

Voices of Survivors:

How to Respond to Disclosure of Sexual Assault

A sexual assault victim, also known as a sexual assault survivor, may share their story about the assault, that their case is being reexamined, or that their sexual assault kit has been tested after a long period of time. From a survivor's perspective, sharing this incredibly personal, traumatic information is difficult and requires deep trust. For you, learning this information may illicit strong emotions or even shock and leave you wondering how to react or respond.

Keep in mind, there are no rules for responding to a sexual assault disclosure. No two scenarios are ever the same. This resource, provided by the National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative Training and Technical Assistance (SAKI TTA) Team, offers guidelines and suggestions that may aid in the continued communication and support of a sexual assault survivor's needs. The direct quotations throughout this resource provide the perspectives of sexual assault survivors.

Provide judgment-free support

"I will never forget the person I initially disclosed to. They didn't judge me and that was the beginning of my road to healing."

Supporting the survivor after disclosure is extremely important to their continued health and well-being.

- ◆ Tell the survivor that you believe them—that's the most important thing a survivor needs to know. Don't presume they would already know this. Clearly state that you believe them and that you are listening.
- ◆ Recognize that you are not a therapist or an expert, nor should you act as one. It is okay to speak frankly and honestly about this to a survivor. They disclosed to you because they trust you, not because you have the professional expertise to handle the situation.
- ◆ Ask how you can support the survivor.¹ It can be difficult for a survivor to ask for help. Asking about ways to help may make accepting help easier.

¹ Compassionate Response to Disclosure: Advice for Supporting a Victim of Sexual Assault.

"When I told my boss that I needed time off to process the fact that they finally found my offender, she didn't understand why it bothered me since it happened 20 years ago. A coworker saw me crying and asked what was wrong. When I told him, he went with me and explained trauma to her. She apologized and sent me home. I'll never forget that he did that for me."

Recognize the emotional changes associated with sexual assault

"I just didn't feel like myself anymore."

Sexual assault is a traumatic event that creates complex emotions and reactions. Individuals who have experienced trauma may react in ways that are unexpected or different than what you presume.

- ◆ Understand that disclosure is extremely personal; when a survivor discloses to you about the trauma they experienced, they're trusting you with their story.
- ◆ Realize that feelings may surface for the survivor without warning or when a new update in their case occurs. This can include signs of shock, dismay, or a combination of feelings. No two survivors will react the same way.
- ◆ Recognize that feelings of guilt may still be present for a survivor about something that happened in the past, even years ago. Make certain they understand that this reaction and any feelings they have are valid.

"When I was told they found the man that raped me, I went about my day like it was no big deal. After all, I went to therapy for years and it happened 9 years ago! While I was making dinner for my family, I just broke down. I found myself on the kitchen floor, sobbing and inconsolable. It took me a week to tell my husband what was wrong."

Assist with locating professional counseling services and other resources

Ensuring a survivor has access to professional assistance is essential. Professional assistance does not diminish the pivotal role you play as a member of the survivor's support system. Recognize that although you do not have access to the same resources as professionals do, the value of your care should never be diminished.

- ◆ Ask if the survivor has resources for healing. If they do not, look for resources *together*. Doing this as a team shows you have confidence in the survivor's ability and shows them they are not alone.

"While I called my local rape crisis center, my coworker held my hand the entire time. I don't think I would have been able to make that call without them by my side."

Maintain a healing environment for the survivor and yourself

"The person I disclosed to hugged me and we binge watched old movies on Netflix. I'll never forget it."

- ◆ Show compassion and care through this process—those are two of the best things you can offer. Don't worry about finding the right words to say. What a survivor will remember most is that you were there and that you believed them, not that you said the perfect words.
- ◆ Do not presume you have permission to share the survivor's story with others. To maintain trust, keep the conversations between you and the survivor private.

- ◆ Realize that you may be navigating through your own feelings after a survivor shares their story with you. It's not easy to see someone you care about go through such an ordeal. Recognize that you may also need care to provide the best support possible to a survivor of sexual assault.

"All the people involved in my case from start to finish gave me the strength I needed to heal, grow, and become an advocate for others. They changed my life forever. I'm paying it forward now."

Compassion and kindness are the most important reactions you can offer to a survivor of sexual assault. Believing a survivor after they disclose to you and providing a listening ear throughout their healing journey are essential to helping a survivor on their road to recovery.

Resources

National Sexual Assault Hotline:
800.656.HOPE (4673)

Provides support and referrals to local resources that may help you in meeting a survivor's unique needs.

SAKI TTA:
www.sakitta.org

Offers additional online resources that can assist both survivors and their confidants. Please note that SAKI TTA does not provide professional/primary support services for survivors of sexual assault; SAKI resources are intended for individuals who want to learn more about cold case sexual assault and ways to offer support during a victim's healing process.

Author:

Natasha Alexenko is a survivor of sexual assault and the backlog of unsubmitted sexual assault kits. In 2011, she started Natasha's Justice Project, a nonprofit dedicated to eliminating the untested sexual assault evidence kits throughout the country. Natasha is a survivor, an activist, and an educator who is working to change the criminal justice system's response to sexual assault.