

HOW TO SUPPORT SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVIVORS

I. Emotional support can be of great value to a recovering sexual assault survivor. To be a support person, you will need the following:

- A. Compassion, which requires some acquaintance with the myths about rape and the usual response these beliefs cause in victims and other friends and relatives of the victim.
- B. Knowledge of the procedural matters involved regarding the medical, law enforcement, and judicial systems.
- C. General communication skills such as taking cues from the victim about what is important and of concern.
- D. Confidentiality concerning the victim is essential.

II. Needs of the support person:

Providing support to the victim of sexual assault can be an emotionally and physically exhausting experience. Support persons need to learn their own personal limitations and know they can turn to someone else in confidence and support. It is unrealistic to expect that every support person can meet all the needs of the victim. Also, the support person needs to stay in touch with his or her own emotional reactions to the victim and how it is affecting them.

III. Roles of the support person:

- A. Remember that the sexual assault victim has two equally important needs:
 - 1. Access to someone who can help him or her deal with the feelings about the experience;
 - 2. Access to factual information and practical resources in order to help with decision-making.
- B. The support person can help with both of these by giving information about the legal process, availability of counseling resources in the community, and support groups for sexual assault victims. The ideal support system or person for a victim of sexual assault is one which:
 - 1. Allows the victim to be himself/herself in feelings and in needs;
 - 2. Allows the victim to heal at his/her own pace and his/her own speed;
 - 3. Anticipates reactions to the crisis without forcing the process; and
 - 4. Realizes that people can heal and emerge stronger from a crisis.
- C. It is important for the support person to be aware of and to communicate what he or she can and cannot provide for the victim. This will prevent raising unrealistic expectations in the victim and will help you to avoid frustration and feelings of failure when the victim's preexisting life problems persist. Such problems may be brought

into focus more sharply during such a time of trauma, and conflicts between the victim and other people may surface.

IV. The support process -- Responding to the emotional needs of the victim.

- A. A major role of the support person is to respond to the emotional needs of the victim. The following guidelines provide suggested ways of being with and responding to the victim.
1. Trust -- Remember that many victims are ashamed and embarrassed that they have been sexually assaulted and they need to be reassured that you will not discuss the situation with anyone at all without their permission. Don't insist that the victim trust you. Trust is very difficult after a sexual assault.
 2. Simply being there for a sexual assault victim may be enough. The most beneficial responses are genuine feelings of warmth, concern, caring, empathy, and the desire to be supportive. These feelings are communicated to the victim and can help in this healing process.
 3. Listening -- Listen in a way that supports and validates the victim's feelings. Do not attempt to redefine the situation as being more or less significant than the victim sees it.
 - a. Keep in mind that victims' reaction will be based partially on their perception of the event in its social context plus previous experience in coping with stressful events. Also keep in mind that the victim's attitude towards men, women, violence, and sexuality as well as personal feelings of self-worth will affect reaction.
 - b. Go with the victim's style of expressing emotions. This may range from crying, shaking, talking, or expressing anger to intellectualizing as if it happened to someone else or simply a silent reaction.
 - c. Help the victim to clarify and express feelings.
 4. It may help the victim to be told that this experience can cause a disruption in one's life for quite a long time, but the more a person can talk about the experience, the less upsetting it will seem, in time.
 5. Allow the victim to talk through as much of the sexual assault as he/she wants to. Finding out that he/she can share this experience with someone who is not shocked by hearing it can be very reassuring to the victim. Encourage the victim to talk about the experience without forcing disclosure! Focus your discussion on the victim's feelings about the sexual assault. Do not press details about what happened and what sexual acts were forced on the victim.
 6. Be aware of some of the normal reactions or feelings the victim may experience: physical problems, loss of sexual interest or changes in response, changes in patterns of living, fears which restrict activity, and loss of self-

confidence. All these may occur long after the victim feels that the sexual assault has been dealt with emotionally.

7. Help the victim work through to a healthy anger; that is, anger directed toward the assailant rather than toward oneself.

B. Victims of sexual assault were put through a damaging experience in being forced to submit to something outside their control. It is important for the victim to regain a sense of control. The victim needs to be given options and then supported in whatever decisions or choices are made.

The support person's role is to help the victim clarify concerns, provide information in order for the victim to come to a decision, and be supportive of those choices.

1. Telling the family and friends.

- a. The support person should help the victim assess which people may provide support and understanding. The victim should make the decision about whom to share his/her feelings. NEVER tell anyone else about the sexual assault without the victim's permission.
- b. The support person may offer to help the victim tell other family or friends. Sometimes a third party can be a buffer.
- c. Sexual assault can affect everyone in the family. Family and friends may need an additional period of ventilation. The crisis disrupts their lives and also brings about feelings of worry, fear, and recognition of their own inability to protect the family from harm. Sometimes, the hurt and anger experienced by the family may supersede their concern for the victim and result in a blaming attitude. The crisis may bring underlying problems to the surface. The victim may need the support person for listening, ventilation, and assistance in coping with family reactions.
- d. The family can best help by showing love and acceptance. It is important not to become overprotective, even though you have a strong desire to shelter your loved one from added harm. This can cause anger and rebellion.

C. Assessing adjustments and the need for referral.

NOTE: Not all sexual assault victims need or want counseling, and the vast majorities do not need professional counseling. Sexual assault can act as a catalyst, as can other life crises, in provoking the victim to reassess his/her lifestyle and experiences in interpersonal relationships. This introspection can actually be a maturing experience. However an inability to resume normal tasks, failure to cope with the reactions of the victim's social network, or lack of resolution may necessitate counseling.