

CONCERNING FAMILY & FRIENDS OF SURVIVORS

Close family and friends are also affected by sexual violence. Regardless of whether or not they were present when the violence was committed, loved ones often experience a complex set of feelings and needs. It can also be very important for family members and friends to seek separate support for themselves during this time.

SECONDARY TRAUMA

Many family members and friends experience “secondary trauma,” after hearing the survivor talk about the incident or from imagining what it was like for the survivor. This trauma may be similar to that experienced by the victim, though usually to a lesser degree. Those who have previously experienced sexual violence or other trauma may experience secondary trauma to a greater degree, which can prevent them from being available to give support to the survivor. It is important that family and friends be given information, support and encouragement to minimize their own feelings of trauma, and so that they will be as helpful to the survivor as possible.

COMMON FEELINGS

Family and friends often experience anger, confusion and insecurity about how to help their loved one. They may wonder if the survivor could have prevented the attack, but not wish to ask such questions. They may find it difficult to listen to the “story,” and hope that silence will make it go away. Others may want to hear every detail.

Sometimes family members/friends will find their feelings confusing. They may be embarrassed or want to keep the assault a secret for fear of what others may think. They may feel guilty or responsible, or feel that they should have been able to prevent it. They may feel that if their advice had been followed, this would not have happened. Family and friends often feel frustrated that they cannot make it all better for the survivor, or that she is not “getting better” more quickly, or they may become overprotective.

In many cases, family and friends feel anger toward the survivor or rage toward the perpetrator, and consider actions that are out of character for them. Many survivors fear their family/friends will get hurt or arrested while trying to invoke revenge on their behalf and this can often cause more stress and fear for the survivor.

While these feelings are normal, they need to be addressed so that family and friends can be supportive to the survivor. Often family and friends, particularly spouses, partners, and/or parents, benefit from participation in support groups or therapy as well. Many suggestions for helping survivors are also useful for helping family and friends.

HOW FAMILY & FRIENDS CAN HELP

Family and friends can be a critical source of support and empathy for survivors. However, it is important that family and friends do more than just pity or feel sorry for the survivor. Family and friends can be most helpful when they:

- ◊ Listen actively whenever the survivor is ready to talk, but not push when s/he is not.
- ◊ Believe the survivor and accept what happened in a non-judgmental way.
- ◊ Support the survivor, and encourage her/him to believe that any reaction that allowed survival was the right thing to do.
- ◊ Understand the common responses to sexual violence and help normalize them for the survivor.
- ◊ Recognize the needs expressed by the survivor’s behavior and emotions.
- ◊ Support the survivor in finding constructive and adaptive ways of managing responses.
- ◊ Give the survivor control of large and small decisions.
- ◊ Respect the survivor’s decision to report or not report the violence to the police. Understand that there are tremendous personal sacrifices involved in prosecuting and many survivors feel unable to make them.
- ◊ Remember that the survivor is more than just a survivor: s/he is a friend, parent, sibling, child, spouse, colleague, etc. Don’t forget to engage with her/him in those roles.
- ◊ Reassure the survivor that the assault has not changed their view of her/him.
- ◊ Challenge the survivor regarding any self-injurious or dangerous behavior.
- ◊ Practice good self-care and get professional help to deal with their roles and/or any secondary trauma reactions.

SUPPORT FOR FAMILY & FRIENDS

- ◊ Rape Crisis Centers provide information and support to family and friends, as well as to survivors.
- ◊ To be connected to a local Rape Crisis Center, call toll-free 1-800-656-HOPE (4673).

Adapted from original work by Miriam Silman, MSW

