

Supporting a Survivor of Sexual Assault

from the Vermont Women's Rape Crisis Center, <http://www.stoprapevermont.org/support.html>

Friends, family members, co-workers, acquaintances, loved ones: someone you know may be a survivor of sexual assault. The support and care that you can provide them with will prove invaluable in their healing process. Below are some suggestions for supporting survivors.

Important Things To Say:

"It's not your fault."

"I'm glad you're alive."

"I'm sorry it happened."

DO LISTEN. Some survivors will want to talk about their experiences. Try to minimize the number of times they have to tell their stories. Keep their privacy. It is a survivor's decision when and whether to tell others about what happened.

DON'T push them to reveal details about the incident or ask questions just because you're curious. Don't prevent survivors from talking about the assault if they want to.

DO BELIEVE. Survivors need to know that you believe what happened. It's rare that people make up stories about sexual assault.

DON'T question details of the assault. If the perpetrator is someone the victim knows, and you know them too, don't say, "I can't believe they would do that!"

DO VALIDATE SURVIVORS' FEELINGS. Acknowledge their sadness, anger, fear, or confusion. Let them know that all of these feelings are normal after a sexual assault. Assure them that they aren't alone.

DON'T say, "when are you going to get over this?"

DO PROVIDE ASSURANCE. If a survivor was drunk during the assault, assure them that they aren't to blame for what happened. If a survivor feels guilty because they didn't fight back, assure them that fear sometimes inhibits us. Tell them that they did the best they could to survive the situation and that no one deserves to be raped.

DON'T blame survivors for what happened. Don't ask them why they were drinking or what they were wearing. Don't ask why they didn't fight back or didn't scream. Don't tell them what you would have done.

DO GIVE SURVIVORS CONTROL OVER THEIR LIVES. Provide survivors with information about their options. Allow them to make a decision for themselves and assure them that you will support whatever decision they make. Assist survivors in getting the help they need by providing phone numbers, transportation, and information.

DON'T try to take control of the situation. Don't give survivors advice (unless they ask for it). Don't tell them that they should do something. Let them make that decision for themselves. Don't threaten to hurt the perpetrator – the survivor has lived through one violent experience and does not need to be confronted with another.

DO STAY WITH THEM THROUGH THE HEALING PROCESS. Express your concern over the long run. Healing takes time. Assure survivors that this experience will cause some disruption in their life, but they will heal. Do talk about other aspects of survivors' lives. This reassures survivors that they have not become the sexual assault.

DON'T become impatient. Healing takes time. Survivors will have good and difficult days. Stay with them through both.

DO FIND SUPPORT FOR YOURSELF. It is difficult to see a loved one get hurt and you may become angry that someone would do something so horrible to someone you care about. Talk to someone other than the survivor about your feelings. Remember: you're an important person in the survivor's life. The survivor trusts you deeply to confide in you about their experience.