

Facts on sexual violence

Sexual violence is any unwanted act of a sexual nature and includes rape, sexual assault, incest, sexual harassment and child sexual abuse. Sexual violence is a crime that can happen to anyone. It happens to children, young people, adults, men and women. Research shows that most survivors are female, most offenders are male and most people experience sexual violence from someone they know. If someone you care about tells you she has experienced sexual violence, you may be concerned about how to effectively support her.

Effects of sexual violence

There is no typical way that someone feels or behaves after experiencing sexual violence – everyone is different. There are however a range of common feelings and reactions which survivors may experience and express.

Feelings

- Shock
- Numb
- Powerless
- Fearful
- Hyper-vigilant
- Unsafe
- Angry
- Shamed
- Guilty
- Scared
- Confused
- Relieved to have survived

Reactions

- Fear of the rapist
- Loss of control over life
- Not wanting to leave the house
- Fear of going crazy
- Mood swings
- Difficulty in trusting others
- Loss of confidence
- Re-experiencing through flashbacks and intrusive thoughts
- Feeling unsafe
- Not wanting to be touched
- Sleep difficulties and nightmares

How a disclosure of sexual violence may affect you

After hearing that someone you care about has experienced sexual violence, you may believe that you should “do something”. You may feel guilt that you couldn’t prevent it from happening or even feel like taking revenge on the offender.

You may experience a range of other feelings including powerlessness, sadness, anger and confusion. You may want to talk and express these feelings or you may find it difficult to talk at all. These feelings and reactions are understandable and you may need to seek your own support to help you to deal with them. It is important to remember, the survivor is NOT there to help you. She has experienced a major trauma and will need all her energy to deal with her own feelings and her healing. She needs YOUR support.

How to best support a survivor of sexual violence

As a support person, you play a significant role in helping the survivor heal from sexual violence. Your response and actions may impact on her ability to heal from the trauma. There is no set way to support everyone. Remember that each individual will react differently to trauma and need different kinds of support.

It is not only emotional support that may be required, some simple practical ideas which may be useful to offer include: company; transport to appointments; child care; grocery shopping or cooking a meal. It is important that you communicate with the survivor and ask her what she wants or needs. By being available, patient and understanding, you will be communicating your willingness to support her.

You may find the following information helpful to guide you in supporting a survivor of sexual violence.

10 key points to consider when supporting a survivor of sexual violence

1. Safety and health

The first step is to ensure that survivor is not in any current danger and whether there are any health concerns that might need to be taken care of. If sexual violence has occurred recently, the survivor may benefit from a medical examination to check that everything is OK.

2. Believe

It is critical that the survivor is believed. Being believed is reportedly the most important factor influencing her healing journey. Survivors are often afraid that people will not believe them, react negatively to what they say or reject them for what has happened to them. Tell her you are glad that she was able to tell you about it. It is important that you do not blame the survivor, make judgmental comments or question her actions. There is NO excuse for sexual violence. Believe in her and believe in your ability to support her.

3. Choice and control

The offender has taken away the survivor’s choice and control over her body. In order to help her feel empowered, you must allow her to make choices for herself.

For example, deciding if and when she wants to talk; whether she would like the door open, or closed; who she wants to tell or whether she wants to report to the police or not. Also, don’t assume that a hug or being physically close is always supportive, ask her and follow her lead; do not take her power away. You can check out what options (e.g. medical, legal, counselling and other support) exist, but ultimately, the survivor must have the power to decide what she wants to do even if you don’t necessarily agree with her decision.

4. Listen

Sexual violence is silencing, so giving space to the survivor to use her voice is important. Now she has control and can break the silence, talk and be listened to if she chooses. The offender didn’t listen, but you can. It is important that the survivor is able to express her thoughts and feelings. Be silent and allow her to talk. Don’t rush to fill any silence; in your haste you may say something unhelpful.

5. No more violence

This is particularly relevant for men who think taking physical revenge on the offender would be appropriate. Further violence will not change what happened, make up for the survivor’s experience, nor take her pain away. The survivor does not need to be dealing with more violence, so you need to put your revenge and retribution thoughts aside, stop the cycle of violence and keep your focus on the survivor.

6. Recognise your limitations

Be realistic – you can not be all things to the survivor, she may need different types of support from different people. It is important that the support you offer is within the limits of your time, energy, skills and knowledge. Most survivors will benefit from a variety of support options which may include counselling and professional support as well as support from friends, family and partners. Find out what other support options may be available and discuss these with her.

7. Maintain focus on the survivor

This situation is not about you so keep your focus on the survivor and don’t attempt to process your own feelings with or through her. If you are also a survivor of sexual violence, you may feel overwhelmed or find yourself unable to put aside your own experience to support another survivor. Be honest and don’t attempt to support someone if you are not capable of this. Keep working on your own healing process and help the survivor find other support options for herself.

8. Consistency and reliability

The healing process is unpredictable with ups and downs, good periods and difficult periods, even in a single day. Your consistent support throughout is important. If things aren't improving right away, don't assume that she is developing mental health problems. Remember sometimes things appear to get worse before they get better. The time frame and healing process of every survivor is unique, things may take a while and by being there and being dependable you will have a positive impact.

9. Educate yourself

Get the facts on sexual violence and the healing process. Seek information from brochures, books, websites and specialist services and this will help to dispel the myths that surround sexual violence. When you have the facts and recognise the prevalence and impact of sexual violence you will be in a stronger position to support someone through their healing process. Know which services in your geographic area provide support and/or specialist counselling to survivors of sexual violence.

10. Take care of yourself

Supporting a survivor can be emotionally draining for you. Take time out to take care of yourself and spend time with people who aren't in crisis. It is also important for you to have your own support people to talk to, so you can process your feelings away from the survivor. Supporters of survivors can also benefit from talking to a professional counsellor. Remember, the stronger you are emotionally, the more effective you will be in supporting a survivor.

Additional points for intimate partners

If you are the intimate partner of a survivor, be aware that certain actions may bring back painful memories and trigger strong emotions for a survivor. Sometimes she will not want to be sexual or even close and physically affectionate. At other times, sexual activity may be a source of her regaining power. If you are not sure of what she wants, ask before acting and recognise that what she wants may change from time to time. You must be patient and let her control the pace and type of sexual activity she is comfortable with.

Counselling for the survivor of sexual violence

Specialised counselling can offer a number of benefits to the survivor of sexual violence.

These include:

- Identifying options and supporting her decisions about accommodation, medical treatment, reporting to the police, etc.
- Helping the survivor to identify and clarify her feelings and assisting her to express them appropriately.
- Exploring ways of coping with the impact and effects of sexual violence.
- Reducing isolation and recognising that she is not alone in experiencing sexual violence.
- Dispelling the mythology that surrounds sexual violence and reinforcing that the blame rests solely with the offender.

The decision to access counselling rests solely with the survivor. Most sexual violence counselling services require the survivor to make her own appointment. After counselling, she may need time and space to process the session before talking about it, or, she may choose not to talk about what happened in counselling at all. This is HER choice.

Your local service contact

The Gold Coast Centre Against Sexual Violence Inc. (formerly the Sexual Assault Support Service) is a free confidential service for women in the Coolangatta to Coomera area.

Qualified and experienced professional workers are employed from a variety of backgrounds including psychology, social/behavioural science and social work.

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www.stopsexualviolence.com



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SUPPORTING A SURVIVOR OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Information for Partners, Relatives and Friends

