

SIGNIFICANT OTHERS SUPPORT

The word “rape” carries with it a flood of emotional reactions. It is closet words that until recently has been discussed only in whispers or in sick jokes that blame the victim. We make an invisible line around our families and friends which we use to protect us from facing the existence of rape. It is as if to say no one I know can ever be sexually assaulted. That sort of thing doesn’t happen around here, at least not to anyone I know. When someone we’re close to is sexually assaulted that invisible line is no longer valid and we are left with little to stand on. We no longer feel safe.

There is a lot confusion that comes when someone close has been sexually assaulted. What can we do? How should we act? What is the right thing to say? What is the wrong thing to say? How does the victim feel? Perhaps the most important people in a victim’s life are closest to him/her. How they react to the assault will play a big part in how she/he deals with the attack. Most men/women who have been sexually assaulted do not react to the sexual aspects of the crime as much as the terror and fear involved. Many of those around her/him, particularly men, may find themselves concerned with the sexual aspects of the crime. It is important to remember that he/she has been in a situation over which she/he had no control, and in which she/he felt humiliation, guilt and shame. Probably the best way to understand his/her feelings is to try and remember or imagine a situation in which you were powerless or afraid. You may remember feeling all alone, fearful, afraid to tell anyone, and wanting comfort. A victim of sexual assault is in need of support and love from those close to she/he is believed and that he/she has a right to have an emotional reaction.

There is a difference between support and taking over. A victim may face some difficult decisions such as whether or not to report to the police, go to the hospital, or prosecute. As a Significant Other in a victim’s life, you may feel a desire to take over, to shield the victim. It is necessary to realize the importance of leaving those decisions up to the victim. It is one way in which a victim can begin to regain the control over his/her life. If there are questions you have about what will happen, for example: if she/he reports the rape, the Rape Crisis Center can be of help in providing information.

In most cases it is advisable for a victim to talk about the assault. (An appropriate time is not necessarily right after the rape). Let his/her comments to a couple of questions guide you in deciding whether you have or have not chosen a good time to discuss it. Let her/him talk about what is important to him/her. What you think she/he should be talking about and do, and what he/she wants to talk about may be quite different. For some victims professional counseling may be of benefit. This counseling however, is not a replacement for the warmth and concern he/she receive from those close to her/him. Your understanding in day to day contact with a victim will assist him/her in returning to a normal life.

Finally, it should be noted that reactions to a sexual assault often last long time. Most men and women make permanent changes in their lives, but you must remember, that attack was very threatening to her/him, and he/she will handle it the best way he/she can.

