



Six ways to support someone who has experienced sexual assault



It takes courage to share the story of a sexual assault. Never underestimate your role or your privileged power to affect the course of someone's journey to healing. If someone has chosen to share their experience with you, you are probably a person they look to for support, compassion and guidance. You do not have to be an expert — you just have to be yourself and listen with care, kindness, compassion and empathy.

1. Listen

Sometimes you do not need a lot of words to be a comfort to someone. Having someone listen lessens the weight of isolation, secrecy and self-blame. Listening in itself is an act of compassion.

2. Validate

Perhaps remember a time when you felt vulnerable or faced a crisis, and think of what helped you the most. Chances are it was not a specific conversation, but the knowledge that the person or people you told were there for you, believed you, were on your side, and were committed to supporting you. Here are some helpful phrases you could use to show that you care.

*"I believe you." "I'm so sorry this happened to you." "This is not your fault." "You're not alone. I'm here for you and I'm glad you told me. Thank you."

A person who has experienced sexual assault may feel that it was their fault. This is not unusual; many of us 'second guess' ourselves when something bad or sad happens. Also, victim-blaming is prevalent in our society. The reality is that violence and sexual assault are criminal acts. Responsibility always lies with the offender, and it may be helpful to communicate that gently and repeatedly.

*"Nothing you did or could've done differently makes this your fault." "No one ever has the right to hurt you."

"The responsibility sits totally with the person who hurt you." "I know that it can feel like you did something wrong, but you did not." "What they did was an act of violence and illegal."

3. Keep an open heart, Make yourself available

The healing journey can be a long one, full of challenging — and sometimes joyful and liberating — conversations. It will make a difference just knowing that you are there to support them along the way.



4. Keep yourself well, safe, and nurture and maintain your capacity to ‘hear’

There is a limit to what we are able to hear and integrate. The stories of someone else’s hardships that are related to a sexual assault will impact, undoubtedly, and affect us, undoubtedly. This indirect experience (or vicarious trauma) is an absolutely human response in coming face-to-face with the reality and difficulties of the human experience. It is important to care for yourself so that you can provide the strong support that you wish to. You will not be your best self if you find yourself too tired to listen with care and compassion, or you are overcome or overwhelmed with emotions in response. Though, all these feelings are valid. Take some rest and recovery time after a difficult conversation as a way of re-centering yourself

5. Ask what more you can do to help

Some people may feel disconnected and numb and not know how to ask for help or what to ask for. Anticipate what they might need and (if appropriate) rally your collective friends around to provide an active support network to help your friend. Violence and sexual assault are about power and control. It’s vital for people to regain their sense of personal power.

6. Know where to point someone to for more help

Offer options and leave space for them to decide what they want to do. Here are some services that can be helpful:

- Call 000 if you’re worried about safety, the safety of children or anyone else.
- Sexual Assault Crisis Line (www.sacl.com.au) — 1800 806 292
- Gippsland Centre Against Sexual Assault (gcasa.org.au) — 5134 3922
- Victoria Police Sexual Offences Child Abuse Investigation Team —
- 1800RESPECT (National Sexual Assault, Family and Domestic Violence Counselling Line) (www.1800respect.org.au) — 1800 737 732



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