

Rape: How Family and Friends Can Help the Victim

RAPE SUPPORT

Family and Friends: How To Help

After a rape, survivors may be openly upset, even hysterical, or they may be numb and seemingly calm. The victim needs to:

- *Obtain medical assistance.*
- *Feel Safe.* Rape is a traumatic violation of a person. Especially in the beginning, it is often difficult to be alone.
- *Be Believed.* With date rapes especially, victims need to be believed that what occurred was, in fact, a rape.
- *Know it was not her fault.* Most rape victims feel guilty and feel that the attack was somehow their fault.
- *Take control of her life.* When a person is raped, she may feel completely out of control of what is happening to her. A significant step on the road to recovery is to regain a sense of control in little, as well as big, things.

Thing you can do to help:

- *Listen; do not judge.* It is not your place to play prosecutor and make her prove her story. Accept her version of the facts and be supportive. You may have to deal with your feelings separately if you feel that it was somehow her fault. Many rape counseling services can be helpful to friends and relatives of women who have been victims.
- *Offer shelter.* If it is at all possible, stay with her at her place or let her at least spend one night at your place. This is not the time for her to be alone.
- *Be available.* She may need to talk at odd hours, or a great deal at the beginning. She may not have a lot of people she can talk to and she may overrely on one person. Be there as much as you can and encourage her to either call a hotline or go for counseling.
- *Give comfort.* She has been badly treated. She needs to be nurtured.
- *Let her know she is not to blame.* This is crucial. Many rape victims blame themselves. She needs to be reassured that the rapist is to blame, she is not.
- *Be patient and understanding.* Everyone has her own timetable for recovering from a rape. Do not impose one on the victim.
- *Encourage action*—for example, suggest she call a hotline, go to a hospital or health center, and/or call the police. Respect her decision if she decides not to file charges.
- *Do not be overly protective;* encourage her to make her own decisions. She needs to feel in control of her life and this will not be possible if you do everything for her.
- *Accept her choice of solution to the rape*—even if you disagree with what she is doing. It is more important that she make decisions and have them respected than it is for you to impose what you think is the "right decision".
- *Put aside your feelings, and deal with them somewhere else.* Although it is supportive for a rape survivor to know that others are equally upset with what happened, it does her no good if on top of her feelings, she also has to deal with, for example, your feelings of rage and anger. If you have strong feelings, talk to another friend or to a local hotline.

THE AFTERMATH OF A SEXUAL ASSAULT

For the Victim, her Family and Friends

Sexual assault is a sudden, arbitrary unpredictable event. The victim has no time to prepare. The assailant(s) control the situation and the victim becomes a victim of someone else's rage and aggression. The victim comes face to face with her personal vulnerability to serious harm.

Everyone who cares about the rape victim has been victimized. This experience will probably disrupt the lives of everyone involved for awhile. Prevention intervention and counseling (especially by someone aware and sensitive to issues concerning rape) are important to assist and prepare the victim and those close to her for possible problems. Victim recovery, to a great extent, depends of the willingness of all involved to accept advice and personal counseling so that they can adequately resolve their feelings about the rape.

Immediately after a woman is raped she is in a state of shock. Shock and stress effect all of us in different ways. Family and friends can be more helpful by listening and trying to understand how the victim feels more than asking specific questions of her such as what she did, what he did, etc. Trying to explain all the things the victim might have done or avoided only strengthens a very normal feeling of guilt that she might already be experiencing. No matter what she did or did not do, she didn't deserve to be raped.

It is normal and predictable for family and friends to have reactions too. Often they may feel anger, frustration, fear, and a sense of powerlessness. They may also feel that a great deal of strength is expected from them at this time. They need an opportunity to express their feelings too, and hopefully a sympathetic friend or counselor can provide that for them. It can be helpful for the rape victim to express her appreciation to those close to her and let them know that their support is helping her make it through.

Due to personal feelings of privacy, trust, and safety that have been harshly invaded, most rape victims experience some reaction to this traumatic event that has taken place. Reactions such as fear, shame, anger, depression and helplessness are but a few of the more common feelings expressed. However, each person is an individual and each situation has its own special considerations. With time and understanding, most woman are able to heal and integrate this experience into their lives.