

## **A NOTE TO THOSE CLOSEST TO VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT: Families, Partners, and Friends**

How does sexual assault affect a person? How does sexual assault affect those closest to a victim? How can those closest to a victim do "the right thing"? More than anyone else, it is those closest to a victim who will influence how s/he deals with the attack.

Most people who have been sexually assaulted do not react to the sexual aspects of the crime, but instead react to the terror and fear that is involved. Often an immediate reaction of the victim is "I could have been killed". Many of those around him/her, particularly partners, may find themselves concerned with the sexual aspects of the crime. The more this preoccupation is communicated to the victim the more likely s/he is to have difficulties in dealing with her own feelings. Probably the best way to understand his/her feelings is to try to remember or imagine a situation where you felt powerless and afraid. You may remember feeling very alone, fearful and needing comfort.

Often the victim of sexual assault needs much love and support the first few days. Physical affection may be important. Stroking or caressing can be comforting. Be sure to ask the victim if touching would be appropriate because some people can become further traumatized by physical interaction. Friends and family help break down the loneliness and alienation. This, of course, leads to the question of sexual activity. It is neither possible to generalize about how the victim will feel about sexual activity, nor should you guess. If you have been involved sexually with the victim, try to discuss, at an appropriate time, how s/he feels in general about the attack, about you and about sexual activity. An appropriate time is not right after the sexual assault. Let his/her comments to the first two questions guide you in deciding whether you have chosen a good time to discuss it or whether you would be pushing the point too soon. Some people will be anxious to resume normal sexual relations as a way of forgetting the assault; others will be more hesitant.

In the case of virgin assault, sensitive support seems most important. A time will arrive when it will be important to discuss the pleasure involved in sex - as well as to reassure the person's right to decide when and with whom s/he wishes to have sexual contact.

It seems advisable for the victim to talk about the sexual assault; however, it is not possible to generalize about how much s/he should be encouraged to talk about it. Victims may *not* appreciate specific questions; they tend to be interpreted as too probing and callous. To probe in these areas may only worsen any problems the victim may have in dealing with the sexual assault.

Instead, questions about how s/he feels now and what bothers him/her the most are more useful. These types of questions are not threatening and should allow him/her to talk about his/her most immediate concerns. Remember, too, the victim wants to talk about other things. Often the sexual assault may leave a victim concentrating on other

problems and it is important that s/he talk about these. Probably the most practical suggestion is that you communicate your own willingness to let him/her talk. Because of your closeness to him/her, the victim may be more sensitive to your feelings. If the sexual assault distresses you, it may be impossible for him/her to talk to you. S/he may also try to protect you. In these and other cases, where s/he really will not be able to talk with you - encourage him/her to speak with someone she trusts. Remember that the sexual assault has brought up feelings of powerlessness - encouraging him/her to talk to whom s/he wants, when s/he wants, is more helpful than feeling that it is necessary to talk to you.

If sexual assault is treated as a serious crime and not a heinous experience, victims would probably have less difficulties in dealing with it. The victim survived the attack, and one would suppose that s/he would want to resume living a "normal" life as quickly as possible. In a healthy, supportive environment, most victims will find the sexual assault meshes with other unhappy experiences in their lives. Because of others' reactions or his/her life situations at the time of the assault, many victims will find the assault was indeed a traumatic milestone. If after a reasonable amount of time, a victim seems unable to cope with the day-to-day problems of life, professional help should be sought.

Whether or not professional counselling is sought, it is not a replacement for warm, concerned, loving communications. A professional counsellor may help, but he or she cannot replace your role in the relationship. Sexual assault not only affects the victim, but also you, as it plays upon your own fears and fantasies. Try to recognize the fears for what they are; otherwise, you may end up projecting them on the victim and cause some serious problems for his/her and your relationship.

Finally, it should be noted that, if the victim has chosen to report to the police, the criminal justice process involves numerous challenges. Your support will be helpful. Strongly encourage the victim to access specialized services for victims of sexual assault. With appropriate, timely intervention, victims of sexual assault continue on to live healthy, satisfying lives.

Support services are available to victims of sexual assault and their families. Individual sessions are designed to support individual coping skills and accelerate recovery in people who are experiencing the after-effects of a trauma. Regardless of the length of time since the assault, all victims can benefit from appropriate supportive intervention.



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