

Telling Loved Ones About Sexual Assault

It can be hard to talk about an experience with sexual violence, and sometimes it may feel most daunting to bring it up with people you are closest to, such as family, friends, or a romantic partner. Whether you choose to tell others straight away or years later, or prefer not to disclose it at all, is completely up to you. If you're considering telling someone about what happened, below are a few questions you may want to ask yourself beforehand, tips to help prepare for the conversation, and ways to cope with unhelpful reactions if they occur.

Thinking about disclosing?

Telling someone that you've experienced sexual violence is 100% up to you. There is no one-size-fits-all that applies to survivors – each person's story and healing journey are unique. There are many different reasons why survivors choose to disclose or not to. Remember, **deciding to tell your story doesn't have to mean sharing every detail** – it's your decision to tell as little or as much as you're comfortable with.

How should I tell someone?

Talking about sexual assault is never easy, but if you do choose to tell someone about your experiences, it can be helpful to have a plan about how you would like to do it. Below are a few suggestions about what you might want to consider before telling a loved one.

What. What you choose to share about your story is completely up to you. If the person you're telling does not know how to respond and is trying to think of something to say to you, they may end up asking for details of what happened. Just because they asked doesn't mean you have to tell them. You can always say, "I wanted to tell you that this happened to me but I don't feel comfortable sharing any more details about it right now."

Who. From what you know about the person you are planning to tell, do you think they will react in a supportive way? Have you heard them make unsupportive or judgemental remarks about sexual assault when it comes up in the news? Have they shared an experience they have had with sexual assault? Do they know the perpetrator, and if so, could this affect their reaction to your disclosure?

When. It will be best to have the full attention of the person you are disclosing to and also give them time to process what you've shared. If someone is about to go to sleep, leave the house, or is intoxicated, consider waiting for a better time to tell them.

Where. If you feel safe with the person you are disclosing to, then it will probably be best to choose a private place to tell them about what happened. However, if you fear they might become angry or violent, a public location would be safer and you could ask someone you trust to come with you.

How. The way you choose to tell someone is about what will make you most comfortable. It can be in-person, over the phone, or in the form of a letter. There are positive and negative aspects to each of these ways of telling someone, but it all comes down to what is right for you. For instance, if you are worried about being interrupted or being asked too many questions, writing a letter could be helpful.

No matter how you choose to tell someone, it is a good idea to set some ground rules first. You can say something like: "I'd like to tell you about something that's hard for me to talk about and it would mean a lot to me if you would just listen and not ask any questions."

Talking to a romantic partner about sexual assault

Talking to a romantic partner about sexual assault can be difficult—whether the assault happened recently or decades in the past, and whether you just started dating or have been together for many years.

Though you don't ever have to tell a romantic partner about sexual assault, if you're sexually intimate with them it can help both of you to understand what you are comfortable with and anything you might want to avoid because of your past experiences. If you feel strong emotions or flashbacks during sex, it could be helpful to tell your partner how you would like them to support you during these times.

Communicating with your partner about specific sexual activities or situations that make you uncomfortable doesn't mean you have to tell them any details of what happened. If you're unsure how to bring it up, you can try something like: "I am not ready to talk about it in too much detail, but I want to let you know that I don't like to do ____ and prefer instead ____ because of something really difficult that happened to me in the past."

Emotions of the person you disclose to

You deserve to be listened to and supported when you choose to tell your story. However, the reality is that sometimes the conversation will not go the way you hope. Even with the best intentions, [someone may not know how to react](#).

It is common for loved ones of a survivor to experience a range of emotions when learning that someone they care about has experienced sexual violence. Some survivors feel that they end up providing a lot of emotional support to the person they disclose to, which may not be helpful in the healing process. Here are a few emotions the person you are speaking to may be feeling:

- **Anger.** Many people you tell will feel anger toward the perpetrator and may express that they want to seek revenge on your behalf. This is a natural way to feel, but isn't always helpful.
- **Confusion.** Sometimes the person you tell will be so scared of saying the wrong thing, that they'll stall for time by asking lots of questions about the assault and what led up to it. Often, these questions will make it sound like they're blaming you for what happened, or suggesting that you could have avoided the attack by doing something different. If that's how it's coming across to you, let them know—and remind them that the best thing they can do to help is to just support you.
- **Fear.** Loved ones may fear for your safety and feel extremely protective. While it is OK to want to help, being overly protective of a survivor of sexual violence can take away their feelings of control over their own decisions.
- **Frustration.** Someone who cares about you may feel powerless to help. But healing is different for each survivor and may take a long time, and it is important for those supporting you to be patient.
- **Guilt.** Someone close to you may feel guilty or responsible for what happened to you, even if they are not. They may be trying to think of how they could have prevented this from happening, but the fact is that the only person responsible for the sexual assault is the perpetrator.
- **Shock.** It is natural to feel shocked and disturbed that someone they care about has experienced sexual violence, however sometimes this can come across as not believing the survivor's story.

Supportive and unsupportive reactions

Having someone react in a supportive way can be an important step toward healing and may help you feel comfortable sharing your story with more people. But even if disclosing goes well, it can still be an emotional experience—and that's OK. Sometimes telling your story can bring back painful memories. This is natural. Remember, every survivor has a unique healing process.

Examples of supportive reactions to disclosing:

- They listen to you in a non-judgmental way.
- They show support by saying:
 - "I believe you."
 - "It's not your fault."
 - "You are not alone."
 - "I'm sorry this happened."
 - "I care about you and am here to listen or help in any way I can."

It can be very hurtful when someone you trust reacts in an unsupportive way. If you don't receive a supportive reaction, it's important to remember that this is reflective of them and not of you.

Examples of unsupportive reactions to disclosing:

- They doubt or question your story.
- They ask what you were wearing or doing when the assault occurred, making you feel blamed or shamed.
- They say you should have gotten over it by now.

It can be especially difficult to disclose to a family member if the perpetrator of the abuse was another family member. You can read our article on [Help for Parents of Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused by Family Members](#) for more information.

Tips for dealing with unsupportive reactions

The person you have told may not be providing the support you need, but remember that you are not alone. To speak with someone who is trained to help, call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800.656.HOPE (4673) or chat online at online.rainn.org (y en español rainn.org/es).

If someone in your life isn't supportive, that doesn't mean that others won't be. However, while you determine to whom and whether you'll share your story again, we recommend that you be kind to yourself and take care of your own needs as best as you can. Ask yourself what you are feeling and think of self-care activities that help to ground you and make you feel better.

Planning your disclosure

If you'd like support developing a plan to disclose your experience with sexual violence, feel free to call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800.656.HOPE (4673) or chat online at online.rainn.org (y en español rainn.org/es). We're here to help you.