



## Supporting an Adult Survivor

### Someone I care about has been sexually assaulted and/or raped. How can I help?

- **Believe the survivor.** Even if they sometimes doubt themselves, even if their memories are vague, even if what they tell you sounds too extreme, believe them. Survivors don't make up stories of sexual abuse or rape. Let them know that you are open to hearing anything they wish to share, and that although it's painful and upsetting, you are willing to enter those difficult places with them and to receive their words with respect.
- **Validate the survivor's feelings:** their anger, pain, frustration, confusion and fear. These are natural, healthy responses. They need to feel them, express them, and be heard. Do not tell them to try and forget- if the survivor does not work through the emotions now, they will resurface later.
- **Acknowledge and deal with your own emotions.** But do not let them take center stage. Be aware that outbursts of emotion may cause the survivor to feel responsibility. Don't add to their worries.
- **Join with the survivor in validating the damage.** Sexual abuse and rape is harmful. Even if it's not violent, overtly physical, or repeated, abuse and rape can have serious consequences.
- **Be clear that the abuse or rape was not the survivor's fault.** No one asks to be abused or raped. The survivor did what they had to do to survive. Fault always lies with the perpetrator only.
- **Don't sympathize with the perpetrator.** The survivor needs your absolute loyalty.
- **Listen.** It is important to listen to the survivor and let them talk then for you to ask questions about the assault.
- **Respect the time and space it takes to heal.** Healing is a slow and personal process that can't be hurried.
- **Encourage the survivor to get support.** In addition to offering yourself as a source of support, encourage them to reach out to others. Offer to go with them to appointments or meetings. Be sure that your support is non-judgmental. Get support for yourself as you will have many feelings about the abuse or rape also. It is important to take care of yourself so you can be there for the survivor.
- **Get help if the survivor is suicidal.** Most survivors are not suicidal, but sometimes the pain of the abuse or rape is so devastating that the survivor may want to kill themselves. If you are close to a survivor who is suicidal, get help immediately.
- **Resist seeing the survivor as a victim.** Continue to see them as a strong, courageous person who is reclaiming their own life.
- **Accept that there will very likely be major changes in your relationship with the survivor as they heal.** They are changing, and as they do, you may need to change in response.

- **Do not measure pain. Trauma is not comparative.** The impacts and effects of an assault on a person are just as valid regardless of what occurred during the assault.
- **Empower the survivor to make their own decisions.** Being assaulted means losing power and control over one's body. Restoring decision making power and control as quickly as possible will help them to heal. This means they get to decide whether or not to report the assault to the police and who they want to tell their story to.
- **Educate yourself about sexual abuse/rape and the healing process.** If you have a basic idea of what the survivor is going through, it will help you to be supportive. A rape crisis center is a great place to start. There are many websites with helpful information as well. Talk with other survivors and supporters of survivors. Many are willing to share what has helped them or can give ideas on how to deal with a certain situation.

**We're here to help as you support your loved one. Call our 24/7 Hotline.**

The Cottage is committed to supporting secondary survivors, as well. Secondary survivors are the non-offending family, friends, and loved ones of individuals who have experience sexual violence, and who want to support their loved one. We welcome secondary survivors to call our 24/7 hotline with any questions. **We're here to help you support your loved one: 1-877-363-1912.**