

Supporting a Survivor of Rape or Sexual Abuse

It can be hard to know how to support a loved one who has been raped or sexually abused. The effects of sexual trauma are many, and often complicated. It's common to feel a sense of helplessness and anger that your loved one has been put through this ordeal. Nothing you say or do will erase what's happened, but your response to your loved one's disclosure could have a powerful impact on how they cope. The most important thing is to listen, believe, and be there.

Some points to consider when supporting a survivor

Listen and believe. Telling people about rape or sexual abuse is an enormous step to take for any person. Allow your friend or loved one to tell you as much or as little as they choose. Don't ask for details. Don't question them. Don't ask why it happened or if they could have stopped it (it will sound like you're holding them responsible for the attack). Just listen.

Different responses. Your friend or loved one will be feeling lots of different emotions, from being upset and crying to being angry and aggressive. They might shut down and not want to talk, or even act like nothing has happened; they may behave erratically, or appear calm. Allow your friend or loved one to experience these emotions; there is no one way of responding.

Reporting to the police is a personal choice. The decision to report rape or abuse to the police can be a very difficult one for the survivor. A lot of people want to cope with the effects of sexual trauma without going to the police. You might want to achieve some justice for your friend or loved one, but reporting the crime without their permission or without speaking to them can increase their feelings of powerlessness. It's your role as a supporter to enable and empower, not take decisions into your own hands.

RSVP's advocacy service can offer support, advice and information for your friend or loved one if they choose to report or want to explore their options. However, if they're a child or vulnerable adult, you will need to take action to safeguard them. If you're made aware that a child (under 18) is currently being abused, it's important this is reported to the police straight away to prevent further harm.

RSVP services: 0121 643 0301 Helpline: 0121 643 4136 Email: info@rsvporg.co.uk



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Practical support. Accompanying your friend to health visits, or the police (if they choose to report) is a really good form of support. Your friend or loved one might need a pregnancy test, support at doctor's appointments or to visit a sexual health clinic. They might struggle to cope with everyday tasks, or need help with childcare. What can you do to make their day a bit easier?

Respect their personal space. After sexual trauma survivors might feel very uncomfortable with the idea of intimacy and physical affection. Be aware that affection such as hugging, stroking and hand holding might be difficult or triggering; check with your friend or loved one that they want to be hugged and be alert to their needs. If you're in a sexual relationship with someone who's survived rape or sexual abuse, be aware that sex may seem frightening now. It is crucial they don't feel pressured into sex but feel able to make their own choices at a time that's right for them.

Keep the focus on the survivor. Sometimes survivors of abuse find themselves consoling and looking after their loved ones more than themselves. The idea of someone hurting your friend or loved one will be really upsetting. You'll likely have your own feelings of anger and shock to cope with. It's important that your own feelings don't get in the way; keep the focus on them.

There's no timeline for coping with trauma. The effects of sexual trauma can be long lasting, the survivor will need to find their own way of coping; it might take months, it might take years. It's important to accept that the process is usually long and gradual and you can't speed it up. Their view of the world might have changed, they could be very negative, they might not trust people. Don't put pressure on your friend or loved one to 'get back to normal'. If they could erase what's happened, they would.

Outside help. Counselling and specialist support services are available to survivors. Allow your friend or loved one to decide what support is right for them. The idea of talking to a counsellor or helpline worker might be easier than talking to friends and family. Don't feel offended if they'd rather talk to a stranger, someone independent. A sense of anonymity can give survivors the

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privacy and space to talk about things they don't feel comfortable saying to people they know. Recognise this as a really important step, and offer support.

Useful links:

For more information on how to support your loved one or friend visit: <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/supportingasurvivor.php>

For a range of self-help for male survivors and partners supporting them visit : <http://www.livingwell.org.au/managing-difficulties/>

You don't need to deal with the effects of sexual violence, sexual assault or sexual abuse alone. RSVP are here to offer support to survivors and their supporters, to enable you to live a life with hope and confidence which is free from abuse.

We offer:

- Specialist counselling for survivors and their supporters
- Independent sexual violence advocates (ISVAs) to assist you through criminal or civil proceedings, or in crisis, whether you have reported or not
- Social groups and coffee mornings focussing on self-help
- Emotional support on the telephone helpline 0121 643 4136

These are some of our services. For more ways we can support you contact:-

☎ 0121 643 0301

@ info@rsvporg.co.uk

@ isva@rsvporg.co.uk

@ www.rsvporg.co.uk/services

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"Counselling gives you a different perspective, somewhere to offload and a chance to talk."

This self-help sheet may be photocopied under the following conditions:

Each page must be copied in its entirety, including RSVP information headings, where applicable. Copies may be made for use within organisations for training purposes or for clients/individuals for self-help purposes. Copies may not be resold.

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a world free from sexual violence and abuse

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