



How You Can Be a Supportive Friend

Recognizing Sexual Assault Awareness month, April 2021 Impact Talk explored the impacts of sexual assault, identifies methods of supporting individuals who disclose sexual assault and discuss vicarious trauma.

Knowing what to say to someone who may be experiencing domestic violence or sexual assault can be overwhelming and scary. Though it may be tough, you can still be of some help. The most important thing to remember is that you don't need to be an expert — you need to be a friend.

Below are questions to reflect on individually or in a group. There are tools to help navigate a debrief with a group, prepare yourself to help someone get the support they need and deserve and to prevent these crimes going forward.

How do you listen without judgement?

Remember, if someone you know discloses that they are currently experiencing abuse or have been abused or sexually assaulted in the past, this could be the first time they're telling anyone. Listening without judgment or blame and letting them know they're not alone can make a huge difference. If the victim/survivor is in need of support, ask them if they'd like to talk to a professional counselor and offer to sit with them while they call one of the 24-hour national [hotlines](#). While you may have a strong reaction to what you've heard, it's important to focus and fully listen to the survivor's words. And if you're in need of support for yourself after being there for your loved one, the hotlines can offer you help as well.

Tip→ Sometimes you don't need words (or at least, many words), to be there for someone. Many people share that just being able to tell their story to someone else lessens the weight of isolation, secrecy and self-blame. Remember, listening can make a huge difference in someone's life. - via the Joyful Heart Foundation's [6 Steps to Supporting a Survivor](#)

What can you say to let the survivor know you believe them?

By letting a victim/survivor know that you believe them, you can change that person's life. A victim/survivor may feel like what happened to them is their fault. It's not unusual for victims/survivors to experience self-blame, doubt or denial. Reassurance that you believe them and that this was not their fault can go a long way to making that person feel comfortable getting the help they need and deserve.

It can be helpful to communicate the following gently and repeatedly:

- "Nothing you did or could've done differently makes this your fault."
- "The responsibility is on the person who hurt you."
- "No one ever has the right to hurt you."

- "I promise, you didn't ask for this."
- "I know that it can feel like you did something wrong, but you didn't."
- "It doesn't matter if you did or didn't _____. No one asks to be hurt in this way."

Tip→ No one deserves abuse or violence. Statements or questions that focus on what a victim did or didn't do – unintentionally or not – signals that the survivor is responsible. The only person to blame for violence and abuse is the perpetrator. Although this sounds like a simple idea, educating yourself about the common myths about domestic violence and sexual assault can help you offer informed, compassionate support and make a huge difference.

How do you provide care to yourself through this situation?

Answers will vary. Domestic violence and sexual assault can be extremely difficult and painful experiences for the families and friends of victims/survivors. Common feelings of those supporting victims/survivors include helplessness, frustration, anger and guilt. It can be helpful to talk with someone. Confidential support is available.

Content information from NoMore.org - <https://nomore.org/learn/what-to-say/>

Know the resources to share with a friend.

- The National Sexual Assault Online Hotline - <https://hotline.rainn.org/online>
- National Sexual Assault Hotline – 800.656.HOPE (4673)
- A list of US local independent sexual assault service providers - <https://centers.rainn.org/>
- A list of local support in Canada - <https://myhealth.alberta.ca/Alberta/Pages/sexual-abuse-other-places-to-get-help.aspx>