

WHAT TO SAY TO OTHERS

- ❖ Family members may seek to help the victim and alleviate their own feelings of helplessness by threatening revenge on the rapist. Such threats tend to further traumatize victims and cause them to worry about the family's safety. Family members' anger can be expressed to you or a counselor, but should not be expressed to the victim. Constant expression of anger only heightens anxiety and adds guilty feelings for "imposing" an emotional burden on loved ones.
- ❖ Discourage family and friends from unintentionally trivializing the sexual assault by joking about it. Male friends in particular may be prone to do this. Such jokes are likely to confuse and isolate the victim rather than being a means of raising spirits.
- ❖ Well-intentioned family members may try to solicit support from close friends, clergy, co-workers, and others. Such efforts should be discouraged if the victim is not prepared to discuss the incident. However, you should not prevent talking to family members if the victim chooses. He or she should decide to whom and under what circumstances to discuss their feelings.
- ❖ Family members should be dissuaded from overprotection. Strong attempts may be made to convince the victim to accept what amounts to 24-hour surveillance. The danger is that these actions may reinforce the child's view of him- or herself as vulnerable and powerless, thus discouraging the mobilizing of their own resources for coping. This can promote an unhealthy dependency on others. Providing support should not function to increase feelings that they have no control over their lives. If anything, family members need to understand that being supportive means helping to build self-confidence and independence.
- ❖ Continual distraction of the victim should be discouraged. The family may engage in a "friendly conspiracy" to keep the victim's mind off the incident, occupying time with a variety of activities and acting as if it never happened. However, attempts to deny the rape are only temporarily effective and communicate that it is too awful to discuss or even to think about.
- ❖ Encourage family members to respect the need for privacy. There are times when it is desirable and therapeutic for people to work through feelings alone. A constant stream of well-wishers can be emotionally draining. It is especially difficult to put the incident into the past if they feel obliged to satisfy the frequent inquiries of visitors as to "what happened" and "how are you doing". When the victim decides she or he needs to be alone, respect that decision. In addition, they may want you to communicate such decisions to the family for them. In doing so, you will assure family and friends that their concern is recognized and appreciated.
- ❖ No one should communicate that the rape occurred because the victim did something wrong. This is especially true in the case of teenagers who are victimized in the context of dating. Avoid suggesting that the actions of the victim, rather than the behavior of the rapist, are at fault. Furthermore, suggesting that they should have done things differently communicates more than blame or judgment. It also communicates that others do not fully understand the circumstances under which the victim was forced to act, circumstances which were not chosen but which were imposed.