

Sexual Assault—How to Help a Resident

Understanding the Issue

Sexual assault is any sexual act that is forced against someone's will. This act may be actual physical aggression, verbal, emotional coercion or psychological. It can be perpetrated by a friend, classmate, co-worker, date, neighbor or relative.

Common Reactions to Sexual Assault

Fear and Anxiety. Survivors of sexual assault will probably experience a heightened sense of fear and anxiety. This may happen when they remember their assault, or it may be triggered spontaneously.

Re-experiencing the Trauma. Individuals who have been assaulted often re-experience the event, sometimes through flashbacks or nightmares.

Increased Arousal. Survivors may feel jumpy, jittery, shaky, easily startled, and have trouble concentrating and sleeping. Continuous arousal can lead to impatience and irritability, especially if the survivor is not getting enough sleep.

Avoidance. Individuals who have experienced sexual assault may avoid situations that remind them of the assault.

Anger. Survivors may feel angry, not only with the assailant, but also with others.

Feelings of Guilt and Shame. Many survivors blame themselves for the things that they did or did not do during the assault. Survivors sometimes experience feelings of blame from others about their assault.

Depression. Depressive symptoms are a common reaction to a sexual assault. Survivors may feel down, sad, hopeless and full of despair. They may cry more often, and lose interest in people and activities that they used to enjoy. They may also feel that their lives are not worth living.

Self Image. Survivors tend to view themselves and the world more negatively than prior to the assault. They also may experience difficulties trusting others, and difficulties with being intimate with others. Their relationships with other may become tense.

Ways to help if someone you know is a survivor of sexual assault

- **Follow the protocol that has been established for working with survivors of sexual assault.**
- **Make sure the resident is aware of options and resources for help, but DO NOT attempt to influence which course of action they take.** On campus and in our community, resources for support and help include (but are not limited to):

- **The Counseling Center** (828) 262-3180 Mon-Fri 8am to 5pm and the 24 hour crisis line (828) 262-2150

OASIS: (828)264-1532 Mon-Fri 8am to 5pm & 24 hr Crisis Line: (828) 262-5035

Student Health Services (828) 262-3100

- **Understand that part of the healing process is the resident feeling empowered to make his/ her own choices about how the sexual assault should be handled.** *As much as you may feel that an assault survivor should pursue a certain course of action, it is important that you allow the survivor to make decisions about how to deal with the assault after it has occurred. This is important to the healing process.*
- **Don't be judgmental.** People do not provoke rape because of how they dress, talk or behave. Rapists look for survivors who are accessible and vulnerable.
- **Do not place blame on the assault survivor.** Assault is not the survivor's fault. Regardless of the circumstances prior to the assault, survivors do not ask to be sexually assaulted. Reassure the resident that the sexual assault was not their fault.
- **Give comfort.** The resident may need a great deal of nurturing and support.
- **Do not make judgments as to whether a survivor is telling the truth or not.** Passing judgment on the rape is not your responsibility. Remember that according to FBI statistics, *only 1 to 2 % of assaults reported are suspected to be false*, which is approximately the same rate for false reports for other crimes.
- **Don't minimize the trauma of being raped by someone you know.** Individuals who are survivors of acquaintance rape deal with extensive emotional issues, which are in many ways similar to the issues that manifest after a stranger rape. Additionally, survivors of acquaintance rape also suffer and must work through the issues of being victimized by someone that they trusted and knew.
- **Encourage the survivor to use their social support and be around trusted others as needed.** Although it is ultimately the survivor's choice, you may wish to encourage them to contact a close friend who can stay with them at night initially after the assault.
- **Encourage the survivor to seek out support through a hotline, counseling center, or rape crisis center.** Individuals trained in sexual assault issues can best help and support the sexual assault survivor.

NOTE: The information presented in this article has been adapted from the Sexual Assault, Counseling and Education (SACE) program at the Tuttleman Counseling Services at Temple University in Philadelphia, PA.