

Supporting a Sexual Violence Survivor: Do's and Don'ts

Do

- ✓ **Listen to and believe them.** Let them know you believe them, you support them, and that what happened was not their fault. Be present in the conversation—put away phones and other distractions—and be patient as they talk through their experience. Remember that you may be the first person they are disclosing to, and that your reaction may influence if they chose to seek support from other sources, so be supportive in every way you can.
- ✓ **Let them know they have options, and respect their choices.** There are many options available for a survivor. They may seek medical care from a hospital or rape crisis center, and they may want to have a forensic exam conducted (remember that these need to be conducted within 72 hours, and there are steps they should take¹ to prepare for the exam). Survivors may opt to: report their experience to the college or university (they can formally report to the Title IX office, to employees who may be required to share that information with the Title IX office, or to confidential resources such as a counselor or faith leader) or to the police; or they may not want to report at all. Help them understand these options, and respect their right to decide which options are best for them.
- ✓ **Remind them that they don't have to report in this moment.** The survivor may not be ready now to report their experience, but at some point they may decide they want to. They may want to create a record of their experience that they can revisit later, or to save copies of communications (texts, social media messages, etc.) that could serve as evidence if they decide to report in any capacity in the future.
- ✓ **Remember that there is no “one way” that sexual violence occurs.** There are many myths and misconceptions around what sexual violence is, and what it looks like. Remember that instances of sexual violence may look different from what you see in the media or popular culture—for example, violence perpetrated against men, or within a relationship—but that doesn't make them any less real. In addition, there is no one “right way” for a survivor to react to violence; every survivor responds differently.
- ✓ **Respect confidentiality.** This person may want and need privacy at this time, and sharing their experience with others may cause additional trauma. If in doubt, you can always ask: “Is it okay if I talk to someone about this?”
- ✓ **Practice self-care.** The survivor's health, safety, and wellbeing is likely your top concern after their disclosure, but remember that you also need to take care of yourself. Caring for someone who's experienced trauma may carry an emotional toll (“secondary survivorship”). Check in on your own emotional wellbeing, engage in activities or hobbies you find pleasing, and remember there are resources, including professional counselors and support groups, to support you, as well.

¹ For more information about forensic exams, refer to <https://www.rainn.org/articles/rape-kit>.

Don't

- x Don't blame the person for what happened.** Avoid questions that may make the survivor feel like what happened was their fault, such as asking what they were wearing, if there was alcohol or drugs involved, or why they were where they were. Remind them that the only person responsible for the violence was the person who perpetrated it.
- x Don't ask for additional details.** When someone experiences a trauma, it's normal to want to try to understand what happened. However, pushing for details or asking lots of questions could retraumatize the survivor by forcing them to relive the experience, and may result in them withdrawing from the conversation. Instead, create an open dialogue space where they can share information in a way that feels right for them.
- x Don't tell them what they should have done, or should do now.** Although it may be tempting to jump in and tell them what you would have done in their situation, or take control of the situation so you can help the survivor through this, they are likely just asking for you to listen and support them. Pressuring them to make a certain decision or to report if that's not something they want to do will put additional stress on them during an already stressful time.
- x Don't set a timeline for when they should be "over it."** Sexual violence is traumatizing, and dealing with that trauma will likely be a long process, potentially even one that is lifelong. Every survivor's recovery journey will be different, and there is no set timeline for survivors to follow to healing.