” and “I’m glad you felt you could share this with me” help to communicate empathy.