

Tips for Talking with Survivors of Sexual Assault

It's not always easy to know what to say when someone tells you they've been sexually assaulted, especially if they are a friend or family member. For a survivor, disclosing to someone they care about can be very difficult, so we encourage you to be as supportive and non-judgmental as possible.

Sometimes support means providing resources, such as how to reach a local hotline, seek medical attention, or report the crime to the police. But often listening is the best way to support a survivor.

Here are some specific phrases recommend to be supportive through a survivor's healing process.

“I believe you. / 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. Leave any “why” questions or investigations to the experts—your job is to support this person. 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. / You didn't do anything to deserve this.”

Survivors may blame themselves, especially if they know the perpetrator personally. Remind the survivor, maybe even more than once, that they are not to blame.

“You are not alone. / 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. Assess if there are people in their life they feel comfortable going to, and remind them that there are service providers who will be able to support them as they heal from the experience.

“I'm sorry this happened. / 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 so glad you are sharing this with me,” help to communicate empathy.

Continued Support

There's no timetable when it comes to recovering from sexual violence. If someone trusted you enough to disclose the event to you, consider the following ways to show your continued support.

- **Avoid judgment.** It can be difficult to watch a survivor struggle with the **effects of sexual assault** for an extended period of time. Avoid phrases that suggest they're taking too long to recover such as, "You've been acting like this for a while now," or "How much longer will you feel this way?"
- **Check in periodically.** The event may have happened a long time ago, but that doesn't mean the pain is gone. Check in with the survivor to remind them you still care about their well-being and believe their story.
- **Know your resources.** You're a strong supporter, but that doesn't mean you're equipped to manage someone else's health. Become familiar with resources you can recommend to a survivor, such as a national hotline or local sexual assault service provider.

If you or someone you know has been affected by sexual violence, it's not your fault. You are not alone.