

HOW YOU CAN HELP: THINGS TO DO

There are many things you can do to help a friend who has experienced sexual assault or sexual violence. When a survivor tells you they were sexually assaulted, they are entrusting you with a part of their life that is painful, frightening, and vulnerable. These guidelines can help you honor that trust and help their healing:

Do ... support your friend. People rarely lie about sexual assault or sexual violence.

Do ... listen to your friend and concentrate on understanding her or his feelings.

Do ... allow your friend to be silent; you don't have to talk every time he or she stops talking.

Do ... let your friend know that you understand her or his feelings. For example, you might say, "You must have been very frightened."

Do ... ask how you can help. Thank your friend for sharing their experience with you.

Do ... offer to accompany your friend in seeking medical attention or counseling or in going to law enforcement.

Do ... help your friend regain a sense of control. Support him or her in making decisions about whom to tell and avoid trying to solve problems for your friend.

Do ... remind your friend that sexual assault or sexual violence is the abuser's fault, not his or her fault.

Do ... validate the survivor's feelings of anger, pain, and fear. These are natural, healthy responses to abuse. They need to feel them, express them, and be heard.

Do ... offer shelter or companionship so that your friend doesn't have to be alone.

Do ... encourage the survivor to get help. You can't be their only supporter.

Do ... educate yourself about sexual assault and the healing process.

Do ... respect the time and space it takes to heal. Healing is a slow process with lots of ups and downs. It can't be hurried.

Do ... resist seeing the survivor as a victim. Continue to see them as strong, courageous individuals struggling to resolve a major trauma.

Do ... get help if you need it. Rape crisis counselors, the counseling center, residential life staff, and the dean of students can be helpful in support of you and your friend. If you don't know who else to call, ask the operator for the number for suicide prevention.

HOW YOU CAN HELP: THINGS TO AVOID

There are also things you should avoid doing or saying when you are helping a survivor of sexual assault or sexual violence. Avoiding the items below will prevent you from causing further hurt to the survivor or creating a barrier between the two of you.

Don't ... ask questions that imply that the rape was your friend's fault, such as, "Why did you go to his room?" "Why didn't you scream?" "Why didn't you run away?"

Don't ... ask for details of the assault or sexual violence. Let the person share what they are comfortable sharing in their own way.

Don't ... try to excuse or explain the abuser's behavior.

Don't ... touch or hug your friend unless you're sure your friend is comfortable with physical contact.

Don't ... act in ways that are upsetting to your friend. Be wary of phrases like, "If I could find the creep, I'd kill him." Although you may be trying to be supportive, that type of comment might upset your friend even more.

Don't ... tell anyone about the assault without your friend's permission.

Don't ... tell your friend what to do; rather, help her or him explore the options. Rape crisis counselors, the counseling center, residential life staff, and the dean of students can be helpful in discussing the options.

Don't ... pity the survivor.

Don't ... ask a survivor to forgive and forget.

Don't ... ask a survivor if they are done dealing with it yet. That is a shaming question. The process of healing may take an entire lifetime.

REMEMBER:

If a survivor chooses to talk to you about the abuse or assault, and you are uncomfortable about it, please say so. Let the survivor know you aren't uncomfortable with them, only the issue. Then offer to find someone who is comfortable with the issue.