



Many people do not know how to help somebody through the trauma of sexual violence. They may go into protective mode, be in denial, or immediately start problem solving. These reactions are normal when hearing a disclosure however what survivors need is someone to listen and hold space.

# SUPPORTING SURVIVORS

## *of Sexual Violence*

01



HEALING AND/OR COPING WITH THE EFFECT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IS NOT LINEAR. EACH PERSON IS IMPACTED DIFFERENTLY AND DIFFERENT STRATEGIES WORK DIFFERENTLY FOR EVERYONE.



02

WHEN A SUPPORT PERSON REACTS NEGATIVELY IT CAN BE TRANSMITTED TO THE SURVIVOR, CREATING AN UNSAFE SPACE. IT IS IMPORTANT FOR THE SURVIVOR TO HAVE SPACE, TO HAVE THEIR OWN REACTIONS, AND TO BE VALIDATED. RUSHING SURVIVORS TO TAKE ACTION OR TO "MOVE ON" DOES MORE HARM THAN GOOD.

### TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF TOO.

03

REACH OUT TO TRUSTED FRIENDS, SUPPORT SERVICES, TRUSTED FAMILY MEMBERS, OR SUPPORT GROUPS. SHARING YOUR FEELINGS AND CONCERNS WITH OTHERS CAN PROVIDE COMFORT AND PERSPECTIVE.

ENGAGE IN ACTIVITIES YOU ENJOY, SUCH AS READING, LISTENING TO MUSIC, PAINTING, OR PRACTICING A HOBBY. TAKING TIME FOR YOURSELF AND DOING THINGS YOU LOVE CAN HELP REDUCE STRESS.

# DON'T

## DON'T PRESSURE SURVIVORS

Don't pressure survivors to make decisions or to seek support until they want to. Don't pressure survivors to make a report or talk about what happened. We may know how these things can help but they only help when someone is ready. Only the survivor knows what they need. Offer information and resources but allow survivors to go at their own pace.

## DON'T OVER-IDENTIFY

Try not to over-identify by telling the survivor about how the same thing happened to you or someone that you know. It may feel like that is helpful but it often leaves survivors feeling unseen or invalidated. Each person's experience is unique and so are their reactions.

## DON'T TAKE CONTROL

Sexual violence often leaves people feeling powerless and/or out of control. It is common for support people to go into caregiving or protection mode. This leaves survivors feeling unheard, frustrated, and/or incapable. It is important that survivors be able to make their own decisions and to have control over their own lives. Providing survivors with options helps them to regain control and build trust. Survivors are the experts of their own lives - ask them how and if they want to be helped.

## DON'T SURPRISE OR TOUCH SURVIVORS

Try not to approach survivors from behind or touch them without consent and/or warning. Some may want to be held while others may wish for space. Their body may feel violated and being touched may feel unsafe - ask what they need. Don't be offended if they need space, it is not personal. Encourage them to express what they feel comfortable with without judgment.

## DON'T CRITICISE

Don't criticize a survivor for where they were, what they were doing, what they were wearing, or for not resisting/fighting hard enough. Don't criticize them for not reaching out or speaking up about it earlier.

## DON'T OVERSIMPLIFY OR DOWNPLAY

Try not to over-simplify a survivor's experiences by saying "it happens to everyone" or downplay their feelings by saying "it wasn't that bad" or "just forget about it". Let them feel their own feeling and express themselves exactly how they need to. What a survivor has experienced has an impact on them regardless of the severity or distance from the assault.

## DON'T PUT TOO MUCH PRESSURE ON YOURSELF

You can't do everything or be everything for others all of the time, survivors need a support network. There is not magic answer to make everything as it was before and healing takes time. You can greatly impact survivors by holding space and being there for them.

# DO

## DO HOLD SPACE

Validate and support survivors without feeling like you need to fix everything. Sexual violence doesn't always need a "solution" and often requires acknowledgment, validation, and empathy. Survivors want to feel seen, heard, and believed.

**Holding space** is the act of being present and making space for someone else to experience their own feelings without judgment or influence.

## DO UNDERSTAND

Do be understanding as to why they weren't able to prevent it. They may have been threatened by, unsuspecting of, or trusting of the perpetrator. They may have feared worse consequences if they resisted or fled.

## DO LISTEN TO WHY THEY DON'T WANT TO TELL

Do listen to why they didn't say something sooner or why they don't want to report it. They may be scared of people's reactions or the repercussions of telling about it. They may also feel confused or ashamed about what happened. Sometimes it takes time to think about it and process.

## DO HELP THEM DISTINGUISH

Try to help survivors understand the difference between hindsight "if only" and guilt. Wishing it never happened is different than self-blaming and wishing you had done something differently. **The only person who can prevent sexual violence is the perpetrator.**

## DO SEEK SUPPORT FOR YOURSELF IF NEEDED

Watching or supporting someone who has experienced sexual violence can be hard and may affect you or bring up your own trauma. Seek support for yourself if you feel overwhelmed or activated by supporting or disclosures. It may take time for the survivor to feel okay with connecting or being intimate again.

## DO BE CONSISTENT

Try to reassure the survivor that you support them. Give the survivor the information and resources they need but allow them to do things on their own time. Allow them to work through it on their own time and do not pressure them to access support or report before they are ready. Make it clear that you are there for them now and will continue to be there for them.

## DO HELP THEM TO FEEL SAFE

Help them to feel safe and take part in things again, but only at their own pace and in ways that they feel are best. Knowing they can talk to you about feeling unsafe and can ask for your companionship when they need it, will be reassuring as they tackle difficult things.