



OAESV Survivor Series

Empowerment, Hope & Healing



SUPPORTING A LOVED ONE WHO'S BEEN VICTIMIZED

The Impact of Sexual Violence on You

The crime of sexual assault/abuse impacts not just the survivor, but also his/her friends, family members, intimate partners and acquaintances. Loved ones are often referred to as “secondary victims/survivors” because the crime has a significant impact on them as well. There are many common reactions and emotions one may experience in response to sexual victimization suffered by a loved one, including sadness, anger, shock, self-blame, fear, a desire for retaliation, wanting to protect your loved one, and wanting to “do something” or “fix things.” Whatever thoughts and feelings you’re experiencing, it’s important to recognize them and how they may be influencing the way you react to and treat your loved one. While it’s important for you to support your loved one who’s been victimized, it’s also important for you to recognize your needs and to seek support if needed. Rape crisis centers are available to help you as well.

The Impact of Sexual Violence on Your Loved One

Sexual assault is a crime of violence in which sex is used as a weapon to harm and humiliate the survivor. It is experienced by the survivor as a traumatic event, similar to combat conditions, natural disasters, or accidents. When someone experiences a traumatic event, it causes physical and psychological reactions that can be intense and confusing for both the survivor and his/her loved ones.

The trauma of sexual assault is uniquely difficult for survivors to recover from because it involves the violation of their most personal space, and it was likely committed by someone known to them, causing them to question their judgment and trust of others. Additionally, sexual assault is the only crime for which the victim is routinely blamed. Nearly all survivors fear not being believed, being blamed for the assault, and being made to feel ashamed by loved ones and authorities. Unfortunately, these fears are too often realized.

In the immediate aftermath of sexual assault, any of the following reactions are possible and are a normal response to a traumatic event:

- Physical: body aches/pains, fatigue, upset stomach/bowels, changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- Mental: difficulty with concentration and comprehension, confusion
- Emotional: disbelief, sadness, anxiety, anger, fear, irritability, neediness, feeling numb, mood swings
- Behavioral: hyper-vigilance, avoidance of people or places, desire to change appearance, surroundings or tasks, difficulty maintaining intimate relationships

For more detailed information about the possible reactions of sexual assault survivors over time, please see our factsheet on [understanding the trauma of sexual violence](#).

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How to Support Your Loved One

While there are helpful things to say, and things to avoid saying, there is no perfect blueprint or script to follow in supporting a loved one who has suffered sexual assault or abuse. Each survivor is unique, as is his/her recovery process. Supporting your loved one is a process that will take time and will include some trial and error, some good days and bad. No one expects you to have all the answers, nor should you expect to.

Helpful things to say:

- “I believe you”: This may seem unnecessary, but it’s an important message to convey. Even if you have questions or doubts about the circumstances surrounding the assault, it’s vital that you interact with your loved one as though you fully believe him/her.
- “It’s not your fault”: Nearly all survivors question their own actions before, during and even after the assault. It’s important that you let your loved one know that the only one responsible for the assault is the person who committed it. Your loved one neither caused nor deserved what happened.
- “I’m here for you”: Even if your loved one does not want to talk to you about the assault or his/her feelings about it, it’s important that you let him/her know that you are available anytime for support.
- “What can I do?/What will help you?” Many loved ones are afraid of saying or doing something wrong. It’s often helpful to simply ask your loved one what would be helpful for them.

Helpful things to do:

- Treat your loved one the same: Survivors need to know that their loved ones still love them, care about them, and think of them the same as always.
- Empower your loved one: Sexual assault is the ultimate loss of power and control over one’s body, safety and well-being. One of the most impactful things you can do is to help restore your loved one’s sense of control by allowing him/her to make decisions and to play an active role in his/her recovery.
- Maintain your focus: Many loved ones feel very strongly about seeking justice or even retaliation for the assault. While anger at an offender is appropriate, focusing on the offender takes your focus away from where it needs to be – your loved one.
- Follow their lead: Allow your loved one the time and space he/she needs to regain a sense of control and begin the recovery process. This will require an open mind and a lot of patience on your part.

When to seek outside help:

- If your loved one threatens to harm or kill him/herself, you must intervene. If the threat is imminent, call 911 right away. If it is less urgent, contact your local crisis hotline or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).
- Similarly, if your loved one is threatening to harm or kill the offender (or anyone else), you must intervene by calling 911 or your local police department’s dispatch number.
- If your loved one is experiencing prolonged symptoms of distress that are interfering with his/her quality of life, encourage him/her to seek assistance. Please see our factsheet on [understanding PTSD](#) for more information.

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Things to avoid saying or doing:

- Don't try to force your loved one into a certain course of action that he/she doesn't want to do, such as pressing charges or seeing a counselor. This may further traumatize him/her.
- Don't hold your loved one responsible for stopping the offender. If your loved one does not want to report the assault, it doesn't mean he/she is letting the offender get away with it or giving the offender the freedom to assault someone else. Only offenders themselves can prevent their own crimes.
- Don't smother your loved one. It's common and understandable to want to protect loved ones who have been victimized, but it's important not to smother them, unfairly restrict their activities, or make decisions for them. Survivors need to feel in control as much as possible.
- Don't try to minimize or change your loved one's recovery process. There is no specific timeline for a survivor to follow. To tell a survivor that he/she should be "over it by now" is not helpful.
- Avoid dwelling on hindsight. Do not tell your loved one what they should or should not have done before, during or after the assault. This is particularly challenging if your loved one was engaging in behavior that was risky or even illegal when the assault happened. Although your intention may be to protect your loved from future harm, he/she will interpret it as blame for the assault.

Specific Concerns

The impact on physical and sexual intimacy:

If you are an intimate partner of a sexual assault survivor, you likely have concerns about how the assault will impact many aspects of your relationship, including physical and sexual intimacy. In addition to potential exposure to sexually transmitted infections, you may be concerned about how your partner will respond to physical touch, as well as his/her comfort level with sexual contact. Each survivor responds uniquely to sexual assault – there is no right or wrong way to respond. Your partner needs to know that you are not afraid to touch him/her. Avoiding all physical contact may make your partner feel as though you're afraid of him/her, or that you no longer find him/her desirable because of the assault. At the same time, you don't want to be aggressive in initiating physical or sexual contact. As with all other aspects of an intimate relationship, it's important to communicate with each other. It's helpful to say, "I love you and want to be with you. That has not changed, but I want you to be comfortable. Tell me what you'd like me to do and not to do, and I will respect that." Keep talking to each other throughout your partner's recovery process.

The assault happened a long time ago:

Some survivors never tell anyone about sexual assault/abuse, some only tell certain individuals, and others only disclose the assault years later. If a loved one has told you about a sexual assault that they suffered a long time ago, it's important that you don't judge them or be upset with them for withholding this information until now. It's very difficult for survivors to talk about the victimization, especially with loved ones who are most affected by knowing about it. Tell your loved that you're glad they told you and be available to listen if they want or need to talk about it. Also understand that even though the assault may have happened a long time ago, it is likely still a very painful and emotional event for your loved one to think or speak about.