How to Respond to a Victim/Survivor

When someone tells you they've been sexually assaulted or abused, it can be a lot to handle. A supportive reaction is essential to diminish any shame or blame the survivor usually takes on after abuse. Encouraging words and phrases can avoid judgment and show support for the survivor:

Consider these phrases:

- "I'm sorry this happened." Acknowledge that the experience has affected their life. Phrases like "This must be really tough for you," and, "I'm so glad you are sharing this with me," helps to communicate empathy.
- "It's not your fault." Survivors may blame themselves, especially if they know the perpetrator personally. Remind the person, maybe even more than once, that they are not to blame. Although self-blame is a healthy reaction and part of the recovery process.
- "I believe you." It can be extremely difficult for survivors to come forward and share their story. They may feel ashamed, concerned that they won't be believed, or worried they'll be blamed. Leave any "why" questions or investigations to the experts—your job is to support this person. Be careful not to interpret calmness as a sign that the event did not occur—everyone responds differently. The best thing you can do is to believe them.
- "You are not alone." Remind the survivor that you are there for them and willing to listen to their story.
- "Are you open to seeking medical attention?" The survivor might need medical attention, even if the event happened a while ago. It's okay to ask directly, "Are you open to seeking medical care?"
- "This doesn't change how I think of you." Some survivors are concerned that sharing what happened will change the way other people see them, especially a partner. Reassure the survivor that surviving sexual violence doesn't change the way you think or feel about them.

Continued Support

There's no timetable when it comes to recovering from sexual violence. If someone trusted you enough to disclose the event to you, consider the following ways to show your continued support.

- Avoid judgment. It can be difficult to watch a survivor struggle with the effects of sexual assault for an extended period of time. Avoid phrases that suggest they're taking too long to recover such as, "You've been acting like this for a while now," or "How much longer will you feel this way?"
- Check in periodically. The event may have happened a long time ago, but that doesn't mean the pain is gone. Check in with the survivor to remind them you still care about their well-being and believe their story.
- Remember that the healing process takes time. Everyone has good and bad days. Don't interpret flashbacks, bad days, or silent spells as "setbacks." It's all part of the process.

How to respond to a disclosure of sexual assault:

- Believe the survivor. Even if they sometimes doubt themselves, even if the memories are vague, even if what they tell you sounds too extreme to believe. People don't make up stories of abuse. Let them know that you are open to hearing anything they wish to share and that although it is painful and upsetting, you are willing to enter those difficult places with them, and to receive their words with respect.

UK Statistics show that 1 in 4 females, and 1 in 6 males are sexually assaulted by age 18.

- Join with the survivor in validating the effects of the sexual assault(s). All abuse is harmful. Even if it is not violent, overtly physical or repeated, all sexual abuse has serious consequences. There is no positive or neutral experience of sexual abuse.
- Be clear that the sexual assault is never their fault. Nobody seduces an offender. People ask for affection and attention, not for sexual abuse. Even if a person responds sexually, even if they weren't forced or didn't protest, it is still never their fault. It is always the responsibility of the offender.
- Educate yourself about sexual violence and the healing process. If you have a basic idea of what the survivor is going through, it will help you to be supportive.
- Validate the survivor's feelings: the anger, pain and fear. These are natural, healthy responses. They need to feel them, express them, and be heard.
- Express your compassion. If you have feelings of outrage, compassion, pain for their pain, do share them. There is probably nothing more comforting than a genuine human response. Just make sure your feelings don't overwhelm their feelings.
- Respect the time and space it takes to heal. Healing is a slow process that can't be hurried.
- Offer the survivor information on how to get specialist support. In addition to offering your own caring, encourage the person to reach out to others.
- Get help if the survivor is suicidal. Most survivors are not suicidal, but sometimes the pain of abuse is so devastating that they may want to kill themselves. If you are close to a survivor who is suicidal, get help immediately.
- 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.
- Resist seeing the survivor as a victim. Continue to see them as a strong, courageous person who is reclaiming their own life.
- Being a close supporter of a survivor can be a challenge. While holding the potential for tremendous growth and intimacy, it can also leave you feeling conflicted, overwhelmed or resentful. You may be frightened or confused, unsure what to do, how to feel or what to expect. These are natural and appropriate responses to a complex and trying human situation.
- It is important to take care of yourself. It is essential that you honour your own needs. If the survivor wants more than you are able to give them, admit your limits. Encourage them to call on other resources. Take some breaks. Get help for yourself. Dealing with raw pain is difficult and you need a place where you can express your own feelings and frustrations.
- If you find yourself feeling extremely defensive or upset when the survivor talks about the abuse, you may be reacting from experiences you've repressed from your own past. This is very common. One person's pain frequently brings up hurts for another. Seek support in dealing with your own unresolved feelings. You are important too.

ref: https://www.rainn.org