



For Friends & Family: How to Support a Survivor of Sexual Assault after a Cold Case Victim Notification

NC SAKI: Victim Notification Toolkit

For anyone disclosing a sexual assault, it can be a very challenging experience. However, for survivors who have been contacted years, sometimes decades after experiencing sexual assault, the trauma of needing to retell, or tell new people, can be even more painful than when it first happened to them. Knowing how to be supportive can be crucial in a survivor's healing process. As a loved one, there are two things you need to think about: how you can support the survivor, and how you can take care of yourself. And in the end, the most important tip is to be prepared for anything.

How You Can Support the Survivor

Believe the survivor: You may have known this happened or this is new information for you. Either way, know that revealing (or re-revealing) this experience takes a great deal of strength and courage. Remember that **NO ONE DESERVES TO BE ASSAULTED**. Let the survivor know that you believe them.

Be respectful of privacy: Don't tell anyone about the assault or re-opening of the case without the survivor's permission. The survivor has chosen to tell you and it may be hurtful or dangerous to inform others.

Provide information: There are several things a survivor may want to think about after being notified of the newest information about their case: seeking counseling, protecting their loved ones, concerns about how this will impact their job/friends/family/children. It is important to provide information but to allow the survivor the agency to make their own choices. Please see the resources page for support options you can provide to your loved one.

Let the survivor make their own decisions: Since the assault happened, the survivor has developed their own way to cope with the trauma. Getting a phone call from law enforcement after all of this time – sometimes with the news that they can move the case forward, others with the news that they still are not able to do anything, can activate many memories and potentially harmful past coping skills (i.e. alcohol and other drug use, suicidal thoughts, disordered eating behaviors).

It is important that you support the survivor, and that you always let the survivor make their own decisions about how or if they want to move forward with the case. Many survivors feel a deep sense of disempowerment as a result of being violated. Therefore it is important to help the survivor feel empowered. Instead of taking charge, ask how you can help. Offer to accompany the survivor to meetings with the detective, district attorney, or even to court. Offer to help take care of their children if the survivor has to attend a meeting, bring them a meal, drop off groceries. Do whatever you can to take remove additional stressors, and support the decisions the survivor makes about the case, even if you might not agree with them.

Be aware of your desire to provide reassurance: Saying things like "everything is going to be alright" or "it could have been worse," may seem supportive, however, the survivor may interpret these reassurances to mean that you don't understand their feelings, or that you are trivializing the magnitude of what they are experiencing. Instead you might say, "I'm sorry this is happening," or "How can I be helpful?"

Remind the survivor that you care: The survivor may worry that their friends and loved ones won't think of them in the same way. Let the survivor know you don't see them differently, and that you are here to support them. Consider highlighting the courage and strength it takes to share their story and seek support.

Give the survivor space if they need it: Be sensitive to the fact that the survivor might want to spend some time alone. Don't touch or hug the survivor unless you are sure they are comfortable with physical contact, always ask for permission.

Be a good listener: Recovering from a sexual assault can take a long time. Being contacted about their case after they have moved on can be extremely difficult. The survivor may need your support now and in the future. Let the survivor choose when they want to talk and how much they want to share. Sometimes the survivor may not want to talk at all. When the survivor does choose to talk to you, these are things to keep in mind:

- DO listen to their response and match your response accordingly. If they are mad – validate that. If they are happy – validate that.
- DO concentrate on understanding the survivor's feelings.
- DO allow silences.
- DO let the survivor know you are glad they disclosed to you.
- DON'T interrogate or ask for specific details about the sexual assault or what is happening with the case.
- DON'T tell them what you would do or what they should do.

How You Can Take Care of Yourself

Learn as much as you can about sexual assault and the Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI): Be as familiar as you can with community resources and common reactions to sexual assault. This will help you better understand the survivor's experiences and the process of recovery, as well as what may lie ahead for them.

Be aware of your own reactions to sexual assault: You may feel a sense of violation when someone you care about has been assaulted, or revictimized by being contacted about their case so long after it happened. You may experience feelings of confusion, hurt or anger. You may wish you could make the survivor's pain go away. No matter how helpful you are, you can't make the situation disappear. The best you can do is help the survivor find ways to help themselves. Your support is much more helpful to the survivor than your anger and frustration.

Recognize the difference between what you want and what the survivor wants: Try to distinguish between what you are doing to make yourself feel better from what you are doing to help the survivor. You may be tempted to do things that make you feel better which are not helpful to the survivor, such as beating up the assailant or trying to get the survivor to just "forget about it." Instead, ask the survivor what would be most helpful.

Know your limitations: Every individual has a limit to how much they can give. This does not make you a failure. It is important to know your own limitations of support and to share these clearly with the survivor. Provide the survivor with other support options. Let the survivor know you will not feel hurt if they choose to talk with someone else.

Seek support for yourself: Your support plays a critical role in the survivor's recovery. Talking with someone who can help you work through your own feelings will better enable you to support the survivor. Remember to respect the survivor's privacy when seeking support from others.

For resources for you and the survivor, see the Resources Page.

This project was supported by Grant No. 2018-AK-BX-0003 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.