

# How to Support a Survivor

- Be a good listener. If you find yourself talking more than the survivor, you are probably not listening enough. Let the survivor talk about the incident, but don't force a discussion.

*“I don't want to pressure you to talk about this if you don't want to, and I want you to know that I'm here for you and ready to listen if you want to talk about what happened.”*

*“If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine. I just want you to know that I'm here for you if you need me.”*

- Believe what the survivor tells you. Talk, listen, respect and be emotionally available to the survivor. Accept the fact that the assault/abuse happened.
- Validate the survivor's feelings. Explain that what s/he is feeling and experiencing is completely normal and acceptable.
- Understand and tell the survivor that what happened is not the survivor's fault.
- Listen non-judgmentally. Ask the survivor what kind of support s/he wants and needs. Honor and respect these needs.
- Recognize and own your biases about sexual assault and rape. Be careful to leave your own judgments out of the conversation.
- Make sure the survivor is safe and physically well.
- Recognize that you cannot fix the survivor. Don't feel as if you need to have all the answers. Respect the fact that every survivor is an expert in his or her own healing process.

*“I don't really know what to say, but I'm your friend and I believe you and will support you in whatever decision you make.”*

- Suggest options to the survivor (medical, psychological and/or other assistance), but let the survivor decide what action to take.
- Ask the survivor if s/he wants feedback on conversations or if s/he just wants you to listen.
- Respect and understand that the survivor may temporarily become distant from loved ones.

- Assure the survivor that you will be available to provide support throughout the process of recovery.
- Give the survivor time to heal. Be patient and understand that the healing process takes time.
- Don't give up on the survivor!
- Moderate your natural tendencies to become overprotective.
- Get support for yourself

## Medical Attention and Legal Assistance

The survivor may, or may not want to seek medical or legal attention immediately. **It is extremely important to respect whatever decision s/he makes.** If the survivor decides to seek medical attention, you can offer to accompany the survivor to the hospital. If s/he declines your offer, don't take it personally.

**It is recommended that medical attention be sought within 72 hours of the assault. This is the maximum time period in which HIV prevention medication and emergency contraception (morning-after pill) can be administered. If five days have passed since the assault, and you would like medical treatment, you can call the Trauma Recovery Center at 415-437-3000. SFGH (San Francisco General Hospital) EMERGENCY SERVICES, RELATED TO THE TREATMENT OF A SEXUAL ASSAULT, ARE OFFERED TO SURVIVORS FREE OF CHARGE.**

During the medical exam at SFGH, if the survivor wishes to pursue legal action, s/he can have forensic evidence collected, and choose to make a police report at this time. Even if the survivor has forensic evidence collected, this does not mean s/he needs to file a police report at this time or at any time. The police department will hold evidence from a sexual assault exam for three months before destroying it, however the longer the survivor waits to press charges the less likely any legal action will be taken against the perpetrator. In other words, the sooner a survivor presses charges, the stronger his or her case will be.

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# Additional Suggestions for Romantic Partner's Survivors

- Ask permission before touching or holding your partner. Take cues from your partner, and maintain open communication.
- Be patient. Changes in your sexual relationship are normal and usually temporary. Be sensitive and understanding to your partner.
- Don't doubt your own adequacy or become angry if your partner is not as responsive as usual.
- Your partner needs to be given the chance to regain his or her sense of personal control. Do not demand or pressure your partner into sexual activity. Resuming sex "as usual" may not be the best way of moving the healing process forward.
- It is also important not to avoid any display of intimacy or affection. This may be interpreted by your partner that s/he is undesirable to you. There are many ways to express intimacy without being sexual.
- Do not rush sexual contact. Allow your partner to make his or her own decisions around initiating sexual contact. It is important that you allow your partner to decide a pace and intensity of sexual contact that feels most comfortable to him/her.
- Accept the fact that your partner's renewal of sexual interest may occur at a slow pace. (It is also possible that your partner may become more sexual than before the assault. Continue to communicate about any shifts in your sexual relationship).
- Discuss the subject of sex in a non-sexual environment (i.e., not in bed).

# In Supporting a Survivor

## You May Experience Certain Feelings:

### Impatience

- The survivor's dependence on you may feel overwhelming.
- Recovery can be a long, slow process that may take years. You may feel frustrated with the time it takes for the survivor to recover.

### Guilt

- You may feel guilty that you did not prevent the assault/abuse. It is neither your fault, nor the survivor's fault. The perpetrator committed the crime--not you.
- If you were the perpetrator, get support for yourself. Take initiative to accept accountability for your actions. You may not be the best person to provide support the survivor.

### Fear

- Your closeness to the survivor's experience may underline the vulnerability to violence that we are all subject to. You may feel vulnerable because you realize that it could happen to you.
- If you are the same sex as the perpetrator, you may fear that the survivor will associate you with the perpetrator.
- If you are a sexual partner, you may be afraid to have sex with the survivor.

### Anger

- You may feel extremely angry at the perpetrator for harming someone you love. Feeling anger is normal and understandable. It is important to find ways of expressing and channeling that anger constructively.
- It is often easier to blame ourselves for bad things that happen to us than to admit that circumstances were beyond our control. Be careful not to direct anger toward yourself or the survivor. It was not your fault, and it was not the survivor's fault that the assault occurred.

It is important to realize that your feelings are natural and normal. Supporting a survivor can be challenging, try to accept your feelings and to get support for yourself.

## Tips for Supporting Yourself:

- Talk with people you can trust. You too need support from others.
- If you are male and the survivor is female, do not take personally that any hatred she expresses toward men. If the perpetrator was a man, her anger with the perpetrator may generalize into a temporary anger toward all men. This is normal and understandable given the circumstances.
- Talk to a counselor or call a rape crisis hotline (**SFWAR's RAPE CRISIS HOTLINE IS 415-647-7273**). It is hard to witness someone in emotional pain. Take care of yourself as you help the survivor.
- Educate yourself about rape and rape prevention.
- Do not expect to be able to make the survivor feel better all of the time.
- Do not blame the survivor. Even when you feel poor judgments were made by the survivor, no one deserves to be sexually assaulted or abused.
- Do not blame yourself. The only person who is at fault is the person who committed the crime.

**24-hour**  
free & confidential  
**Crisis Hotline**  
**415-647-RAPE**  
(415-647-7273)

SAN FRANCISCO **WOMEN AGAINST RAPE**