



Helpful Strategies for Talking with a Survivor of Sexual Assault

Believe them. Believing someone when they tell you they have been sexually assaulted is the most important thing you can do. Your immediate reaction can have a powerful impact on their healing, especially if you happen to be the first person the survivor has disclosed to. Always believe them.

Listen non-judgmentally. Use active listening skills and allow the survivor tell as much or as little of their story as they feel comfortable with. It is not up to you to “figure out what happened” or even understand all of the circumstances or details of the assault. Simply listening is enough.

Assure them that they are not to blame for the assault in any way. Survivors of sexual assault often blame themselves for what has happened. It is important to assure survivors that no matter what happened — it was not their fault.

Protect their privacy. It is up to the survivor to decide who knows about the assault. Do not tell others, even if you think the survivor should or would “want them to know.” Of course, if you are worried about the survivor’s immediate physical safety, you should contact the police.

Assure them they are not alone. Survivors of sexual assault often feel isolated, scared, and powerless. Tell the survivor that you are there for them and then follow through by being there to listen and support.

Use all available resources. Assist the survivor to get connected to campus resources or other professionals who can help. Say, “There are people on campus who are experts in this, who know what to do and who can be trusted.”

Get help for yourself. Even those with the best intentions can become over-involved with the survivor’s recovery, possibly hurting both of you. Seek advice if you have any concerns about how to help. Staff in the Counseling Center (781.891.2274) or the Health Center (781.891.2222) can help you.



Things to Avoid When Talking with a Survivor

- We often want to respond to violence with aggressive action. The worst thing to do is act aggressive around someone with trauma. Avoid saying, "I will hurt the person who did this to you!"
- Don't ask the survivor to tell every detail about the assault. Survivors often experience additional trauma when asked to repeat their story.
- Don't say that you know how they feel.
- Don't evaluate their behavior or feelings by saying, "You shouldn't feel, you ought to feel, you're wrong."
- Don't ridicule or shame by saying, "Why didn't you fight?" or "This wouldn't have happened if you..."
- Don't give unwanted advice by saying, "I would have..."
- Don't interpret, analyze, or diagnose by saying, "You're doing that now because..."
- Don't order or threaten by saying, "If you don't do _____, you'll regret it."
- Don't give too positive evaluations by saying, "I'm sure you'll be fine. It will all work out."
- Don't distract or divert the conversation by saying, "It isn't that bad, let's talk about something else."
- Don't discourage the survivor from going to the police if they choose to report the assault.

***Portions adapted from The College of William and Mary. Sexual Assault Resources and Education*