

Talking

The survivor needs to talk, think and dream about the rape repeatedly so that she can work through the experience. Make it clear that you are available and willing to hear what she needs to say.

Reassurance:

She is likely to feel guilty and unsure. She needs to hear that the rape was not her fault, she also needs to believe that whatever she did during the assault was the right thing to do because it saved her life. Finally, she needs to know that whatever reaction she is having to the rape is the right reaction for her.

Regaining Control:

She needs to resume control of her body, her feelings and her life. Don't tell her what to do or put pressure on her to do things she isn't ready for especially having sex. Support her choices and be patient.

Safety and support:

She will need practical help to protect herself against further attacks and she will need a safe environment in which to experience her emotions. Warmth, loving and support are crucial. Very often, it is also helpful for her to speak with a councillor who knows about rape and Rape Trauma Syndrome.

- Will support her as she faces other friends and relatives and help educate them about rape and how to be supportive.

It will be most helpful for her if you:

- Are available to listen, but don't put pressure on her to talk
- Avoid being overly protective, this reinforces her sense of vulnerability and lack of control
- Avoid acting as if the rape never happened, even if she herself is in denial
- Make sure that you have support for yourself

DON'T IGNORE YOUR OWN NEEDS

Supporting a rape survivor can be extremely difficult and can bring up many strong feelings in you. If you ever experienced a sexual assault or other trauma, your memories and feelings of that experience may come back. It is essential for you to have your own support during this time. It will not be helpful for the survivor if she feels responsible for your strong feelings or feels that she must take care of you. Talk to the other people who are close to you, but who have not been as closely affected by the rape. You may wish to seek counselling for yourself from POWA or another organisation.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

You should make it clear by your actions and what you say that you:

- Believe her
- Love/care for her
- Do not believe that what happened was her fault
- Available to hold her if she wants, but if she prefers not to be touched, that's OK too.
- Are sensitive to her concerns for security
- Will support and respect whatever choices she makes about reporting the rape to the police or seeking other forms of help



FOR MORE INFORMATION OR ASSISTANCE, CONTACT US ON:

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SUPPORTING A WOMAN WHO HAS BEEN RAPED

If a woman or girl you love or care for has been raped, she will need all your support to survive the trauma. If she requests your assistance and support, you have the opportunity to make a huge difference in her recovery process. This section will give you some advice on how you can help her and help take care of yourself through this difficult process.

UNDERSTAND YOUR OWN REACTIONS

To effectively support any rape survivor, you will need to understand your own reactions to the rape. You must take responsibility for dealing with your own feelings, and understand how they may impact the survivor. Here are some common reactions of family and friends:

Helplessness or Powerlessness

You may feel overwhelmed by not knowing what to do or by the fact that you were unable to protect her from the rape. You can use these feelings to begin to understand the trauma that she has experienced but you must not expect her to make you feel better.

Taking over

You may want to take control and sort everything out. While she is likely to need extra help at first, ultimately she must be in control of the recovery process. Rape takes away her sense of control and power-she needs it back!

Trying to shorten the healing process

The survivor will probably experience many problems and strong feelings as a result of the rape. It is difficult to watch someone you care about feeling so traumatised. You may want to try to stop her from experiencing these painful emotions. This impulse is ultimately helpful though she needs to work through the whole experience so that she can fully recover. The best thing you can do is support her through this process and acknowledge her strength and courage.

Anger

It is natural to be angry about rape, and she may feel supported by your concern and outrage. However, she will certainly feel worse if she believes that you are angry with her. She may also feel worse if she believes that you will carry out threat against the rapist.

Guilt

You may feel guilty that you were unable to protect her, but you are not responsible for what happened-the rapist is! Avoid becoming over protective of the survivor as a way of dealing with your feelings as this can be almost as unhelpful as taking over.

Trying to speed up recovery

It is natural to want her to get better quickly, but recovery from rape is a long, slow and difficult process that can take months or years. Give her time and trust her ability to ultimately recover.

Denying the reality of rape

Sometimes it is more comfortable to avoid talking about the rape or to pretend it never happened. This is counter-productive as the rape is a huge part of her life now and she needs to talk about it and express her feelings in a conducive environment

Relationship problem

Rape places great stress on relationships. Be patient with her and find support for yourself in other relationships or through counselling.

EDUCATE YOURSELF

Learn all you can about rape and make sure you read the accompanying pamphlets **“Rape: Myths and Misconceptions”** and **“Rape Trauma Syndrome”**. You will not be able to effectively help the survivor unless you are well informed. You must understand and believe that how she was dressed, who she was with, where she was, what she was doing or the decisions she made when she was attacked do not make it her fault. Only the rapist is responsible for the rape. NOBODY else is to blame.

ACCEPT AND UNDERSTAND THE NEW REALITY

When a woman or girl has been raped, her life is brutally changed. Healing is possible, but it is not a short or easy process. Things will never be the same as they were before the rape, if you don't accept this fact, if you grow impatient with her recovery or if you minimize the difficulties she is facing, you will make a bad situation worse. However, you also need to believe in the survivor. She can heal and with appropriate support and enough time, she will. Proclaiming that her life is completely ruined or treating her as if she is permanently damaged can be just as destructive as minimizing and dismissing the problem. Things will never be the same, but with time, care and support, they will eventually get better.

EXERCISE SELF-CONTROL

While it is natural to be angry about what has happened, think carefully about where you direct your feelings. If you confront the rapist there may be no satisfaction for you that does not put you at legal risk. You cannot help the survivor if you create your own legal problems, you must also resist all temptations to blame the survivor. The rape was not her fault and whatever she did during the rape was the best, most intelligent thing she could have done because it saved her life.

WHAT SHE NEEDS

Immediately after the rape, she will need to make decisions about:

Medical Attention

The survivor should be encouraged to seek medical attention within 72 hours even if she does not appear to be injured. She needs to find out if she has any internal injuries and determine her risk of pregnancy, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. If she decides to report to the police, she will need to see a District Surgeon for a medico-legal examination before she gets treated for any injuries or illnesses.

Police Intervention

She must make the decision about whether to report the rape, and you must support her choice. If she does want to report the rape you can offer to go with her to the police station and stay with her while she makes her statement.

Crisis counselling

Again, she must decide if she wants to speak with a counsellor. You can help by giving her information about organisations like POWA that have knowledge and skills in working with rape survivors. The survivor will also need long-term support, you can help in the following ways: