

Supporting Others

When a person tells somebody else about an incident of sexual violence, we call this a disclosure. If someone is telling you about what has happened to them, it is because they trust you. It takes a huge amount of courage to tell another person about what has happened. For that reason, you are very important to them and what you say and do matters. Supporting anyone through a disclosure can be difficult, it can be made even harder if the person is a loved one. Here are some supports to equip yourself with useful skills.

A note on language: We know that language is important, and people feel differently about the terms used to describe people who have experienced sexual violence. Throughout our toolkits, where space is limited, we will be using 'survivor', but we acknowledge that not everyone will identify with this term.

It is not usually obvious how to handle situations like these, so don't worry if you're feeling like it's overwhelming. Many great supports are available for you and for the person disclosing.


You or the person disclosing can call the **National 24 Hour Freephone Helpline at 1800 778888** for support and information on options.

Keep in mind that these are guidelines. Each survivor is unique, if you are unsure about anything you can check in with the survivor. Above all else, while supporting someone through a disclosure of sexual violence, be kind and sensitive and show the person that you care.

Offer your support and attention

One of the most important things you can do for a survivor of sexual violence is to believe them and let them know you are there for them. Another invaluable help is simply to listen and accept what they are saying.

Here are some phrases that might help:



"Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me"

"What happened was not your fault"

"How you are feeling is completely understandable and valid"

"I'm here for you"

"I believe you"

Try to stay neutral

It's normal to be upset by hearing that something awful has happened to someone you know. It's okay to be angry and sad, but try to stay calm. Showing big emotions could make the survivor feel ashamed or at fault for making you feel that way. Whatever you are feeling is valid, but try not to show those feelings to the survivor.

Don't blame

A person is never responsible for being assaulted. Sexual violence is 100% the fault of the perpetrator and never the survivor. Ever.

Try not to ask questions about the details of the assault or assaults, or about details such as what the person was wearing or why they did or did not do certain things.

You do not need to know this in order to support the person, and it may make the survivor feel like you are blaming them. Going over the details could also retraumatise them.

Instead, focus on being present and listening to what they want to tell you right now. In general, try not to overwhelm the person with too many questions. Allow them to talk about how they are feeling in a way that is as comfortable as possible for them.

Here are some questions to avoid:

Here are some helpful questions if you do want to ask any:



“What were you wearing?”



“Why didn’t you say no?”



“Were you drinking?”



“Have you told the Gardaí?”



“Why did you go back to his house?”

“How can I help you right now?”

Is there anyone else you trust that you think you could get help from?

“Do you want me to offer solutions or just sit with you for a bit”

Important take away

A survivor is never to blame for an assault. Don’t ask critical or blaming questions. Listen and be present.

Understand sexual violence can take many forms

In all its forms, sexual violence is harmful and wrong and can be traumatising. Any sexual contact without consent is sexual violence and should be taken seriously.

What happened might not fit the understanding you have of sexual violence but sexual violence doesn’t have a particular look or experience. It could be an isolated incident or an ongoing occurrence within a relationship of any kind. It has many forms and in all its forms is wrong and should be taken seriously.

Statistically, sexual violence is most likely to be carried out by a person known to the survivor.

You might know the perpetrator; it may be the person’s partner or a mutual friend. As a result, it might be particularly challenging for you to understand that this has happened. The most important thing to remember is how the survivor is feeling in that moment – if it is shocking and upsetting for you, it is much more so for them. Try and avoid saying things like “he would never do that” or “she doesn’t seem like a person who would do that” even if it is hard for you to believe. It has been difficult for them to confide in you and so focus on supporting them in that moment.

Try this: Don’t say anything about the perpetrator. At all. You don’t even need to ask who it was, if that information wasn’t already offered. That’s not important. What’s important is for you to be there for the person disclosing to you.

Important take away

Sexual violence takes many forms, it is never the survivor’s fault.

It is incredibly important to the survivor that their experience is not dismissed. Here are some things that are considered sexual violence.

- unwanted touching
- unwanted, offensive communication including comments or jokes
- sexual harassment
- pressuring someone for sex
- indecent exposure and obscene gestures
- being forced to watch sexual behaviour, including pornography
- sharing of intimate images
- rape

Be understanding & non-judgmental

Be patient and supportive both in the moment and the time that follows. There is no “right” way to respond to sexual violence. The person may not behave in a way that you expect. They may have problems with everyday things like eating, sleeping and concentrating on work or study. In all its forms, sexual violence is harmful, wrong and can be traumatising. Be aware that trauma can have serious effects on the brain and the person may be acting in ways that are not like them or that are “challenging” or “difficult”.

Don't expect them to be back to their usual selves quickly – it's important to give them time. If the assault or assaults were a while ago, try to understand that this may have had an impact on their behaviour. Trauma can also have an effect on memory. If a person does not have clear or solid memories, this is because of trauma and not because what they are saying isn't true.

Important take away

In all its forms, sexual violence is harmful, wrong and can be traumatising. Trauma can make people behave differently, be patient.

Let them make their own choices

Sexual violence was not their choice, so it is vitally important that you do not take away their decision-making powers or pressure them into any actions or choices such as reporting what has happened to the Gardai.

Don't interrogate them or push them on their actions – it is up to them to say what they need to do. You can find out what options are open to them, but let them decide what they want to do.

Never report an incident to the Gardai or speak to others without the survivor's consent. Don't tell anyone else about what the survivor has told you, they have trusted you to keep their experience confidential. There could also be safety concerns that you are not aware of. It's their story to tell when they are ready.

It's okay to talk to a trusted person in your life to seek support for yourself but avoid using names or details that might identify the person.

Traumatic effects of sexual assault

These can include but are not limited to:



Emotional

- Crying
- Anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Fearfulness
- Anger
- Emotional numbness
- Depression



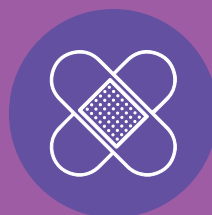
Cognitive

- Memory lapses
- Loss of time
- Flashbacks
- Difficulty making decisions
- Decreased ability to concentrate
- Thoughts of suicide



Behavioural

- Self harm
- Substance abuse
- Alcohol abuse
- Disordered eating
- Difficulty in relationships
- Suicide attempts
- Hypervigilance
- Self-isolation or withdrawing from normal social groups



Physical

- Changes to sleeping and eating habits
- Sexually transmitted infections
- Pain
- Injuries
- Low energy
- Migraines
- Lowered immune function



Sense of self

- Guilt
- Shame
- Self-blame
- Self-hatred
- Feeling damaged or 'less than'
- Feeling like a 'bad' person
- Questioning one's own purpose

Let them know what their options are

[Here is a guide to the practical steps](#) to take in the aftermath of sexual violence. Remember that what happens next is completely up to the survivor, be patient and allow them to make their own decisions.

You can give them the number for the DRCC **National 24 Hour Freephone Helpline on 1800 778888** or [webchat](#).

Helping them mind themselves

Consider if they have anyone in their lives who could support them. There are loads of resources for minding yourself in the aftermath of assault [here](#). Looking after yourself can look different for everyone; for some people, maybe it's staying in bed for a few days and resting, for others, it's finding a therapist to process their feelings with.

Seek support for yourself

Finding out someone you care about has experienced sexual violence can be very upsetting. It is normal to be affected and to find it hard to know what to do. Make sure to seek support for yourself too, whilst respecting their choices for privacy.

Speak to a loved one without giving details, or call the **National 24 Hour Freephone Helpline on 1800 778888**. The Helpline is there for anyone affected by sexual violence including those impacted by a disclosure.

Try not to take on too much responsibility for others healing or feel like you need to fix things for them. You can be there for them but you can only do that if you are looking after yourself first.

Educate yourself

Supporting a loved one through a disclosure can be difficult, [here are some supports](#) to equip yourself with the skills to be there when someone needs it.

Child Protection

Please note that DRCC has a duty to report any child protection concerns to appropriate authorities, as per the [Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017](#).

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Freephone Helpline at

1800 778888

for support and information on options.



An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt
Department of Justice



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