

When You Are Supporting Someone Who Has Experienced Sexual Violence

- 1. Believe them.** Even if they sometimes doubt themselves, even if their memories are vague, even if what they tell you sounds too extreme, believe them. People don't make up stories of sexual abuse or assault. Let them know that you are open to hearing anything they wish to share, and that although it's painful and upsetting, you are willing to enter those difficult places with them and to receive their words with respect.
- 2. Let them define their own experience and path to healing.** This includes letting someone choose the words to define their own experience (including labels like "survivor", "victim", "perpetrator", or "rapist", or choosing not to identify with any labels). Each person's healing journey is unique, and however they choose to respond, process, or cope is valid.
- 3. Don't place blame on the person who was harmed.** Sexual violence is about control and power; the assault/abuse has nothing to do with what someone was wearing, what they were doing, or where they were. No one asks to be abused or assaulted, however they responded helped them to survive; the fault is always on the person who causes harm.
- 4. Listen carefully.** Empathetic listening is very helpful at all stages of recovery. Don't try to feed fears, minimize concerns, or solve problems. Just "be there" and let them know you're there to listen and support them.
- 5. Don't force forgiveness.** This is another form of minimization; it encourages further denial and makes the road to recovery more difficult. Forgiveness may or may not be the end result of a process of struggle/grief/anger, etc. It is up to the person who was harmed to decide.
- 6. Understand how abuse is related to adaptations for managing trauma such as alcohol, drugs, eating disorders, or self-harming.** These are ways to try to stop the pain or find comfort.
- 7. Hold out hope but not easy fixes.** There is healing from memories of sexual abuse. Putting a time frame on it or making it sound easy will usually be counter-productive.
- 8. Be supportive but not controlling.** This can be very triggering for people as sexual violence is about control.
- 9. Don't encourage secrecy.** Telling a survivor to keep quiet about it makes them feel like appearances or the comfort of others is more important than how they are feeling. Secrecy is usually a part of the abuse and should be broken at the right time, ideally within a therapeutic plan.
- 10. Validate the survivor's feelings: their anger, pain, and fear.** These are natural, healthy responses. They need to feel them, express them, and be heard.
- 11. Don't sympathize with the abuser.** The person you are supporting needs your absolute loyalty.
- 12. Respect the time and space it takes to heal.** Healing is a slow process that can't be hurried, and it's not a straight line.
- 13. Respect their boundaries.** People who experience sexual violence may either seem like they have no boundaries, or have very strict boundaries. Both of these responses are for their protection. As they heal, they will learn how to set and maintain healthy boundaries. Respecting their boundaries will facilitate the feeling of safety they need.
- 14. Get help for yourself.** You will have many feelings about the abuse or assault. Get support for yourself. You need to take care of yourself so you can be there for the person you are supporting.