

Compassionate Response to Disclosure: Advice for Supporting a Victim of Sexual Assault

Victims of sexual assault, also known as survivors, do not always report the attack to law enforcement officials first. Instead, a victim may choose to first disclose to a family member, a friend, a caregiver, a teacher, or another trusted adult. A victim choosing to disclose for the first time months, years, or even decades after the assault is not uncommon.

Before hearing a survivor's story, you may not ever have known what your loved one experienced. Finding the words to say when someone tells you they have been sexually assaulted is not easy. This resource provides information about how to support an individual during their process of disclosure, no matter if the assault happened recently or months (if not years) in the past.

A victim has the right to seek and receive medical care after a sexual assault. In addition to a victim's healthcare needs, they may choose to have a sexual assault forensic examination that includes a medical professional collecting DNA samples for a sexual assault kit (SAK), sometimes known as a rape kit. Victims' SAKs are then sent to crime laboratories for testing. Delays in submitting and testing SAKs lead to delays in bringing suspects to justice. Through the National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI), a program supported by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, jurisdictions have received funding to send SAKs to crime laboratories for testing and create a coordinated community response to sexual assault.¹ Law enforcement officials and/or a victim advocate may then notify victims of their SAK results.

Learn more about the SAK testing process in the **"What Happens Next? Resources for Support, Questions, and Information"** brief.

Offering Support

Victims need the same amount of compassion whether they're telling you about the assault for the first time or they need additional support after being notified their kit was tested. A victim sharing such personal details—even with someone they care about and trust—about this traumatic and painful event can be very difficult for many

reasons, including a victim's concerns about others' reactions and judgment. We encourage you to be supportive and nonjudgmental. Your initial reaction is important to assure the victim that they are safe, you believe them, and you value their trust.

During the disclosure process, remember that the victim may exhibit different reactions from what you may expect. The victim may

- ◆ have a flat affect;
- ◆ seem numb or disconnected;
- ◆ exhibit a range of emotions, including anger, fear, and/or crying; or
- ◆ become hysterical or physically exhausted.

None of these reactions are uncommon, even if the assault occurred years ago.

Engaging in Active Listening

Your primary job is to support the survivor; active listening is a great way to be supportive. Avoid asking the victim questions about details of the incident, and leave any "why" questions or requests for additional information to the experts. The survivor may need time to process what happened during the assault or what has happened more recently if law enforcement has contacted them lately about the case. The most important thing you can do is to listen and provide a safe space for the survivor to talk.

Further, you may feel the urge to talk about your own experiences or to talk about the experiences of others. Although you have good intentions, understand that sharing this information may only complicate the conversation or take away from the victim's sense of security. These actions may cause the victim to feel like you are not listening or that you are deflecting the difficult thing they are sharing with you. Additionally, it may make them feel as if you are comparing their experience to others' experiences. If a survivor of sexual assault shares their story with you, try to focus on their immediate needs and assure the person that you are present and ready to support them.

¹ More information about the National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative is available at www.sakitta.org.

Responding in a Supportive Manner

When speaking with a survivor about their experience, try to keep some of these phrases in mind to be supportive throughout the healing process. Traumatic feelings can be triggered when a victim is contacted about their SAK being tested, especially if the assault occurred months or years ago. When speaking with a victim, don't presume that disclosure becomes any easier after a significant amount of time has passed. Survivors may feel as though the assault happened recently, even if it occurred months ago.

The following suggested communications will help you to create a supportive, affirming environment for the survivor.

“I believe you. It took a lot of courage for you to tell me about this.” It can be extremely difficult for a victim to share their story. They may feel ashamed, concerned that they won't be believed, or worried they'll be blamed for the assault. Understand that it takes courage to disclose the assault, no matter if they are sharing their story immediately after the assault or waiting to share until more time has passed.

“You are not alone. I care about you, and I am here to listen or help in any way I can.” Let the victim know that you are there for them and willing to listen to their story, if they are comfortable sharing it. Assess if there are people in their life they feel comfortable going to for support. Also remind them that there are professionally trained service providers, including sexual assault advocates, who will support them as they heal from the experience.

“I'm sorry this happened. This shouldn't have happened to you.” Acknowledge that the experience has significantly affected their life. If the survivor was notified their kit has not been tested yet, then express regret that there has not been more of a timely resolution. Responses like, “This must be really tough for you,” and “Thank you for trusting me enough to share this with me,” help to communicate empathy.

A Note About Survivor Self-Blame

Victims often blame themselves because they feel as though they should have done something different to avoid the assault or should have seen it coming.

We recommend directing your focus to the victim's feelings with statements such as, “I hear you,” or “I believe you.” Victims may use self-blame as a way to maintain control of the situation. Therefore, some victims may struggle with hearing responses such as, “It's not your fault. You didn't do anything to deserve this.” If you think the victim is using self-blame to gain control of the situation, then encourage them to discuss this topic with a trained professional who can help the victim work through their feelings of self-blame and other emotions.

Author:

RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) is a dynamic organization comprising experts to provide the best-in-class services for survivors, inform and educate the nation about sexual violence, and improve the public policy and criminal justice response to sexual violence. The victim services experts at RAINN take a victim-centered, trauma-informed approach to developing programs and services that support survivors of sexual violence and their loved ones.