



Fact Sheet: What if my friend has been sexually assaulted?

If you have a friend who tells you that they have been sexually assaulted, then the first step towards recovery has been taken. They have chosen a trusted person to confide in.

The way you respond to their confidence is very important. You will have feelings of your own to deal with. You may be upset and confused. Because of the emotional stress of listening to what they are telling you, you may feel like crying, or giggling. You may not feel competent to support your friend in what they are going through, and you may not know where to turn for information that will help them.

There are some really important, practical things you can do:

Listening

Listen to what your friend has to say. Try not to interrupt, or ask lots of questions. Let them tell you at their own pace. Don't worry if they stop talking for a while, silences are OK - you don't have to rush to fill them with words.

Sexual assault has for too long been a crime that victims feel they cannot talk about. It is good for them to be able to tell somebody they trust. Because it is you that they have chosen to tell, it is important that you respect this trust and not talk about what they have told you with your other friends.

Reporting to police is always a decision to be made by the victim/survivor.

Believing

The way you can help your friend is to believe them. People rarely make up stories about sexual assault. You will have been influenced, as we all are, by the beliefs and attitudes in our society about sexual assault:

- That s/he was 'asking for it';
- That it was their fault in some way;
- That children lie about incest.

So it is not helpful to say things which may instinctively come into your head, like:

- 'Why did you go there?'
- 'You know what he's like, you shouldn't have gone out with him'.

Messages like that just let the offender off the hook. And anyway, your friend is probably telling herself the very same things, and blaming herself for what has happened.

If your friend tells you that they are a victim of sexual assault by someone in the family, and if they are under 18 years of age, it is important that you encourage them to tell a trusted adult who can do something about it, perhaps a relative, a school counsellor or teacher, or a worker at your local Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA).

Remember that sexual assault is never the fault of the person who has been assaulted. It is always the fault of the perpetrator who did the assaulting.

Informing

You can help your friend to decide the best course of action if the sexual assault is still happening, and to find out where



they can get more information and assistance.

There will be a Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA) near your home or school. Encourage your friend to telephone the 24 hour Counselling and Support Line, 1800 806 292.

How it might affect you

It is normal to feel hurt when someone we love is made to suffer. Sadness, anger, confusion, guilt, fear, helplessness, anxiety, shock and desperation are all common reactions for victim/survivors and the people who are close to them.

Being aware of these emotions will ultimately help you to better understand the victim/survivor's experience and be more supportive.

As somebody supporting a victim of sexual assault, you too can telephone the 24 hour Counselling and Support Line for advice and support.

There will always be someone on the other end of the phone you can talk to who will believe, understand, and be able to help.

Ask before you touch

Don't assume that physical contact, even a gentle hug, will be comforting to the victim/survivor. Many victim/survivors prefer to avoid contact or even simple touching, even by those they love and trust.

Be patient. Give them the space they need and don't take it personally. It is important to think about the impacts of the sexual assault on the victim/survivor and to respect their needs and wants.