

Supporting a loved one in your life who has been sexually victimized

Providing support to a loved one who has been raped or sexually victimized can feel very challenging. A full spectrum of feelings may occur in this situation, including outrage, sadness, fear, frustration, and confusion. A particularly difficult aspect of this experience can be a feeling of powerlessness: feeling that we were unable to protect our loved one from the assault, and now we don't know what, if anything, we can do to help them. We may have a very clear idea in our heads about their immediate needs and what they should do. When they respond differently from our expectations, we may feel frustrated and confused.

Secondary wounding is a term that we use to refer to trauma that occurs after the sexual victimization because of unsupportive responses from support providers or family and friends. A positive, supportive response from a person the survivor discloses to can reinforce the idea that though the victimization occurred, there are people who care about them and support is available to them. A negative, judgmental response will give them the opposite message: that not only have they been sexually victimized, no support is available to them. This can greatly affect their ability to see the world as a safe and just place. It is for this reason that it is so important to remember a few key things when dealing with this issue with our loved ones.

Many supporters of survivors of sexual victimization report feeling frustrated that they don't know what to say. The following are some guidelines for effectively providing support to a loved one in your life who has been sexually assaulted.

1. Believe them, without condition

We all have ideas about what a 'typical' sexual crime looks like; we receive these ideas from the culture that we live in. Your loved one's experience may look very different from what you would have expected: do not question their experience, and do not minimize it in any way. Avoid trying to make them feel better by naming situations which you feel would have been 'worse'. Acknowledge that you understand that something serious and traumatic has happened to them and allow them to define their own experience.

2. Speak to them, without blame or judgment

Do not analyze their experience in the hopes of discovering what they could have done differently to avoid it, as this will make them feel as though they are to blame for the victimization. Do not judge any part of the victimization. Nothing that they have done caused the crime, regardless of where they were, who they were with and what they were doing before the victimization occurred. The crime occurred because someone made the conscious and calculated decision to victimize them.



3. Do not judge their response

Whether the crime happened last week or several years ago, they will be coping with it in whatever way feels manageable to them. This response may seem more intense than you feel is appropriate and may be very different from how you feel they 'should' be responding. Let them know that whatever feelings or responses they are experiencing are ok with you. If they are choosing not to focus on or speak about the victimization, that is their choice and should be respected. The healing process moves at a different pace for everyone: there is no 'right' or 'normal' way to respond to a sexual victimization, and no 'appropriate' time frame after which someone should have 'gotten over it' or 'moved on'. The healing process for many tends not to be linear, and they may go through stages of feeling better and then feeling worse, depending on various factors including what is occurring in their life now. Encourage them to be patient with themselves and to trust in their ability to heal at their own pace. Make them aware of any supports, formal and informal, that are available to them.

4. Allow them to make their own decisions

Sexual victimization is a crime that takes all power and control away from the person who experiences it. It is essential for the survivor to feel that they have some control over what happens to them next. You may have strong feelings about what actions they should take: you may feel that they should report the crime to the police, go for counselling immediately, or confront or expose the perpetrator. Try to remember that you have no control over any of the consequences of these actions, should you pressure them into any of them. They are not responsible for any actions taken by the perpetrator in the future. Counselling can be very helpful for your loved one when they feel ready, but it is never helpful to force someone into something they are not comfortable doing. Your goal should be to have them feel supported in whatever decisions they make. Whatever action they feel the most comfortable with right now, is the one you should support them on. Again, it is important to let them move at their own pace. If they aren't ready to take any kind of action, that is their choice.

5. Take care of yourself

Allow yourself to have feelings about what has happened to your loved one and seek support if you need it. Witnessing trauma can shake our belief system about the world being a safe and just place. Hearing the details about someone we care about being violated and harmed can feel very painful. We may feel angry, frustrated, sad, or anxious. We may worry about other people finding out about the victimization and being judged for that. These feelings make sense and it is important to be aware of and to acknowledge them.



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