

A NOTE TO THOSE CLOSE TO VICTIMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

How does sexual violence affect a victim? How does sexual violence affect those closest to a victim? How can family and friends do the “right thing”? To answer these questions, it is important to remember that sexual violence is not a sexual act but a crime of violence motivated by the offender’s need to overpower the victim and feel in control. In response to the assault, a victim may be left feeling vulnerable, frightened, angry, confused, betrayed, violated, dirty, embarrassed, and powerless. Even small decision-making may be very difficult.

Probably the best way to understand a victim’s feelings is to try to remember or imagine a situation where you felt powerless and afraid. You may remember feeling very alone, fearful, or needing comfort. Often the victim needs much love and support the first few days. Friends and family can help break down the loneliness and alienation.

It seems advisable for the victim to talk about the sexual violence; however, it is not possible to generalize how much he or she should be encouraged to talk about it. Victims do not seem to appreciate specific questions which can seem probing and callous. Victims may be especially reluctant to share details about the sexual assault, particularly in regard to the sexual acts that they were made to perform. To probe in these areas may only worsen any problems they may have in dealing with the rape. Instead, questions about how they feel now and what bothers them the most are much more useful. These questions are not threatening and should allow them to talk about immediate concerns.

The most practical suggestion is that you communicate your willingness to let the individual talk about the experience. Because of your closeness to them, they may also be sensitive to your feelings. If the assault greatly angers or upsets you, it may be impossible for them to talk to you until you are more in control of your own feelings. They may also try to protect you and may try to make you feel better.

If society were more sensitive to victim/survivors of sexual violence and they were not subject to victim-blaming attitudes, they would probably have far fewer difficulties in dealing with the trauma. Over time, most victims will find that the rape meshes with other traumatic experiences in their lives. However, after a reasonable amount of time, if they seem unable to cope with day-to-day problems of life, professional help may be sought. Whether or not counseling is a part of their recovery, it is not a replacement for warm concern and loving communication from friends and family. A professional counselor or advocate may help, but the professional cannot replace your role as a friend or family member.

DOS AND DON'TS FOR MALES

- * A common initial reaction among men is a strong desire to seek revenge against the rapist. However, this is a time when calm and reasoned judgments are most needed. It is especially important that you do not personally contact the rapist, even if their identity is known to you. Such actions can create legal problems for you and place the victim in the position of having to deal with additional fears concerning your safety and his or hers. In fact, making verbal threats toward the rapist in the presence of the victim is likely to intensify the fear and anxiety the victim already feels.
- * Another common reaction among men when they first learn of sexual violence against a family member or friend is a strong sense of anger and frustration. Such powerful emotions are understandable but can be destructive unless properly channeled. For instance, in no way should such feelings be directed toward the victim. In fact, upon first encountering the victim, you should refrain from venting your frustrations. The thing they may want and need most at that time is simply for you to be there. Under no circumstances should you make accusations or judgments about their behavior. It is important for you to remain calm and provide the opportunity, if they desire, to talk about what happened. While your feelings are important, how they feel needs to be your primary concern.

- * In addition, it is essential that you communicate to the victim they are not responsible for the rape. The victim needs to know that you do not blame them for failing to fight off the rapist or for being in a situation that resulted in rape. Not only should you avoid implying cooperation on their part, but absolutely avoid suggesting that they may have enjoyed the experience in any fashion. It is important they feel assured that you do not equate the rape with an act of promiscuity and that you do not see the individual as defiled or less moral than before the incident. The ability to feel and communicate unconditional acceptance toward the victim is an important first step in reducing the deep sense of anxiety they may feel.
- * Sexual assault robs people of the sense of control over their lives. In order for them to work through the trauma of the rape and begin to put their life back in order, they must regain this sense of control. Therefore, it is important that the victim be encouraged to make decisions about any and all events which affect their life. Do not attempt to make these decisions for them or to pressure them to follow a particular course of action, even though you quite naturally want to help and feel more useful by “taking charge” of the situation. It is also important that you communicate your unfailing support in whatever decision they make. They need to feel that no matter what they decide, you will stick by them and that you will be there and continue to provide security and consistency in your relationship with them.
- * Empower the victim by reinforcing the positive steps they have taken in dealing with the assault; reporting, working with an advocate, taking care of themselves. Instead of being overprotective, help them regain self-confidence and independence. See them as a survivor rather than a victim.

LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES

A sexual assault is a profoundly traumatizing experience. Recovery from an assault will take a natural course. However, a complete resolution may take months or even years to achieve. There are several kinds of response patterns which victims typically experience.

The first phase is acute distress, which is the victim’s initial response to the rape. This is characterized by shock, confusion, fear, helplessness, anxiety, and other signs of emotional disorganization.

The second phase is a period of apparent readjustment. The victim may attempt to resolve the anxiety and confusion and repress memories of the rape and feelings about it. For example, they may announce that they have “forgotten” the incident and give every outward appearance that the rape no longer bothers them. This may appear to be a final resolution of the incident, but typically, it is not.

The third phase is marked by the emergence of a number of troubling responses. They may experience depression, anxiety, fear insomnia, nightmares, and various physical symptoms, including stomach pain, weight loss, tension headaches, irritability, etc. They may also cry unexpectedly and want to talk about the rape. These responses are a positive sign that they are beginning to confront the reality of the rape and are dealing with deep-seated feelings, which they had previously denied or rationalized. At this point, it is especially important that they continue to receive comfort, support, reassurance, and understanding from friends and family members and a willingness to let them talk about their feelings. Do not appear disappointed that they are again having trouble dealing with the rape when everything had appeared to be back to normal.

The final stage of recovery is integration. At this point, the victim has accepted the fact of the sexual assault and has sorted out their feelings of guilt and responsibility—focusing anger on the assailant—and integrated the experience into the whole of their life, neither repressing nor being dominated by it. During this phase, a number of people make changes in their lives. A recent study showed that victims of attempted sexual assault engaged in behaviors that might provide protection for the future (learning self-defense, buying locks and security systems) more than did victims of an actual completed rape. It may be that victims of a rape experience a sense of helplessness and extreme vulnerability, feeling that there is nothing they can do to help themselves in the future.