

WHAT IF MY YOUNG ADULT IS SEXUALLY ASSAULTED?

What if my teen is sexually assaulted?

Being sexually assaulted—especially if it was by someone your teen trusted or liked—can bring up a wide range of complicated emotions, including guilt, self-doubt, and worries that the assault was somehow their fault. Working through these feelings is an important part of the healing process and will help them move forward in a positive way. Understanding common misconceptions and responses about sexual assault can help you and your teen manage or change some of your beliefs about this crime.

Common to blame themselves in an attempt to make sense of such a senseless crime:

- ~ *Blame themselves – for example, they may wonder if they were flirting too much or looked too interested.* It's not their fault, no matter how they acted or how they looked. Offenders choose to abuse despite what the victim looks like or what they do.
- ~ *They did not know the drink was drugged or that alcohol had such an impact on them.* Worry that it's their fault for accepting a drink or accepting a drink that was drugged. It is not their fault; offenders have been using alcohol as a newest date rape drug.
- ~ *Worry that they will get in trouble with the police if they were drinking underage.* The police are more concerned with your teen's health and safety than getting them in trouble.

How can you help?

Reaching out to your teen and keeping the lines of communication open is crucial to your relationship. Let your teen know, often, that you are there to listen without judgement and want to know how you can help.

Some teens withdraw from friends and family. Others do not want to be alone. Some feel depressed, anxious, or nervous and get angry a lot. Ignore the anger and ask your child what will be helpful. This can continuously change so ask frequently.

Teenagers and young adults are the age groups at greatest risk for sexual assault – especially acquaintance sexual assault. About 50% of sexual assault victims are under 18 years of age when they are victimized. Youths 12-17 are two to three times more likely to be sexually assaulted than adults. Most teenagers who are sexually assaulted are victimized by someone they know.

Preteens and teenagers often turn to their friends to discuss deeply personal issues — and, unfortunately, something as serious as sexual assault is no exception. They don't always tell their parents at first.

Teens many times fear that parents will get angry, blame them or punish them in some way if they are assaulted.

Teens may have many confusing messages about what happened and are too ashamed to share them with their parents.

Teens may feel uncomfortable talking about sexual issues with their parents.



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The emotional trauma caused by a sexual assault can be severe and long lasting. The victim may be affected in many different ways. Although each person is unique, there are some feelings and reactions that most sexual assault victims experience. It may be helpful for your teen to know about these responses. However, always remember that even though many victims experience similar reactions, there are still individual differences in how people respond to the trauma of sexual assault. Your teen may experience some or all these symptoms.

Common Feelings:

Feel ashamed, angry, sad, different, lonely, anxious, betrayed, depressed, or as if they will never be able to trust anyone again. All these feelings are common after an assault. They will not last forever. Talking to a counselor can help your teen work through these feelings.

Feel guilty or confused because they may know their attacker. Most sexual assaults are committed by an acquaintance. It was nothing they did or did not do.

Have nightmares about the assault or their mind may be filled with images of what happened, even when they are trying not to think about it. This is common too and will not last forever. Counseling can help them learn how to deal with these images.

Worry about how their friends will react if they find out (Will they believe them or take sides?). Your teen's real friends will be supportive and be there for them.

Worry about how you and your family will react if you find out. This might be hard for you and your family to accept at first. Learning about sexual assault and talking to someone you can trust can help your family as well as your teen.

Think that nobody understands how they feel and that they are alone. Many teens have gone through this and your teen has the support of people who care about them.

Someone who has been sexually assaulted might feel degraded or confused. It's also normal to feel ashamed or embarrassed. Some feel depressed, anxious, or begin to be self-destructive.

Sometimes the feelings surrounding sexual assault may show up in physical ways, such as trouble sleeping or eating. It may be hard to concentrate in school or to participate in everyday activities. Experts often refer to these emotions and their physical side effects as — trauma reaction. The best way to work through these is with professional help.

Common Reactions: Reactions can include,

- Numb, shocked, dazed
- Distant from others
- Afraid of the offender, or being hurt again
- Having unwanted memories, flashbacks and nightmares
- Having physical symptoms like headaches, stomach aches
- Having trouble sleeping
- Loss of concentration and focus
- Loss of interest in things that previously provided pleasure
- Loss of appetite
- Depression
- Anxious
- Generalized fear and powerlessness
- Shame and Guilt, many times reinforced by others
- Ashamed or humiliated
- Questioning self worth
- Self injury /or self punishment

Some of these reactions may occur immediately, or one may have a delayed reaction weeks or months later. The feelings may be very intense at times. Sometimes the feelings seem to go away for a while and then come back again. Sometimes various situations trigger these reactions as well—seeing the offender, watching a movie where there is a sexual assault scene etc.



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As a parent, supporting your teen after a sexual assault can be very difficult. Be sure to get them the medical and emotional help that they need after the assault. As they heal from the ordeal, offer your love and support while still giving them space. To be strong and helpful during this difficult experience, make time to deal with your own emotions separate from your child. Talk to a professional or use your support system to share your strong feelings such as anger, helplessness, confusion, etc.

Make an appointment with your doctor or attend a clinic.

Your teen needs to be tested for STI's, possible pregnancy, and internal injuries. Making sure your teen is medically ok is necessary. Your teen may be hesitant to attend such an appointment so discuss ways your teen wants to be supported through this process.

Make an appointment with a therapist for your teen.

Those who have been sexually assaulted sometimes avoid seeking help because they are afraid that talking about it will bring back memories or feelings that are too painful. However, this can do more harm than good. Seeking help and emotional support through a trained professional is the best way to ensure long-term healing. Working through the pain sooner rather than later can help reduce symptoms like nightmares and flashbacks. It can also help someone avoid potentially harmful behaviors and emotions, like major depression or self-injury.

Allow your teen to make their own decisions about their care.

If your teen is old enough to weigh different options, allow them to choose how they will deal with their attack. Help them compare the different choices they can make without pressuring them to do anything. For instance, you can talk to your teenage or adult teen about their options for reporting after their sexual assault without telling them what they should do. If your teen is younger, gain their support to decisions you make for them.

Help your teen speak to the authorities if they want to.

One of the biggest decisions your teen will have to make after their attack is whether they will report the crime of sexual assault to the police. Offer to stay with them if they choose to discuss the incident with the police right after it occurs, at either a hospital or your local police services. Some police services, like WPS, have online reporting of the sexual assault, which can let the police know the crime has happened, who committed the crime without directly having contact with Police. There are several options to reporting, inform yourself of these options and discuss each with your child recognizing that they have the final decision.



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Observe your teen as they recover for signs of ongoing trauma.

Healing emotionally and physically after sexual assault may take months or years depending on the person and situation. Keep a close eye on your teen to see how they are recovering from the assault. Consult their doctor or a professional if you notice they are suffering from symptoms like:

- Depression
- Insomnia
- Eating disturbances
- Social withdrawal
- Hyperactivity
- Self harming

Ask your teen what they need instead of making assumptions.

Everyone deals with trauma differently and has different coping mechanisms. Ask your teen how you can help them feel more comfortable and safer after such a horrific ordeal. Follow their cues before offering physical comfort like a hug or your hand to hold.

- Some sexual assault victims may avoid physical contact after their attack, while others may need it to feel safe and loved.
- Your teen may take comfort from their favorite meal, a hot cup of tea or hot chocolate, a soothing bath with oils, listening to calming music, or other small gestures that you can make to help.

Be understanding about your teen's difficult moods.

Surviving an assault can cause a range of emotions that may affect your teen's behaviour. Be calm and understanding if your teen has mood swings, outbursts, or negative reactions. Your acceptance during this difficult time will eventually help to curb these responses.

- For instance, if your teen is confrontational with their siblings and wishes to skip family gatherings, allow them to do so while they deal with their trauma.
- Your teen may also want to spend more time alone or with a person, such as a special friend or a specific parent.

Let your teen know that you believe them unquestioningly.

A fear of not being believed can keep sexual assault survivors from sharing their stories with loved ones. Once your teen opens about their sexual assault, let them know that you believe them entirely. This sense of validation may provide them with some peace while they are recovering.

- Say something like, "I know that you are really hurting over the sexual assault and I am here for you."
- Only directly acknowledge that they are telling the truth if someone has expressed doubts about their account of the events. Otherwise, the implication that someone may doubt them could upset them. Also understand it is normal for them not to remember everything about the crime as the brain does not record all memory during a traumatic incident like sexual assault.

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Let your teen know that you are there to listen.

It can be difficult to give your teen the space they need while letting them know you are there for them. Tell them that they can talk to you anytime that they need to. Let your teen know that you love them and are available to help them in any way they need you to.

- For instance, you can say, "I won't push you to open up, but I am always here for you if you want to talk."
- Offering the option of help without pushing them to open will help your teen feel supported without feeling overwhelmed.

Don't put a timeline on your teen's healing.

There is no accepted amount of time for recovering from sexual assault. Don't assume that your teen should be over their attack months or even years after it first occurs. Let your teen get better at their own pace without putting pressure on them to get back to their old self.

- Never ask your teen if they are over their attack yet, which may cause them to feel shame.
- Don't tell your teen about the progress of other sexual assault victims, which may make them doubt their own journey to healing.

Get to know your teen's triggers to avoid them when possible.

Observe your teen's behaviour and moods to see if certain things make them upset. Certain images, music, social situations, or movements may cause them distress by reminding them of the attack. Do your best to avoid these triggers in your own actions or in your home environment.

- For instance, playful wrestling or aggressive hugs may make your teen anxious.
- Avoid playing movies or television shows with sexual assault as a theme. Let your teen know that they can and should immediately turn off anything that upsets them. This will help them avoid second-hand trauma.

Controlling Your Own Emotions

Acknowledge and accept your negative emotions. While strong emotions can be harmful to you and your family, you should not blame yourself for having them. It is normal for you to feel angry and sad that your child has been assaulted. Vocalize these feelings to friends and family who you trust to help overcome them.

- Writing in a journal may help you sort out these emotions.
- Talk to a professional about your feelings, questions, fears, concerns
- Practicing self care to be your best—getting sleep, eating healthy, exercise, mindfulness/relaxation, healthy coping responses to anger, stress etc.- as this will help you to be there for your child
- Important to model self care for your teen and encourage your teen to do the same to overcome stress, anxiety and depression.

Sexual assault is a horrific crime committed by offenders who are responsible for the crime, not your teen. Offenders dehumanize victims and take control and choice away when they are committing the crime of sexual victimization.

Your teen needs to work through the impact of being dehumanized, being controlled and having their body invaded. With your support and help they can overcome the impact.