

How to help a friend who has been raped or sexually assaulted

If someone has told you that they have been raped or sexually assaulted, it's likely to have been one of the hardest things they have ever had to say. It may have taken them weeks, months or even years to feel able to talk to anyone about what has happened. Most people have little experience of helping someone through a traumatic event such as a sexual assault or rape, so it's normal to feel unsure about what to do. What is important is that you care enough about that person to want to help. This guidance aims to help you, help your friend.

- Before you do anything else, listen to your friend.
- Be patient.
- Ask them how you can help: you might have ideas about what they should or shouldn't be doing but it's important to allow them to come to their own decisions without feeling pressured.
- Give them time: as well as listening, you need to remain patient. Try to resist asking them about the details of the assault because they might not feel ready to talk about it. If they don't feel ready to talk about their experience, you may want to suggest that they write it down to help them 'get it out' and begin to make sense of what has happened to them.
- Give them space: knowing when to give someone space is vital. An important part of their healing process will be to regain a sense of control over their life, so allow them to do this as much as you can.
- Avoid taking over: respect their decisions and never plan their recovery for them. Only they know how they feel, so it's important they're allowed to recover at their own pace. You could help them find useful information but don't insist on them doing anything or speaking to anyone they don't want to.
- Reassure them: when they feel confident enough to talk to you about what happened, remember to reassure them. Tell them that you believe them; don't judge and don't blame them.
- Don't ask 'how much did you drink?' 'What were you wearing?' 'Why didn't you ...?' or make statements such as 'You should have ...' These questions or statements might be interpreted as disbelief or blame and could cause distress.
- Be consistent: being supportive over a long time is very important.
- Following a sexual assault or rape, different people will react in different ways. A person may experience a variety of feelings and emotions for a long time after the assault. Don't expect your friend to react in particular way. There is no 'normal' response to rape or sexual assault.

Helping a partner: If your partner has been sexually assaulted or raped, it will almost certainly have an impact on you and your relationship. There are things you can do to help you both get through this difficult time together such as:

- Believe them
- Be patient
- Allow them to tell you what has happened in their own time, without pressuring them for details
- Respect their decisions, even if you don't agree with them
- Take responsibility for looking after yourself and how you're feeling; your partner is unable to do this at the moment
- Ask them how you can help

Whether the victim is your friend or a partner you may be struggling to cope with what has happened and how you're feeling. You may feel upset, angry or helpless. If this is the case, it's important that you seek help for yourself.