



Providing support

Tips for family & friends

If your friend, family member or partner has experienced sexual violence, they will need time to process what has happened. You, as someone close to them, play a central role in providing empathetic support to help soften the effects of the trauma. Here are a few tips and ideas for what you can do.

Listen, don't judge

Listen to their story, if they choose to share it, but try not to ask too many questions about the details of what happened. They may not want to share everything, and it may not be healthy for them to do so. Let them know you are there for them, and willing to listen whenever they need you. Offering your time, listening and simply being present or asking someone how they are doing, can already make a huge difference. Even if you don't know what to say, acknowledge that, and tell them.

Never ask why something happened, or question their actions and why they couldn't prevent it. Asking those sorts of questions can feel judgmental, and imply that you blame them.

Believe

Believe their story, regardless of how it may sound to you, because what matters is the distress they feel in this moment. Reassure them that you believe them, as survivors of sexual violence are often under the impression that they will not be believed.

Allow Emotions

It is important to allow the survivor to express their emotions in whatever way comes naturally to them. If they need to cry, let them, even if it's difficult or painful for you to watch. It's important to give legitimacy and space to their feelings. Some survivors get angry, others try to move on as if nothing happened. Whichever emotions they may feel, let them be expressed.

Remembering is normal

While it seems like fair advice, it isn't productive to tell someone to forget what happened. Often that isn't possible, nor will it solve the problem. Processing the emotions and memories of trauma can take a long time, and is not always easy to witness. The best way you can help is by having patience and continuing to listen, however long it may take.

Ask about physical contact

Always ask before initiating any sort of physical contact with a survivor, and respect their need for space if they express it. Many people who have experienced sexual violence do not want to be touched, and a well-intended hug can cause a lot of distress in that instance. Ask about touching, and allow them to take the initiative.



Centrum Seksueel Geweld

This is even more important if you are in a sexual relationship with the survivor. Accept that they may not be ready for that, and that it can be frightening. Respect their preference, and don't put pressure on them. Allow them to decide the pace, and take the initiative.

Offer Practical Support

Helping with every-day difficulties is also very impactful, and offering to do simple acts like making tea, doing dishes, or coming with them to appointments can be incredibly comforting.

Respect their choices

After an instance of sexual violence, survivors are forced to make a lot of difficult decisions about seeking care, legal action through the police, and many other things. For you, these decisions may seem incredibly straightforward, but for them they can be very unpleasant or unclear.

However difficult it may be for you, it is essential that you allow them to make their own choices. Pressuring them or making decisions behind their back can be harmful to their recovery, as their recent experiences have likely made them feel powerless. Sexual violence takes away someone's agency over their own body, and regaining that agency through making decisions about their own life is incredibly important. Let them decide if they want to go to therapy/ stay home/ exercise etc.

Keep it Confidential

The survivor should be allowed to decide for themselves who knows what happened and who doesn't. Don't share their experience without asking them explicitly.

It's not about you

As someone close to the survivor, you are likely to experience a lot of troubled feelings of your own about what happened. You may be furious at the perpetrator, or feel guilty that you couldn't prevent it. These feelings are legitimate, and you should be able to express them- just not to the survivor. They need all the energy and strength they have for their own recovery and healing process, and they can't be there for you right now. Find someone else you can confide in about your feelings.

Call the Sexual Assault Centre

You are welcome to call the SAC with any questions or concerns you may have during our office hours. We will gladly help you to the best of our abilities.

Take Care of Yourself

Supporting a survivor of sexual violence can be incredibly difficult and heavy for loved ones, and as such it is important to take your own needs into account as well. If you are finding this difficult to deal with, it may be worth considering further guidance or support. This can be obtained by contacting your doctor or general practitioner, or calling the SAC for advice.