Friends and Family: How to Help

The process of recovering from a sexual assault or rape takes time. As a friend or loved one, your help during this process is essential. Survivors need a great deal of support and caring, as they begin to address and survive a very frightening and violent

- **Listening and being available.** Survivors will need to talk about what happened and will probably express many feelings. Providing a safe environment in which to talk, and also setting aside time for these conversations, may be the most helpful thing that friends and family can do. You do not need to provide answers. Just listen. If you are not able or willing to listen, acknowledge that as your need and help the survivor in ways that you can. Remember that the recovery process may last for several months to years and that the need and desire to talk will vary, depending on where in the recovery process the survivor happens to be. Survivors may also need encouragement from loved ones to seek the assistance of a trained professional, who can help the survivor to express the often painful thoughts and feelings connected to the sexual assault or rape.

- **Believing and not judging.** Too often family and friends may fall into the trap of believing some of the rape myths -- particularly those that have to do with the victim somehow being responsible for the assault or rape. The job of family and friends is to support, to believe, and to be non-judgmental. Survivors will be dealing with their own sense of shame and guilt, and should not be burdened by the ill-founded judgments of those people who are closest to them.

- **Offering a safe place to stay or even staying with the survivor.** This may seem like such a small thing, but feeling

- **Recognizing that recovery takes a long time.** It is important for significant people in the survivor’s life to refrain from suggesting or even hinting that the survivor “should have gotten over it by now.” This sort of nonsupport may further delay or interrupt the healing process. Friends and family can aid in the healing by acknowledging the feelings, by reminding the survivor that the feelings are a normal part of healing, and by emphasizing that these feelings will not last forever.

- **Respecting the decisions that the survivor makes.** Part of feeling in control includes making decisions and having those decisions be respected. Sometimes family and friends may not agree with the decisions that are being made; however, it is important that survivors be allowed to determine their own solutions to the sexual assault or rape.

- **Being gentle, sensitive, and respectful of the survivor’s wishes for closeness or affection.** Do be gentle and sensitive. Survivors may want affection or they may not want to be close. If you are not sure what they want, ask before acting and recognize that what they want may change from time to time.

- **Dealing with your own feelings.** Typically, family and friends have some fairly strong reactions to having someone they care about being assaulted or raped. They may feel anger, rage, guilt, confusion, blame, or numerous other strong emotions. Just as the actual survivor must express emotion, so too must friends and family. But rather than expressing this emotion to the survivor, the friend or family member should deal with these emotions with someone else. It is not fair to survivors to have to handle not only their own feelings, but also those of the people they are turning to for support and assistance. In fact, this can only add to the feelings of guilt and remorse.

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Surviving Sexual Assault and Rape

Recovering: Feelings and Decisions

Recovering from rape is a process that begins as soon as the immediate threat has ended and the perpetrator is gone. There are many decisions to be made and many feelings to be expressed. Not all of the decisions or feelings will need to be handled at once, but rather as recovery progresses. This brochure describes common reactions, as well as how friends and family can help.

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UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-EAU CLAIRE

Counseling Services

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Check out our website: www.uwec.edu/counsel
**This can’t be happening:**

Fear and shock are the overriding feelings during the initial phase of surviving. Some people initially react to these feelings by crying, by being anxious, by exhibiting an exaggerated startle response, and by feeling ashamed, dirty, violated, vulnerable, and self-blaming. Others may react to the fear and shock as if nothing traumatic has happened. They may appear to be "handling everything just fine."

Yet every survivor of sexual assault or rape is dramatically affected, regardless of how they may appear to be feeling or behaving following the attack.

These feelings may make decision making more difficult, yet there are some questions that will need to be answered. Am I safe here or do I need to go someplace else? Where should I go? Should I tell someone? Who should I tell and when? Should I call the police? Should I seek medical help?

Making rational decisions during this time of emotional upheaval is difficult. Survivors need to weigh alternatives, and they usually will benefit from talking with gentle, informed, and trained crisis helpers. Most communities have a telephone hot line that can help survivors sort out options, even if the survivor does not want to give a name or make any sort of formal or official report.

I just want to forget what happened:

Usually, survivors will experience a fairly dramatic shift in feelings and sometimes in behavior very soon after the sexual assault or rape. Where once they were fearful, tearful, confused, emotionally drained, and out of control, now they may appear to be just fine. Survivors at this stage will often say, "I just want to put this out of my mind and get on with my life. And that is exactly what the survivor will try to do.

This is usually a time when feelings get closed off as the survivor tries to heal from the emotional and psychological wound. This is often the time when family and friends may be fooled into believing that the survivor really has recovered.

This phase may last from a few days to several months. During this time, decisions typically are postponed or left hanging. Feelings are restricted and there is the appearance that everything is normal.

Keep in mind that the survivor is healing but is not healed entirely at this point. Survivors are trying to

I’m so angry and depressed. I can’t seem to get control of my emotions:

Regardless of how hard survivors may try to keep the sexual assault or rape from impacting their lives, no matter how much they may deny its importance, the experience has had a profound influence.

Survivors will likely feel anger, depression, anxiety, and perhaps have a general sense that everything is falling apart. This phase is often marked by recurring nightmares, a generalized feeling of anxiety, and flashbacks to the attack. While these feelings are disturbing, they are a normal part of the healing process. Often it is at this time that survivors seek assistance from trained professionals who can help to put their lives back together.

Depression is also a part of the picture during this phase. Survivors may experience changes in sleeping and eating habits, as well as changes in ordinary, they may cry for no apparent reason or burst out in anger at what would seem to be minor irritations. This anger may be directed at the perpetrator, loved ones, or self.

Loss of sexual identity may also occur. Survivors may change their clothing style, hairstyle, makeup, or anything else that will allow them to see themselves as different from the person who was attacked. Though this is a painful time, this phase suggests that the survivor is

Life goes on and I can handle it:

When enough of the anger and depression is released and worked through, survivors may begin to accept what has happened to them. They may still think and talk about what happened, but they will now understand and feel in control of their emotions.

The trauma begins to play less of a major role in their life. In no way do they condone what happened, but they are now able to live again. Though their lives may have changed, their feelings of self-worth and strength will reemerge. As this happens, survivors will need to spend less and less time dealing with the rape. In essence the rape experience will become integrated with all of their other life experiences.

Life will probably be different, and their world view may have changed somewhat, but the survivor will feel strong and whole and in control of life again. At this point, they have not only survived but also recovered from the trauma.

Remember: Recovery does occur, and life can and will go on. Though a bad thing happened, it