

The Aurora Center for Advocacy & Education

# Concerned Persons/ Secondary Victims Sexual Assault

## **What is Sexual Assault?**

Sexual assault is actual, attempted, or threatened sexual contact with another person without that person's consent. Consent must be informed, freely and actively given, and mutually understood. If physical force, coercion, intimidation, and/or threats are used, there is no consent. Acquaintance sexual assault is non-consensual sexual contact between people who know each other.

## **10 Ways to Help a Survivor of Sexual Assault**

### **1. Be Supportive**

There are many ways to be supportive of an individual who discloses to you that they were sexually assaulted. The first step in supporting the survivor is to BELIEVE them, then support any of their decisions regarding medical, legal, and emotional care resources. An advocate from The Aurora Center can speak with you, or the survivor, about these resources. Remember that the violence that occurred took away the survivor's power and control. It is important that they are allowed to be in control and make their own decisions (even if you do not like the decision they make). Supporting the wishes of the survivor will help them to begin healing from the assault.

### **2. Communicate**

Communicating the following messages with the survivor can increase their openness in disclosing to others in the future:

"I believe you."

"I am sorry that it happened to you."

"You did what you needed to survive."

"It's not your fault."

"Help is available."

### **3. Listen**

As a friend or family member, it is important that you LISTEN to what the survivor tells you. Sometimes assault victims need to talk about the attack. Be non-judgmental and non-blaming. Respect the amount of information that they want to share with you. It is more important to listen than to talk or give advice.

### **4. Be Patient**

Be aware that the recovery from sexual assault can be slow and that there is not a set period of time for healing. Let the survivor proceed at their own pace and continue to be available for support throughout the process.

### **5. Be Sensitive**

Let the survivor know that you do not subscribe to any of the common myths about sexual assault (see resource "Myths and Facts about Sexual Assault"). Understand that the survivor has experienced trauma that was not their fault but will likely continue to impact them. Let them know that this is okay, that they are not "damaged," and that they are NOT to blame for what happened.

### **6. Allow for Space**

Check in with the survivor about how they feel. It may, at times, be helpful to support the survivor by respecting their need for personal space. Even if you mean well and want to offer comfort, remember that the survivor needs and deserves control over their body. They may not want to be touched, hugged, held, or accompanied. Ask for permission before touching or holding the survivor. Comments like these can be helpful "I want to help," "Can I do anything that would be comforting to you?" or "Would it be alright if I gave you a hug?"

## **7. Know the Options**

Assist the survivor in getting the help they want and need. This may mean providing phone numbers, transportation, information, etc. Informing the survivor of their options can be critical.

Advocates from the Aurora Center are available to help explain these, and other, options to you as well as the survivor. It is important for survivors to be able to make informed decisions. Encouraging the survivor to connect with an advocate at The Aurora Center can offer them the chance to learn what options are available and what each option entails. Advocates never force survivors to access any one option, and neither should you.

## **8. Be Non-Judgmental**

The manner in which you respond can increase or decrease the likelihood that the survivor will continue to seek needed assistance. If the survivor feels judged by you or someone else's response to their disclosure, they will be unlikely to reach out for help again and may feel ashamed. Your job as a concerned person is not to judge, or say what you would have done differently, but to be supportive and appropriately attentive to the individual and to validate their feelings.

## **9. Help in Gaining Safety**

Asking the survivor questions like "what would help you feel more safe?" can help reveal options for increasing safety. The survivor may want you to stay the night, stand outside of the door when using a bathroom, accompany them to a hospital or counseling office, help them make a report to police, or to screen calls. It is important to understand that even if the assault happened in the survivor's past, trauma can have life-long effects. Believe, listen and be patient with the survivor.

## **10. Self-Care and Knowledge**

Seek support for yourself. Become aware of your feelings about the trauma and the stress of supporting your loved one. It is best to avoid communicating your biases and negative emotions to the survivor. However, it may become important for you to speak with someone about how you are feeling. This can be particularly important if your loved one's assault is triggering your own experiences of trauma. Staff and advocates at The Aurora Center are available to speak with you about your experiences in the role of a support person as well as your experiences of being a survivor.

Educate yourself about sexual assault and unwanted sexual contact. Having friends and family know more about sexual assault can be very useful to the survivor. It is important to remind yourself that you do not know everything about the survivor's experience. However, dispelling any myths that you have about sexual assault, learning about what to expect during the healing process and increasing your understanding of this issue in general can be useful to both you as well as the survivor.

### **Additional Things that Significant Others and Intimate Partners Can Do:**

- A disruption of routine, even without crisis, produces anxiety. Recognize that you and the victim/survivor may both be in crisis. Prioritize issues that need immediate attention and let go of decisions that can wait.
- Ask for permission before touching or holding the survivor.
- If you are an intimate partner, do not rush sexual contact. The survivor needs to decide when it is right to have sexual contact, and to pace the intensity of involvement.
- Accept the fact that the survivor's renewal of sexual interest may occur at a slow pace.
- Discuss the subject of sex in a non-sexual environment (i.e., not in bed).

## **10 Things to Avoid in your Role as a Support Person**

### **1. Don't Blame**

Do not place blame on the victim. Perpetrators of these crimes are the only ones to blame for their actions. There is never an excuse for force or coercion. This is true even if: the survivor has had sex with that person before, is in a committed relationship with the perpetrator, has been drinking or using drugs, has flirted with the perpetrator, or did not fight back. What the survivor was wearing or doing does not matter. If they did not give consent, it is assault. Don't ask if they did anything to "lead him/her on." The perpetrator made a choice to commit an assault and could have chosen otherwise. Remember, perpetrator are responsible for their actions; the victim is never to blame.

### **2. Don't Make Assumptions**

*This is a good general rule. Allow the survivor to tell you what happened, what they want, how they are feeling, or what they need. Do not assume that you can imagine this person's experience. Even if you have survived similar trauma, it is likely that your experience is less similar than you assume. Also, don't assume that what was helpful for you will be helpful for them. Ask the survivor.*

### **3. Don't Give Advice or Tell Them What to Do**

*Instead, review options with the survivor and support their decisions. They have the right to have control over their own life, even if you believe you would do something differently or if you believe they may regret their decision. Don't press the survivor to report the incident to the police. Don't force them to talk to someone about it. Doing nothing is a valid option and needs to be supported, especially right after a recent assault.*

### **4. Don't Make Threats**

*Don't make comments against the perpetrator such as "I am going to find and kill them." Threatening to take care of the situation only adds to the emotional burden the survivor is already carrying. Learn healthier ways of taking care of your own anger.*

### **5. Don't Question or Criticize**

*Don't criticize or question the survivor for not telling you sooner about the incident. The very reason for not telling you was most likely fear of your rejection. Honor the survivor's timing and thank them for disclosing this information to you. This is not the time to inquire about why they haven't spoken with you about this before. It does not mean that they don't trust you or care about you. Being told about the incident is a time for supporting the survivor and honoring their needs for healing.*

### **6. Don't Gossip**

*Do not break the survivor's trust by telling others about the assault without permission. The survivor should have the control over who knows, and when and with whom they talk to about it.*

### **7. Don't Be Overprotective**

*Resist overprotecting the survivor and respect their judgment concerning dating, seeing friends, going out, staying in school, etc.*

### **8. Don't Prevent Talking**

*Let the survivor talk as they need. If you are unable to provide a listening ear for any reason, suggest an advocate or counselor. It is okay to take care of yourself and implement boundaries, but you should give the survivor other resources.*

### **9. Don't Lose Patience**

*Comments such as "Why aren't you over this yet?" or "You constantly talk about this like it's the only event in your life," are not helpful. Remember that the recovery process can be slow and will vary with each individual.*

### **10. Don't Perpetuate Rape Myths**

*Rape myths exist due to structural conditions, societal gender roles, and power roles in a patriarchal society. They are untrue judgments about how a victim/survivor should respond, why rape occurs, who can be raped, that rape is sex, and more. These are not based in science and are unhelpful in providing support to survivors.*



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