

How to Help a Friend After a Sexual Assault

People who have experienced sexual assault have experienced a profound violation. Their sense of safety and predictability has been shattered. Survivors' reactions may vary profoundly depending on their life circumstances and amount of social support.

Be Supportive - Try to provide a safe and non-threatening environment, emotional comfort and support for the survivor to express feelings. Take your time with the student – let them know that you are not in a rush, and have time to spend with them in order to hear their story and any concerns they have. In addition, don't take their emotional reactions personally. For example, students may experience anger that is globalized and [usually temporarily] directed at the university and/or its representatives, for not protecting him/her. Try not to react personally to this expression of feelings. Tell the student you are sorry this traumatic event occurred, and that you want to understand and assist them. [Then get your *own* support – e.g., from other friends, or from the Counseling Center – in order to vent and talk about your own reactions.]

Be Reassuring - Sexual assault is NEVER the victim's fault! No one asks to be sexually assaulted by what they wear, say, or do. Let the student know that only the perpetrator is to blame. The survivor may not be ready to think this, or see the events in this way – in which case, do not push too hard. Simply express your lack of blame for the student, without needing him/her to see it your way immediately.

Be Understanding - The survivor needs to hear that fears, anxieties, guilt, anger, and even periods of feeling numb are normal, understandable, and acceptable. In addition, students may be feeling primarily just one of these emotions, or a complex combination. It is important to remember, and communicate to the student, that there is no “wrong” way to react to this kind of traumatic event. Don't tell the student that it's “lucky it wasn't worse.” This isn't consoling; instead it minimizes the traumatized person's feelings and experiences.

Encourage Action – Encourage the survivor to report the assault, see a doctor, and contact a counselor. The survivor must ultimately make the decision as to what to do. *Don't push.* Although of course we all hope that every student in this situation will do all of those things, as soon as possible, it is very important not to rush them into making decisions before they are ready. Remember – this student has just experienced a traumatic event in which his/her wishes were ignored and overridden completely. It is very important not to re-traumatize the student by railroading him/her into the decision *we* feel is best, on our *own* timetable rather than the student's.

Be Patient - The survivor can't just 'forget it' or just move on. Recovery is a long-term process. Encourage the student to seek counseling, either on- or off-campus – wherever the student feels most comfortable. *Don't try to be the student's therapist.* You're not trained to do this, and in fact, because of your role as a friend or a fellow student, it's *impossible* for this to work as a substitute for counseling. In terms of getting the student referred to a therapist, it is often helpful to make a personal recommendation. Understandably, survivors of sexual assault often have particular difficulty trusting a new, unknown person. Describing what the counselor is like, or offering to personally accompany the student to see a professional, can help to bridge this experience for the survivor.

Understand the Possible Effects

- *Shock.* Many survivors go through periods of numbness or disbelief. This may last a short time, a very long time, or may alternate with periods of strong feeling.
- *Disturbing memories.* Many survivors are plagued by recurrent memories of the sexual assault or rape. These memories may occur at very unexpected and unpredictable times, and may interfere with concentration in class, while studying, etc.
- *Being overwhelmed with feelings.* These may vary from survivor to survivor, but typically include sadness, anger, fear, and powerlessness.
- *Physical symptoms.* It is common for the body to carry some of the stress from the attack. This may include bruising, abrasions, soreness and more severe injuries, but may also include headaches, loss of appetite, difficulty sleeping, and other symptoms.

- *Impact on other relationships*: difficulty trusting, isolating self.
- *Self blame*. It is common for the survivor to question what she did wrong to cause the assault or rape. This does not imply that the survivor was, in fact, at fault.

Resources for Survivors

Physical Health

First and foremost, it is important for survivors to take care of their physical health. An important step is to get a physical exam by medical personnel. Locally, you may visit:

Pomona Valley Hospital Medical Center
Emergency Services
1798 North Garey Avenue
Pomona, CA 91767 (909) 865-9611

Campus Resources

Deans of Students Offices

Claremont Graduate University	(909) 621-8965
Claremont McKenna College	(909) 621-8114
Keck Graduate	(909) 607-0389
Harvey Mudd College	(909) 621-8125
Pitzer College	(909) 621-8241
Pomona College	(909) 607-2248
Scripps College	(909) 621-8277

Campus Safety	(909) 607-2000
Monsour Counseling and Psychological Services Center	(909) 621-8202
Student Health Services	(909) 621-8222
Health Education Outreach	(909) 607-3602
Chaplains	(909) 621-8685

Community Resources

Project Sister - Sexual Assault Crisis & Prevention Services

Hotline: (909) 626-4357

<http://www.projectsister.org/>

Planned Parenthood

1550 N. Garey Ave,

Pomona, CA 91766

(800) 576-5544

<http://www.plannedparenthood.org>

Books/Print Resources

Ledray, L. E. (1994). Recovering from Rape (second edition). New York: Henry Holt & Co. (available at Claremont Colleges Library)

- I Can't Get Over It: A Handbook for Trauma Survivors, by Aphrodite Matsakis. (available at Claremont Colleges Library)
- McEvoy, A. W. & Brookings, J. B. (1984). If she is raped. A book for husbands, fathers and male friends. Holmes Beach, FL: Learning Publications. (available at Health Education Outreach – HEO)
- Reclaiming Your Life After Rape, by Barbara Olasov Rothbaum & Edna B. Foa. (available at Health Education Outreach – HEO)
- Warshaw, Robin. I Never Called It Rape. New York: Harper and Row, 1988. (available at Health Education Outreach – HEO)

Support Networks

RAINN - Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network - information and resources about sexual assault and abuse (includes an online "hotline" and also a lot of research statistics about sexual assault as well as abuse):

<http://rainn.org/>

National Center for Victims of Crime - resources to get legal as well as counseling help after experiencing a sexual assault or other types of crime (e.g., stalking, dating violence, etc.):

http://www.ncvc.org/ncvc/main.aspx?dbID=DB_TrainingInstitute104

Darkness 2 Light - information and resources about child sexual abuse:

<http://www.darkness2light.org/>

Off-campus groups for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse:

http://www.darknesstolight.org/GetHelp/support_adult_survivor.asp