

How you might be feeling and the impact this can have on her:

It is common to have a wide range of feelings when you find out someone you care about has been sexually assaulted.

You may be feeling shocked, angry, sad, guilty, confused and much more. These feelings are normal and okay.

You may also have many feelings toward the perpetrator, particularly if this happened to your partner, a friend or family member.

It is important that you look after yourself during this time. This means being aware of your own needs and feelings.

For example you may feel like hurting or killing the person who did this to them. Saying that you are angry at the perpetrator may be helpful, but to act on it may leave the victim feeling responsible for you and your behaviour.

It is important to be aware that all of your reactions will impact upon the person you are supporting. The needs of this person should always come first.

There may be many questions that you want answered, or you may be confused about your feelings. Find someone you can talk to. This may be a friend, family member or a counsellor. However, it is important to consider the woman's privacy when choosing someone to talk to.

Remember sexual assault takes away a woman's power. She needs you to support her as she takes back control of her life and makes the decisions that are best for her.

This is a time when they need to be looking after themselves. If you are supporting a child, you need to concentrate on their needs. It is important that your messages to them are clear and that you are supportive.

To heal from a traumatic event like sexual assault can take a considerable amount of time - even years.

Many women report that it is very difficult to resume a sexual relationship in the aftermath of a sexual assault, even if the assault was a long time ago.

Ensure she has the freedom, and your support, to make choices about what is right for her.

Throughout life, people learn different ways to cope with these experiences. The ways in which each individual deals with their sexual assault will vary. Some people block it out and hope it will go away, others use drugs or alcohol as ways of coping. They may become workaholics or perfectionists, they may self harm or dissociate. (eg. Feeling out of touch with yourself and your body.) It is important to know that these are the things that helped this person survive to where they are today. They may have used negative means of coping, you may be able to help them find new positive ways.

Survivors of sexual assault report that many things trigger memories for them. For each individual it will be different. It may be a life event such as getting married or the birth of a child. It may be daily things such as a smell, a touch, a word, a place. These memories may come on at any time and the person may find themselves feeling out of control.

If you are supporting someone, it is important to ask them how they want to be supported. Don't just assume what you do is okay.

The Centre Against Sexual Violence offers free confidential information, support and/or counselling for women aged 12 years and over who have experienced child, past or recent sexual assault. Family, friends and others supporting a survivor can also access services at the Centre Against Sexual Violence.

CASV welcomes all individuals who identify as being from non-English speaking backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender.

Other contacts in your area:

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Supporting Adult Survivors of Sexual Assault

(Information for friends, relatives and partners)

Centre Against Sexual Violence

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Email admin@casv.org.au

Web www.casv.org.au

What is sexual assault?

Sexual assault is any unwanted sexual act. This can be a wide range of behaviour including rape and child sexual assault.

Sexual assault is a crime.

All sexual acts towards children are abusive, as children do not have the ability to consent to any sexual activity.

Sexual assault is traumatic and can have lasting effects throughout life. Every person will be unique in how they react to sexual assault. This will depend on individual circumstances, such as their age, physical and intellectual ability, life experience, support system and whether there has been any previous experience of sexual assault.

Victims can be left with many feelings after being sexually assaulted.

Adults and children may have similar feelings such as: being frightened; not telling anyone; intrusive thoughts and nightmares; not wanting to be touched; and having overwhelming emotions.

How these are expressed will be unique for each individual.

Many people do not tell anyone about being sexually assaulted until much later.

This does not mean that it has not affected them until this point. What it does mean however, is that for many reasons they were not able to tell.

These reasons may include:

- that they were afraid of the perpetrator
- they thought people would not believe them because they were "just a kid" and he/she was an adult
- they were told by the perpetrator that something bad would happen to them or a loved one
- they were told by the perpetrator that what was happening was normal and happened in every family
- they were ashamed or embarrassed

It is common for the victim to feel guilty over the assault and question what they did, or believe that they could have stopped it.

It is important to let them know that whatever they did at the time helped them to survive.

Reassure them that the assault/s had nothing to do with what they did or didn't do.

Sexual assault is never the fault of the victim.

You can not make the sexual assault go away, however you can assist in the healing.

Responding to the survivor

- Believe her, and tell her that you do.
- Reassure her that it is good that she has told.
- If it has taken some time for her to disclose, try to understand why she could not disclose earlier.
- Stress that it was not her fault and that she has done nothing of which to be ashamed.
- Help her feel both physically and emotionally safe.
- Respect her right to choose how much - and to whom - she talks about the assault.
- Encourage her to express herself and her feelings, in a safe way.
- Discuss what is happening, and help her gather any additional information she may need.
- Respect her right to make her own decisions about what to do.
- If she would like to, help her to find someone, such as a counsellor, whom she can trust to talk to about what happened.
- If you are supporting a child, protect them from further assaults.