

Michigan State University Sexual Assault Program
Sexual Assault Information for Friends & Family

Rape and sexual assaults are crimes which affect many people close to the victim/survivor. The survivor is the primary victim, but co-survivors (i.e. friends, family, partners, co-workers, roommates, etc.) become secondary victims to the crime, because they too are affected by the situation. Many co-survivors do not know what to do or where to go for help, or they may feel they don't have a role in a survivor's recovery. Co-survivors must respond to their feelings and emotions in regard to the incident. Family and friends will all respond differently, depending upon their past experiences in life and the myths and beliefs which they had about rape and assault prior to the experience.

A survivor of sexual assault has experienced a crime where control over the situation, and indeed the right to make decisions regarding one's own body, has been removed. It is natural to feel a tremendous loss of power and control over life following sexual assault, so you should emphasize that just surviving is an accomplishment and that anything he or she did to survive was the right thing. Surviving a sexual assault is a testament of the individual's strength.

What the survivor might feel

- **Anger** at the assailant(s) or herself/himself for not escaping the situation.
- **Powerlessness**, loss of control over one's life.
- **Guilt**, the feeling that she or he could have prevented the assault.
- **Fear** of being blamed or assaulted again, people finding out, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, physical contact, being alone or with others. Responses vary according to each person.
- **Helplessness**, loss of all self-reliance.
- **Depression** as more than a "mood" of sadness.
- **Anxiety, confusion, or feeling "crazy."**
- **Humiliation, shame.**

How the survivor might behave

- Expressive: crying, yelling, shaking, being angry, etc. Anger may be directed at you since you are close to the survivor.
- Appearing extremely calm, controlled or unaffected.
- Appearing withdrawn.
- Having nightmares or trouble sleeping.
- Changing eating habits.
- Lack of concentration or energy.
- "Waking flashbacks" with an intense sense of reality.
- Experiencing symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

How friends & family might feel

- **Pain, sorrow, disgust**
- **Blame** for oneself or the victim
- **Impatience** with the recovery process
- **Anger** at the assailant, wanting revenge
- **Preoccupation** with the sexual aspects of the assault; seeing it as sex rather than violence

What friends & family can do to support the survivor:

- Believe the survivor and tell the survivor that you believe her/him.
- Do not blame the survivor for the assault. Tell the survivor, "It's not your fault." Whatever she/he did to survive the situation succeeded.
- Listen to the survivor. If you feel uncomfortable, be honest. Let her/him know that you care but just cannot handle details of the sexual violence.
- It is normal for survivors to have periods of denial where they do not want to talk about the assault. *Do not push them to talk*, but also do not assume they have completely recovered. Let the survivor know you are available to help if needed.
- Accept the survivor's reactions, whatever they may be. State that these feelings are normal and that the recovery process takes time. Avoid comparing their experience to others' experiences. Everyone's response to trauma is different.
- Address immediate concerns, particularly medical and legal issues. Help identify options and information.
- Do not take control of the situation yourself. Remember, the survivor has been robbed of all sense of control, so letting the survivor make decisions will be empowering. Support the survivor's decisions, even if you disagree with them.
- Help identify a support system for the survivor, and encourage him/her to seek counseling or help from a rape crisis center or sexual assault program.
- Be patient and let the survivor recover at his/her own rate. It may take weeks, months or years. Survivors may never completely "forget" the attack.
- Do not ignore your own feelings, but don't let them overshadow those of the survivor. Do not hesitate to seek outside help from a rape crisis center, counselor or friend. *Do not use the survivor as your support system.*
- Confront your own fears and prejudices about sexual assault. Educate yourself about the common myths and misconceptions surrounding sexual assault by attending workshops, reading books and contacting your local rape crisis center.

This information comes from: www.erie-county-ohio.net/victim/family.htm

Friends and family members of people who are sexually assaulted can call the MSU Sexual Assault Crisis line for information and support 24-hours a day at **(517) 372-6666**.

Online Resource: www.endrape.msu.edu and RAINN (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network) www.rainn.org