

Fact Sheet



Information for Support People

If a person has experienced any of the following, they have been sexually assaulted:

- Being forced or tricked into having sexual contact that they don't want;
- Being threatened with sexual contact that they don't want;
- Being subject to a variety of threats or actual sexual contact, including unwanted touching and intercourse.

Sexual assault violates a person's being; it is an attack against their body, emotions and sense of self.

If someone close to you have been sexually assaulted, you may feel;

- Helpless;
- Sad;
- Angry or shocked;
- Confused about the 'right thing' for you to do.

While there is no 'right thing' to do, how you react is important and may influence the feelings or choices of the person who has been assaulted.

What support can I give?

You can support someone who has been sexually assaulted in these ways:

- Listen to them;
- Believe what they tell you;
- Validate their feelings. Pain, fear and anger are natural reactions that need to be expressed and heard;
- Respect the fact that it takes time and space to heal;
- Recognise the harm that was done to the person who was assaulted;
- Acknowledge the strength and courage it has taken them to survive a traumatic event;
- Do not be judgemental

The assault was not the fault of the person who was assaulted, although self-blame is a common reaction.

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They may say or think things like:

- 'Maybe I gave out the wrong signals';
- 'I shouldn't have got into that car';
- 'I shouldn't have gone there alone';
- 'I shouldn't have...'

Statements like this suggest that the survivor had some responsibility for the assault taking place. This is not so. Sexual assault is never the victims fault.

The assault was solely a result of the choices and behaviour of the person who committed the assault.

It is essential that you understand this if you want to support someone who has been assaulted while they go through the healing process.

Reactions may include:

- Headaches
- Insomnia
- Fear of certain people or places
- Emotional Numbness
- Shame
- Nightmares
- Depression
- Denial
- Guilt

These are all common reactions and may take some time to subside. In the healing process, everyone must be allowed to progress at their own pace.

Many people feel that their lives will never be the same again. But it is possible to heal from the effects of sexual assault and regain a sense of control and personal power.

It may be tempting to 'take over' and make decisions for someone in distress but this will only increase the sense of helplessness they may already be feeling. Remember they know their own needs best. Support them in the choices they make. (The only exception is if someone is putting their own life at risk).

If someone who has been abused or assaulted chooses to discuss their feelings about it, be open to this, but also be clear about what you are able to offer. Don't make commitments or promises that you can't keep. Provide information about other available resources (such as counselling services).

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Survivors of abuse should be supported in taking any steps they feel will help them.

- **DO** help them to regain a sense of safety and control over their life by allowing them to make their own decisions.
- **DO** offer options, make suggestions, help them to weigh up the pros and cons, but let the decision be theirs.
- **DO** ask them what they need from you.
- **DO** help in practical ways.
- **DO** encourage them to get support.
- **DO** seek support for yourself – with their permission.
- **DO** seek help if they are suicidal.
- **DO** educate yourself about sexual assault and the issues surrounding it.

Remember, survivors of assault deserve support in their efforts to resolve the effects of this abuse in their lives.

- **DON'T** blame them for the abuse.
- **DON'T** sympathise with the abuser.
- **DON'T** take charge.
- **DON'T** ignore what has happened to them by telling them to 'forget about it'.

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