

How to Help a Student who has been Sexually Assaulted

Survivors of an assault may have a range of emotional, physical, and mental reactions, including having no reaction at all. Each person who has been assaulted will react in a different way because of their own personal experiences. Listed below are some general strategies you may find helpful in helping another student who has been assaulted.

- 1) The most important strategy is to **Believe the Person**: Research shows that the reaction of the first person a survivor discloses his/her story will affect the way they seek support and the way in which healing occurs. It is most helpful to set aside your beliefs/reactions and to believe the person when they tell you they have been assaulted. It is not up to you to determine the facts of the case, rather, your role is to provide support and listen.
- 2) **Listen non-judgmentally**: In addition to believing the person, it is equally important to listen in a non-judgmental manner. The key is to use active listening skills and to not ask many questions or attempt to reassure when they are sharing their story. Most important, don't question details of the assault. Rather, focus on relating to the feelings of the student and paraphrase what they are sharing.
- 3) **Assure the person they are not to blame**: Often survivors of an assault assume they are to blame for what occurred. As a support, it is imperative that you assure them that no matter what happened, it was not their fault. The survivor is not to blame, the perpetrator is, as no one deserves to be assaulted.
- 4) **Validate feelings**: After an assault the student may feel like they are experiencing a variety of emotions and may feel like things are out of control. Assure the person that any reaction is normal at this time and simply reflect the feelings they are sharing.
- 5) **Empowerment**: It is up to the student who was assaulted to make decisions about what they want to do. Remember, after an assault a person feels disempowered, so it is important to help them make their own decisions. If you are asked for guidance or advice, talk about resources and options (see handout) and try to connect them to someone who can provide further support.

Helpful Phrases- you may use some of the following phrases as a way to empower the student who has been assaulted.

- What do you want to do?
- Tell me more about_____?
- What does that mean to you?
- Do you want to?
- What would you like?
- What would you like to see happen?
- What I'm hearing you say is_____.
- What is it that bothers you about that?
- How do you feel about that?

Things to Avoid when talking with someone who has been assaulted

Often when helping a survivor of assault our own feelings reactions can be triggered. It is important that you attend to what the student needs and to be careful of trying to fix the situation.

- Evaluating- try not to say “you shouldn’t, you ought to, you’re wrong”
- Interpreting, analyzing, diagnosing: “you’re doing that because”
- Ridicule, questioning, shaming: “what were you thinking/doing?”
- Criticizing/blaming: “this wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t...”
- Advising/offering solutions: be careful with trying to tell the student what they should do. Rather, focus on providing them with information about where they can go for support
- Distracting, diverting: “It isn’t that bad, let’s talk about something more pleasant.”

Remember, seek your own support! It can be difficult when helping someone who has experienced a trauma, as it may trigger a variety of reactions in you and you may feel unable to help. Please seek out a support person for yourself; this could be a friend, or a professional staff member. The Office of Counseling Services can be a place to seek support, feel free to call 757-594-7047 to consult with a staff member.