Secondary Survivors, Friends and Family: When Someone You Know Is A Survivor

Safe@Weber Advocacy Services

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It is often difficult to know what to do, how to respond, or where to tell the survivor to go for help. Friends and loved ones of the survivor may feel they don’t have a role in the survivor’s recovery because they don’t know where they fit into the process.

Many people have limited knowledge about sexual assault and domestic violence, which is often based on stereotypes that do not reflect the norm of what most survivors experience. Rape and assault are acts of violence, power and control - not about sex or pleasure. The survivor has experienced a crime where control over the situation, and indeed the ability to make decisions about their own body, has been taken away.

What is my role in survivor recovery?

In the immediate crisis phase after a sexual assault, the survivor may not be ready to begin “recovery” and may just want things to “go back to normal.” They may need a higher level of support from others, or they may not want to talk about it at all. These reactions are common for any kind of trauma or crisis, and even more common with assault because it is a very personal type of violation. Survivors also may not be ready to define what happened as “rape” or “assault.”

Your role as a support person is to help the survivor regain control over everyday decisions. Bring your authentic self to conversations. If you would normally joke with the person, that may be an aspect of support they look for and value from you. Surviving the situation is a testament to the person’s strength and that’s a good way for you to frame it. The person may not be able to see themselves as a “survivor” right away, though. Mirror whatever language they are comfortable with in discussing what happened, but also be ok with it if they don’t want to talk.

How might the survivor feel?

It is natural for survivors to feel a tremendous loss of power and control over all aspects of their lives after a rape. Keep in mind that no two survivors have the same emotional reaction or behaviors. Sexual harassment, sexual assault, violence and stalking are never the fault of the victim/survivor.

Common survivor feelings:

- Shock, numbness
- Anger at the perpetrator or at themself
- Loss of control, even questioning “am I crazy?”
- Humiliation, violation, degradation, betrayal
- Feeling dirty, damaged
- Sadness, loss (of many things), depression – in extreme cases, suicidal
- Fear of retribution if they report it or tell anyone
- Fear for safety, anxiety, nightmares
- Guilt, shame, self-blame (for any choices which, if done differently, they think may have altered the course of events)
- Fear of being blamed by others (and real encounters of that often happen)
● Confusion, loss of memory, fuzziness
● Losing trust and faith in the goodness of others, feeling unsafe in the world
● Questioning their own judgment about everything

What can I do to help?

● If the survivor talks about what happened with you, it is critical that you demonstrate that you believe them, regardless of what you may think privately. Remind the survivor that healing takes time.
● Listen. Be there. Communicate without judgment.
● Don’t question the details they share, as they may feel cross-examined or feel that you are questioning their honesty. Allow the investigators to do that job.
● Encourage the survivor to get support. An advocate can explain all options, help consider pros & cons of each option, provide crisis support, accompany the survivor to resources or set up appointments for them, and make referrals.
● If the survivor seeks medical attention or plans to report, and they are not working with an advocate, offer to be there. Your presence can offer the support they need, which they may not be able to seek from a family member or significant other.
● Be patient. There is no timeline for recovering from trauma. Avoid putting pressure on the survivor to engage in activities they aren’t ready to do yet. It may take weeks, months, years for the person to integrate this trauma into their life experience.
● Encourage them to practice good self-care during this time especially.

Follow the ABCDEs of Advocacy: Affirm, Believe, Connect, Direct, Empower

● **Affirm** - Acknowledge that the experience has affected their life. Survivors may blame themselves, especially if they know the perpetrator personally. Remind the survivor, maybe even more than once, that they are not to blame.
  ○ "I’m so glad you are sharing this with me."
  ○ "It’s not your fault."
  ○ "I’m sorry this happened."
● **Believe** - It can be extremely difficult for survivors to come forward and share their story. They may feel ashamed, concerned that they won’t be believed, or worried they’ll be blamed. Leave any “why” questions or investigations to the experts - your job is to support this person. Be careful not to interpret calmness as a sign that the event did not occur - everyone responds differently. The best thing you can do is to believe them.
  ○ "I believe you, and I am here for you."
  ○ "I believe you, and am sorry this happened to you."
  ○ "You are not crazy, what you’re describing is a common reaction to…"
● **Connect** - Remind the survivor that you are there for them and willing to listen to their story. Remind them there are other people in their life who care and that there are service providers who will be able to support them as they recover from the experience.
  ○ "You are not alone."
  ○ "How can I support you best? Are you safe now?"
● **Direct** - You can support the survivor by offering to accompany them or find more information.
○ "Let’s brainstorm together what to do next."
○ "You have options, would you like me to tell you about the different resources available?"

● Empower - Let the survivor talk about their experience if they come to you. This will validate their reactions and help them feel more “normal” and less alone. Some survivors blame themselves about what they did or didn’t do. It’s important for them to understand that they were having a trauma response, much of which is dictated by the brain. Focusing on their resilience and survival is affirming.
  ○ "I’m honored that you trust me enough to share this with me."
  ○ "It took a lot of strength and courage for you to....[seek help, report, tell me, etc."
  ○ "You are having a normal response to an abnormal situation."
  ○ "Whatever you did to survivor was the right thing because it worked."

If they have reported to authorities, used a hotline, sought medical care, gone to counseling, sought financial assistance, sought housing assistance, had to tell a loved one, or their supervisor, then they have already had to retell the story multiple times, both in detail and in summary. Re-telling can be re-traumatizing and triggering. To minimize this, keep your own curiosity in check and only have them talk about it if THEY seem to want or need to tell you.

If they have not done any of these things, you can provide options. But it is imperative that you let the survivor decide whether or not to pursue these resources. You may even want to encourage certain steps if they haven’t considered them (medical attention for treatment of possible sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy; advocacy or counseling services, support group, to assist in the recovery process). But be accepting of the survivor’s decisions. Remember, the survivor has been robbed of a sense of control over their own life. Making decisions on their own, no matter how minor, will help them begin to regain a sense of empowerment and self-determination. Respect the survivor’s need for confidentiality and never share what they have told you with others, unless you have their permission. This is really important. Violations of privacy are trust violations, and this may make them feel violated all over again.

One of the most damaging experiences for survivors is having others perpetuate rape myths that they deserved it or asked for it because they were drinking, wore provocative clothing, didn’t lock doors, or voluntarily allowed themselves to be alone with the perpetrator. Especially avoid traditionally victim-blaming questions that imply the survivor could have done things differently. Don’t say what you would have done in the situation, to prevent it.

Continued Support

● There’s no timetable when it comes to recovering from sexual violence. If someone trusted you enough to disclose the event to you, consider the following ways to show your continued support.

● Avoid judgment. It can be difficult to watch a survivor struggle with the effects of sexual assault for an extended period of time. Avoid phrases that suggest they’re taking too long to recover such as, “You’ve been acting like this for a while now,” or “How much longer will you feel this way?”

● Check in periodically. The event may have happened a long time ago, but that doesn’t mean the pain is gone. Check in with the survivor to remind them you still care about their well-being and
believe their story.

- Know your resources. You’re a strong supporter, but that doesn’t mean you’re equipped to manage someone else’s health. Become familiar with resources you can recommend to a survivor (see end of document).
- Remember that the healing process is fluid. Everyone has bad days. Don’t interpret flashbacks, bad days, or silent spells as “setbacks.” It’s all part of the process.
- Keep in mind that you are not a counselor and you cannot take on responsibility for the survivor’s wellbeing. You can be a support, but within reasonable boundaries. It’s important that you refer the survivor to helping professionals and not allow them to excessively lean on you, call/text you all the time about the situation, in place of seeking professional assistance.

**What might I feel?**

When someone you care about tells you they’ve been sexually assaulted or abused, it can be a lot to handle. A supportive reaction can make all the difference, but that doesn’t mean it comes easy. You might feel overwhelmed. Don’t hesitate to seek outside support for yourself.

On campus you can utilize Safe@Weber, the Counseling & Psychological Services Center, and various community resources. Don’t ignore your own feelings. You may need to talk to someone yourself. But while you are with the survivor, avoid allowing your own emotions to take priority over the survivor’s.

You may feel:

- Pain, sorrow, disgust, self-blame (thinking you could have done something to protect the survivor)
- Sympathy or empathy for the survivor
- Anger at the perpetrators; wanting revenge
- Protectiveness toward the survivor
- Impatience with the survivor’s recovery process
- Frustrated with others reactions to the survivor
- Frightened or anxious about your own safety

Furthermore, if you are a survivor of sexual or physical violence, this may activate some of your own feelings of victimization and you may want to revisit your own healing process. Or, it may activate any experiences and feelings of loss that you have struggled with in the past. It is important to stop, listen and attend to those feelings.

**What can I do?**

- Talk to someone you trust about how you are feeling. This may be a crisis for you as well and it is important that you respond to your emotional needs.
- Engage in self-care. Use healthy coping mechanisms that you have used in dealing with other crises.
- If strong feelings persist, you may want to talk to a counselor or attend some form of support group for friends & loved ones of survivors.
- Volunteer in an agency that works to stop sexual assault and other forms of gender-based violence.
- Educate yourself about sexual assault by attending relevant events.
Confront sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression. Confront sexist language and jokes about rape. Help to challenge and change others’ attitudes that allow the rape culture we live in to thrive.

Local Resources:

- Safe@Weber Violence Prevention & Advocacy Services
- Your Community Connection: Family Crisis Center (Weber & Morgan Counties)
- Safe Harbor Crisis Center (Davis County)
- Sego Lily Center for the Abused Deaf
- Weber State Counseling & Psychological Services Center
- Utah Coalition Against Sexual Assault (UCASA)
- Utah Domestic Violence Coalition (UDVC)
- Weber State University Police Department
- Weber State University Office of Affirmative Action & Equal Opportunity

National Resources:

- As One Project: Helping Friends and Family Members of Survivors of Sexual Violence Move Forward AS ONE
- RAINN: National Resources for Sexual Assault Survivors and Their Loved Ones
- RAINN: Self-Care for Friends and Family
- How to Help a Friend Who Has Been Sexually Assaulted