

## Supporting a Survivor: The Basics

When a survivor comes out about having been sexually assaulted or abused by an intimate partner — whether it be their first time telling anyone or their hundredth — recognize that the process can be extremely difficult and that you should be as supportive as possible. When a victim comes out to you, remember that they have chosen to trust you with a part of themselves. Respect this.

For a lot of people, the idea of supporting someone who has endured sexual or dating violence is scary, often not because they don't want to be supportive, but because they are not sure what say or how to respond. Here are a few pointers.

### **DO:**

- Put them at ease. That doesn't mean you can make the pain go away or that they shouldn't be crying or upset or showing whatever emotion they are showing. It does mean letting them know that you hear what they are saying and that you are emotionally open to them. Let them know that you are there for them and receptive to what they are saying.
- Express anger and sadness at their injustice.
- Validate their feelings about the experience, acknowledging pain without catastrophizing. If they start to minimize what has happened to them, let them know that you believe them and that there is no need to minimize what happened to them. What they went through is understandably very painful. Something survivors will often do is express that they feel that they shouldn't "complain" about having been raped, particularly if they are privileged in other aspects of their life, such as education or socio-economic status. Let them know that rape is not a way to balance out the other good things they may have in life. Another way a survivor might minimize the abuse is by saying that since sexual violence is common, it's "not that big of a deal." Remind them that statistics don't take away from the hurt or pain they are experiencing.
- At the same time, remember that while sexual abuse is always inexcusable, it isn't always traumatic. Sometimes sexual abuse is earth-shattering for a victim; sometimes it's a disturbing but small bump in the road. Just as you shouldn't minimize the assault, don't catastrophize either. Stay attune to the survivors' attitude and don't assume or dictate how she or he must feel.
- Express admiration for their courage and recognize how difficult this must have been for them. Tell them how genuinely impressed you are by their resiliency and recognize that this must be very difficult, but that they can find support in you and others.
- Be strong and take care of yourself. The survivor you know is suffering and they have probably reached out to you for assurance and support; give them exactly that! It's because of strong and supportive friends and family that many of us have survived the process of recovery from sexual assault. You'll be better able to respond to the survivors' needs, though, if you also take care of yourself. Secondary trauma is real, and you should — while respecting the survivors' confidentiality — turn to your own support system and be realistic about how much you can provide.

## **DO NOT:**

- Question the validity of the victim's claims. A victim's worst fear is not being believed. Having someone question whether or not a person was actually violated, assaulted, or raped is a huge insult that can shake a survivor to his or her core. They have decided to trust you with a very personal story and they count on your support. Doubting the validity of their claims will only cause them more pain. Also, remember that over 92-98% of REPORTED rapes are not false reports. If they choose to report, many others will be skeptical — you can leave that job to police, school administrators, rape culture, etc.
- Seem cold or unapproachable. If you do this, the survivor may feel like they have no right to talk about what has happened to them. They may feel confused and lost as they struggle to reconcile a dismissive attitude towards their struggle with their own pain. Don't make this situation more difficult than it needs to be for them. Open yourself up to them and make your presence and support known.
- Make excuses for the perpetrator. The assailant's actions are inexcusable. Don't suggest that the survivor approach the assailant to make sense of what happened or to "clear the air." Don't suggest a simple apology will remedy the problem.
- Tell the survivor what they must do. You can suggest what course of action they can take, particularly if they ask for your advice. Suggest resources they may use or offer to explore resources available to them, such as filing a report with law enforcement, talking with an attorney, seeking out therapy or medical aid, and talking to a rape hotline.
- Minimize the assault. Remember that one kind of rape or assault — by a stranger, an acquaintance, a friend, a partner — isn't more or less "legitimate" than another. Don't anticipate the ways in which a particular type of violence will affect a survivor, and don't expect that one is necessarily more traumatic than another.
- Question why the survivor has decided to tell you now, even if it has been months or years since the assault.
- Shoulder the burden alone. A survivor may demand more of you than you are able to give. You are probably not trained to manage a survivor's recovery, and may be emotionally exhausted. Be kind and honest with the victim about what you are able to do, and encourage him or her to seek professional help through a hotline or therapist.
- Share the survivor's story without his or her permission.