

Advice for Significant Others of Sexual Abuse and Rape Survivors

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You likely know someone that is a survivor of sexual assault or rape—a family member, a relative, a friend or a co-worker. Nearly 20 percent will experience sexual assault before their 18th birthday and many will also experience sexual victimization as adult.

Significant others are key in supporting survivors of all ages.

While this may be a difficult role to take on, survivors often will benefit from a strong support system in order to cope with their past trauma. Significant others include family members, friends, and partners. There are several steps significant others can take to ensure that they are helping their loved one.

Listen to and trust their story: For many survivors, sharing their story is an important part of the healing process. While this seems like a simple task, it is often the most emotionally draining and challenging part of providing support. Many secondary survivors (or loved ones of sexual assault and rape survivors) seek counseling or support groups to help them cope with their loved one's story. However, in the moment, it is important to focus on the survivor.

When listening to their story, it is also important to believe what the survivor is saying and withhold judgment. Any questions or statements about the survivor's choices that imply victim blaming can stop the survivor from further sharing their story. Survivors likely already feel guilt about the situation; significant others need to make sure that they do not add any unnecessary guilt.

Avoid trying to solve their problems: When significant others first hear about what happened to their loved one, they often try to fix the situation. Not only do significant others not have all of the answers, but the decisions they might make themselves may not be the same ones their loved one would choose. Survivors should not be coerced into seeking counseling or involving law enforcement unless they are prepared to take those steps.

By forcing their loved one to make decisions they feel uncomfortable with, significant others are taking control of the situation away from the survivor. After experiencing rape or sexual assault, which are acts of power and control, survivors often feel a loss of control over their lives. Significant others need to reinforce the fact that their loved one does have control of their life and are capable of making their own decisions.

Become informed: It is helpful for significant others to learn about sexual assault and rape. By attempting to grasp what happened to their loved one, friends and family can begin to understand the role they play in the healing process. However, they need to remember that all of the research in the world does not make them more knowledgeable of the situation than the survivor. Survivors are experts on their own situations.

It is also important to remember that there is no timeline for healing. Whether the event occurred 20 years ago or 20 minutes ago, each survivor is affected in a unique way; however, by listening with an open mind, placing control in the hands of the survivor, and educating themselves on rape and sexual assault, significant others can be effective support systems and help their loved one move beyond their past.