

# How to Support Survivors of Sexual Trauma & Abuse



Answering the call since 1972.

## When someone comes to you for support...

**Believe them.** It is **not your role to question** whether rape or abuse occurred. False rape reports are no more or less common than false reports for other violent crimes. Victim-survivors are the experts on their lives.

**Never blame them for being assaulted or abused.** No one ever deserves to be assaulted. Questions like “Why didn’t you tell anyone?” or “Why were you drinking?” are placing the blame on the victim. Avoid “count your blessings” statements that may be heard as judgmental and possibly trivialize what happened such as “it could have been worse” or “you’re lucky you weren’t hurt badly”, etc. **Let them know, “It wasn’t your fault.”**

**Don’t take charge of the situation** and pressure them to do what you think they should. Encourage the person to get the help *they* feel they need. The Care Center Advocates are trained to help explain and understand options. **There is no “right” or “wrong” way for a survivor to respond after experiencing abuse or assault.**

**Listen to them.** It is crucial to let the survivor know that they can talk **when they are ready**. Some may not wish to speak with you immediately. But at some point during their process, they might come to you for support. When that happens, don’t interrupt or interject your feelings. Just listen. Your caring but silent attention will be invaluable.

**Ask before you touch.** Don’t assume that physical contact, even in the form of a gentle touch or hug, will be comforting. Try your best not to take it personally and **give them the space they need.**

**Take care of your own emotional needs.** The Care Center services are available to friends and family as well. Sexual violence affects us all and you deserve support, too.

[www.stacarecenter.org](http://www.stacarecenter.org)

## What are some reactions or emotions to sexual trauma & abuse?

Remember, everyone responds to the aftermath of a sexual assault or abuse in a different way. There is no right or wrong way.

- Anxiety, fear, depression
- Physical health symptoms
- Flashbacks, intrusive and distressing memories of the violence
- Disorientation and difficulty concentrating
- Self-blame, guilt, and shame
- “Shutting down”, avoidance, or emotional numbing

**Coping responses:** Everyone responds differently to trauma. Survivors may use a variety of coping mechanisms including: alcohol/drug use, social isolation, anger and aggressive behavior toward others, avoidance, cutting, disordered eating, high-risk sexual behaviors, etc.

**It's okay for a survivor to have happy experiences!** Everyone reacts differently and it's okay for survivors of trauma to still experience joy and happiness. This might be seen as avoidance by others, but every emotion the survivor experiences is real and valid.

## The Care Center is here to help.

- 24/7 Support Hotline
- Medical Advocacy at Lawrence Memorial Hospital, Watkins Memorial Health Center & Ransom Memorial Hospital.
- **FREE** Individual Therapy & Support Groups
- Help with protection orders & court advocacy
- Educational workshops on sexual assault, rape culture, etc.

**Advocates are available 24/7 at 785-843-8985.**

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