

## Sexual Assault

# How to Support a Friend

### How do I know if a friend has been sexually assaulted?

There is no one way to identify if someone has been sexually assaulted unless she or he or someone close to them tells you that this has occurred. However, there are several signs/symptoms of rape trauma ( a type of post-traumatic stress) which may help you to identify if a friend needs help.

- Sleep disturbances: nightmares, difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Change in appetite
- Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Difficulty concentrating
- Fears about personal safety
- Exaggerated startle response (jumps at a small noise or if their name is called)
- Numbness, uncommunicative
- Depression/ feelings of hopelessness
- Difficulty being touched or expressing loving feelings
- Withdrawal or not interested in participating in activities they once enjoyed (doesn't feel like going out, going to movies, seeing friends, volunteering or participating in student groups, etc.)
- Seems detached from others

### What can I do to help?

No one expects you to be a trained rape counselor, but there are things you can do to help your friend to cope and to find help.

1. Always ensure that your friend is safe. ‘
2. Remember that your role is NOT to define or prove the assault. The most helpful thing that you can do is to remain supportive while referring your friend to campus or community agencies. Where to get help
3. You do not have to have all of the answers. If someone discloses to you, it usually means that you are someone they trust. Often, they just want to be heard. Though there is not one "right" way to respond to someone who has been sexually assaulted, the following may serve as a general guide:

#### *Helpful Responses:*

- Believe your friend.
- Maintain a calm manner.
- Listen without interrupting. Encourage your friend to take whatever time is necessary.

- Respect the language your friend uses to identify what's happened
- Understand that individuals from different backgrounds may express or experience reactions to an assault in different ways.
- Validate your friend's experience or reactions.
- Remind your friend that he or she is not at fault.
- Help your friend identify other safe people in his or her existing support system.
- Encourage your friend to seek medical attention and counseling. Provide resources:
  - Important Links and Resources
- Allow your friend to make his or her own decisions.

Some common responses to sexual assault are not helpful. These responses are part of a natural attempt to gain control over the situation and cope with your own feelings about rape, but they are ultimately not useful in helping the survivor to get help or to recover.

### *Unhelpful Responses*

Asking questions that imply blame or question the survivor's actions.

For example

- "What were you doing there?"
- "Why did you drink so much?"
- "Why didn't you ask someone to walk you to your car?"
- "Why did you go to his room?"

Questions like these may make the person feel blamed or guilty and may decrease the chances of their being willing to speak to a counselor who can help them

- Asking for details about what happened or ask too many probing questions. You can be just as helpful without knowing the details of what happened. You can be most helpful by helping to get the assault survivor to a counselor who can assist your friend.
- Blaming or judging. (i.e. "You shouldn't have had so much to drink.")
- Dismissing feelings or minimizing the experience. (i.e. "You should just forget about it.")
- Telling others about the assault or gossiping about it. Unless you have the survivor's permission and are making a referral to someone in a professional capacity, do not talk to others about the assault. It is critical that you respect the confidentiality of the person who has been assaulted. Their trust in themselves and others has already been severely damaged by the assault. You don't want to accidentally make things worse.
- Telling the survivor what to do - they need to feel in control of what is happening to them.
- Trying to "fix" the problem. (i.e. pressuring to make a report or take certain actions)