A Guide for Friends of Survivors of Sexual Assault

If someone has told you that they have been sexually assaulted, it's likely to have been one of the hardest things they have ever had to tell you. It may have taken them weeks or even years to feel able to talk to anyone about what has happened. Respect the huge step they have taken and the trust they have put in you.

Most people have little experience of helping someone through a traumatic event such as a sexual assault, so it’s normal to feel unsure what to do. What is important is that you care enough about that person to want to help.

How to Help a Friend:

1. **Listen to your friend without judging them.** The survivor likely came to you because they consider you to be a person of trust to them. Remember to reassure them and validate their feelings. Tell them that you believe them and reinforce that they are not to blame for what happened.

2. **Give them the time and space that they need.** Let the survivor tell you how they feel. Try to resist asking them about the details of the experience as they might not feel ready, and therefore may feel pressured. Don’t take it personally if you’re your friend doesn’t want to talk to you or to talk right now. Part of being a good listener is letting them know that you’ll be ready to listen if and when they are ready to talk.

3. **Let them know that they do not have to go through this alone.** Counselors are available 24/7 through Public Safety at 617-333-2222. There are also resources available in the community to help support survivors. Reassure the survivor that they are cared for.

4. **Help to educate them about their options.** The survivor may want to seek medical care (STD testing, pregnancy testing/prevention, physical checkup, evidence collection, etc.), talk to a counselor, or report the assault to authorities. As a friend, you don’t need to be an expert on all the options that are available; there are professionals to help educate both you and the survivor. Counselors are professionals that can help educate you or your friend about the options available.

5. **Respect their decisions rather than telling them what to do.** After a sexual assault, a survivor may experience a loss of power and control. Respecting the choices that survivors make helps them regain this control. This may be particularly challenging if you feel impacted by their choices. It is important to allow your friend to come to their own decisions without feeling pressured.

6. **Take care of yourself.** Recognize that hearing about a sexual assault can be difficult and that you are going to have your own feelings about what has happened to your friend, and some of
them like sadness and anger may even be similar. It is normal and okay for you to experience your own reactions. You may even feel confused about how to best support your friend. Remember that there are resources available to help support you as well. Talking to a counselor can help you understand your own reactions to what has happened and enable you to support your friend more effectively.

7. **Respect your friend’s privacy.** Ask your friend what, if any, information it is OK for you to share with others. Ask how to manage others’- floor mates, classmates, club members, friends-questions and concerns. Should they be directed to ask your friend directly or are there ways you can respond and still respect your friend’s privacy?

### A Guide for Parents of Survivors of Sexual Assault

As a parent it can be extremely difficult and overwhelming to hear that your son or daughter has been sexually assaulted. It can be hard to know how to act or what to say. The most important thing you can do is help your son or daughter feel safe and supported. Students at Curry College have a number of resources available to assist them in dealing with the aftermath of sexual assault.

Everyone responds differently to sexual assault. Frequent responses include feelings of fear, distress, humiliation, anger, confusion, numbness, and guilt. It is important that your son or daughter be allowed to experience and process through these feelings without the fear of having them invalidated or dismissed.

**How to Help as a Parent:**

1. **Believe your son or daughter when they confide in you.** Don’t pressure them to talk. It is better to go slowly and let them set the pace. Listen and help them process through their feelings. Validate their anger, pain, and fear. These are natural responses that need to be felt, expressed, and heard. It is okay to tell your son or daughter that this is a difficult topic for you to talk about. Let them know that you are open to talk about anything, even if it is uncomfortable.

2. **Do not blame your son or daughter, or yourself.** Avoid asking “why” questions as much as possible because these often imply blame. Focus on his/her needs. If they didn’t tell you immediately about the assault, listen to their reasons. It is very common for survivors to wait before sharing with people they love. Reassure them that they have your love and support.

3. **Take the necessary steps to protect and ensure your son or daughter’s safety.** Encourage them to seek medical attention, or alternative housing if necessary. Understand that your son or daughter has the right to decide what steps are necessary to take. It’s important that your son or daughter regain a sense of control. Sexual assault is a crime that takes away an individual’s
power. It can make them feel invaded, changed, and out of control. It is crucial for survivors to be able to make their own decisions in order to regain power over their own lives.

4. **Discuss with your son or daughter their options and ask them what they want to do next.**
This may or may not include contacting a counselor, advocate, judicial officer and/or the police. Reporting a sexual assault crime can be a very difficult, long, and painful process for survivors. It is not an appropriate option for everyone, but a trained advocate can help you both navigate through their options.

5. **Make sure your son or daughter gets the professional care and support they may need.**
Counseling can be very helpful in assisting your son or daughter through the healing process of coping with the sexual assault. Remember that every person's healing process is unique.

6. **Recognize your son or daughter's need for privacy.** Their boundaries have been violated and reclaiming personal space is important. Respect the time and space it takes to heal after a sexual assault.

7. **Take care of yourself.** Educate yourself about sexual assault and the healing process. Realize when you've reached your own limitations. Find a supportive person or counselor with whom you can share your strong feelings with so that your conversations with your son or daughter can focus on their needs.

8. **Seek immediate professional help** if your son or daughter displays any suicidal behaviors or if you are worried about their emotional or physical well-being. **Curry College Counselors are available 24/7 through Public Safety at 617-333-2222.**