

We're listening. We believe.

supporting survivors of  
sexual violence

information, tips and resources for  
partners, family and friends

end violence

*wise*

share hope ♦ change lives

## Getting Started

It's hard when someone we love has been hurt. Often, we want to help but aren't sure what to do. Sometimes we're afraid we'll say or do the wrong thing and make it worse. Letting your loved one know you care about them and letting them make choices for themselves are always good places to start.

If the hurt is related to being a victim of sexual violence, learning about the issue can be an important step for you. Knowing about the issue can help you support your loved one while showing them that you are taking what happened to them seriously. In addition, there is a lot of misinformation about sexual violence in our society, which can make knowing the facts a little harder but that much more important in order to be as helpful as possible.

## It's More Common Than You Might Think . . .

- 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be sexually assaulted by the age of 18. (Finkelhor, et al., 1990)
- 14.8% of women have been a victim of rape; 2.8% of women have been a victim of attempted rape.  
(Tjaden & Thoennes, NIJ/CDC Report, 2000)
- From 1992-2000 an average of only 31% of all rapes and sexual victimizations were reported to the police.  
(Hart, Timothy, & Rennison, 2000)
- 7 in 10 rape and sexual assault victims know their attacker prior to the assault. (Rennison, 2000)
- 2/3 of women who had been physically assaulted by an intimate partner had also been raped by that partner. (McFarlane, Malecha 2005)
- In a survey of college women, 13.3% indicated that they have been forced to have sex in a dating situation.  
(Johnson and Sigler, 2000)

## The Definitions

Every person has the right to be touched only in the ways they want to be. While state laws on sexual assault vary, **any sexual contact or other sexual behavior that occurs without a person's consent is a violation of that person's rights. This is the definition of sexual violence.**

Something is usually called "sexual assault" if it involves any non-consensual sexual contact. The term "rape" is used when there has been sexual penetration. The penetration can be with an object or can be very slight and is still considered rape. It is also a violation if someone is watched by someone else (voyeurism) or had sexual things said to them without their consent. Much of the information in this booklet focuses on surviving sexual assault but can be applied to other types of sexual violence as well.

The great majority of assaults are perpetuated by someone the victim knows—friend, family, partner. Sometimes the term “date rape” is used to describe this. While this term was originally developed to raise awareness about the reality that most people are assaulted by someone they know, this expression minimizes the severity of the crime. For example, people would not call it “date murder” if someone was killed by someone they knew, even if it was on a date. It is an assault, rape or murder no matter what the relationship is between the victim and perpetrator.

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## Consent

Consent is not just permission. For any sexual act to be consensual, it has to be freely chosen, without coercion, force, or manipulation. Just because someone goes along with something does not mean they are consenting. A person has to *want* to engage in sexual activity for it to be consensual; otherwise, the person is being violated.

If someone has been drinking alcohol or taking drugs, their thought process is affected and they may not be able to consent. If someone is given alcohol or other drugs without their knowledge, they cannot consent.

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## Alcohol and Other Drugs at the Time of the Assault

Some victims were using alcohol or other drugs recreationally before being assaulted. While being drunk or high may have made them more vulnerable, it is not the reason they were assaulted, nor does it make them responsible for what happened to them. As a person supporting a survivor, it is important not to focus on your loved one's use of substances at the time of the assault if they were using by choice. It was only the perpetrator's behavior that caused the assault. Talking about the survivor's substance use may lead them to believe that you think they are somehow responsible even though they're not.

Some victims are given alcohol or other drugs without their knowledge to incapacitate them or make it impossible for them to remember what happened. Not having a clear memory of the assault can be very difficult and confusing for the victim, and it in no way minimizes the impact of the assault.

While certain drugs are commonly known as "rape drugs," any

time someone is assaulted after choosing to use alcohol or other drugs recreationally, or if they are given a substance without their knowledge, it is called "drug-facilitated sexual assault."

## The Response

Everyone responds to fear differently. The most common reactions for humans during an assault are to freeze or submit. This is normal. It is an instinctive reaction to terror.

For survivors of sexual violence, this freezing reaction means they could not fight or scream to defend themselves when they were attacked. They may be afraid that their loved ones will not believe what happened to them was an assault because they did not fight back. They may be scared that you won't understand why they didn't fight back or defend themselves in some other way. What they did or did not do is not what is important. What is important is that they did the best they could to survive. If you can let them know this, it will probably help your loved one.

## Dissociation and Memory

Your loved one may have unconsciously sent their mind somewhere else during the assault(s) because it would have been too hurtful to feel what was happening (emotionally and/or physically) if they didn't. This is called "dissociation."

Dissociation is common, instinctive, and important for survival. It helps people get through events that they otherwise could not endure.

Dissociating is only one of a number of things that our bodies and minds do to protect us when they sense we are in danger. It is a way we protect ourselves from something we should not have to experience. For survivors, sometimes it feels as though they have betrayed themselves. It is good to remind them that this is not the case. They only did what they could do to keep themselves as safe as possible.

Dissociation can also be an ongoing way of coping well after the event and may make concentration or staying present difficult.

Because your loved one's mind might have been somewhere else during the assault, their memories of what happened may be unclear. If your loved one does not remember perfectly, or if the narrative about the event changes, it does not mean the assault did not happen.

The way we remember frightening events is often very different from how we remember other things. These memories often come back in pieces and usually are not linear. Sometimes a memory comes back after being "triggered," i.e., there was a reminder of some sort.

Triggers can be sensory—a sound or smell, for example. Sometimes they are metaphorical. Often survivors feel as though they are experiencing the assault again or they may have flashbacks. This can be very scary, sometimes sending a survivor into a state of terror.

**Supporting someone you care about who has been sexually violated is hard, but there are a number of simple things you can do to help . . .**

## **Believe them.**

*People do not want to talk about sexual assault unless they have to.*

*If someone is saying it happened, chances are overwhelmingly good that it really did.*

## **Tell them it was not their fault.**

*No one wants to be assaulted. No matter what they were doing, what they were wearing, or where they were, these factors did not cause the assault. The only reason they were assaulted is that the perpetrator(s) chose to assault them.*



## Support them.

*Victims' power is taken away from them when they are violated. By supporting them, and empowering them to make decisions for themselves, they can regain that power. Let them have control. Let them see how proud you are that they survived, that you know it can be a struggle and that you respect their perseverance.*

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## Let them heal at their own pace.

*This can be difficult for loved ones because they want—often desperately—for their survivor to “get better.” Integrating an assault can take a long time. Trying to rush them will not help.*

## Encourage them to be good to themselves.

*What is soothing for them?*

*Walks, eating well, taking baths, having alone time or time with friends . . . you may be able to help identify what would be good for them.*

*Let them know that you know they are worth it and support their self-care.*

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## The Impact

Sexual violence can turn a person's world upside down. Integrating the fact that this can happen, and that it did happen to them is difficult work.

People often have the thought that they are going to be killed when they are being assaulted, whether or not this is the intent of the assailant. It is terrifying. This sort of overwhelming sensation is called "trauma."

If the victim had a relationship with the assailant before the assault, it can be scary because it seems that if someone they chose to trust can do that to them, maybe no one is safe. It even puts trust in their own judgment in doubt.

If the assailant was a stranger, it can seem as though anyone they don't know is dangerous.

Whatever the circumstances of the attack, it is common to feel scared and/or anxious for a long time after an assault, (or for a long time after coming to terms with having been assaulted in the past). There is a frightening realization that the world is not as safe as they once thought it was. This is not only true for the survivor, but can be the case for friends and family as well.

20 Anxiety can also be related to the burst of adrenaline that the victim experienced when they were assaulted; especially for people who have been assaulted many times, the adrenaline flow can become less regulated and cause unmodulated bursts of energy or fear without the person knowing why. For others, the fear that they might see the perpetrator again can cause enormous anxiety. In general, survivors can be struggling with an undercurrent of nervousness that can be hard for other people to understand. It is also common to feel out of control, depressed or powerless.

The chance that a woman will develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after being raped are between 50% and 95%.

(Population Information Program, 1999)

## Alcohol and Other Drugs After the Assault

Alcohol and other drugs can seem like they offer an escape from the reality of being in an unsafe world and a way to cope with anxiety after an assault. This can be dangerous. People can become dependent on substances as a way of avoiding thoughts or feelings about the assault. In addition, they might be more vulnerable to another attack if they are using alcohol or other drugs. Perpetrators tend to look for people who are vulnerable.

21 There are anti-anxiety pharmaceuticals that doctors can prescribe that can be safer. You could encourage your loved one to see a counselor who can talk about their options for care and possibly refer them to a doctor.

In addition, there are counselors who can reduce anxiety through relaxation and other body-mind techniques such as Somatic Experiencing, Sensorimotor Therapy or yoga.

## Guilty Feelings and Attempts at “Mastery”

Often survivors blame themselves. This is a way to try to make sense of what happened. It is important to remind them that it is not their fault. Sometimes survivors try to “reenact” the assault in order to prove to themselves that *this time* it will be different.

Some ways this can happen is a survivor will unconsciously seek out a situation that is similar to the one in which they were assaulted in the hopes of having a different outcome and thus “mastering” what happened. For example, if someone was assaulted after going to a certain bar, they might go back there to try to prove to themselves that they can be safe. This can be very difficult for loved ones to witness, as it can put the survivor in dangerous situations because predators look for vulnerable people. You could try to point out that this might be happening and that you are worried.

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## Perspectives

Your loved one may seem different after being assaulted or when they are coming to terms with an assault from another time in their life. They are the same person, they just experienced something very frightening. Expecting them to be as fun-loving or carefree as they were before the assault can make it harder for their healing.

Try to balance talking about it and not talking about it. Ask if they want to talk. People don’t want to be identified as “the person who was assaulted” but avoiding the subject can feel stigmatizing as well.

Many survivors see their lives as “before” and “after” the assault for the rest of their lives. It can be devastating but in the end it can be a strengthening experience. Having support from a loved one can make the difference.

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## Help from Professionals

There are many ways in which a person affected by sexual violence can heal. Many people in the community are available to help in different ways. Their training and choice of modalities vary in approach:

**Advocates** at WISE (or other crisis centers) utilize the Empowerment Model to listen to and support survivors as well as help navigate legal or other systems. The advocate's role is to offer information and resources and empower the person to make the decisions that are right for them.

Advocates in crisis centers like WISE are specially trained in the dynamics of sexual violence. Any communication with them is strictly confidential although some are required to report child abuse and neglect.

One-on-one support and support groups are available. All services are free.

*The following types of specialists have different focuses. They may not have any training in working with victims of sexual violence. Most will provide one-on-one counseling sessions and some also offer groups. There is usually a fee charged. Insurance may cover some of the fee for some providers. Many work on a sliding scale. When trying to find a provider, it is good to ask what they know about sexual assault and trauma.*

**Medical providers** can help with injuries, sexually transmitted diseases and overall care.

**Psychologists** (Ph. D.) usually work within educational settings or counseling centers.

**Clinical Psychologists** (Ph.D. or Psy.D.) assess psychopathology and provide treatment.

**Psychiatrists** (M.D.) are medical doctors. They can prescribe pharmaceuticals. Some also provide therapy.

**Mind-body Practitioners** focus on lowering anxiety without drugs. Somatic Experiencing (SE) and Sensorimotor Therapy are two modalities that are specifically for trauma healing.

**Faith Leaders** Clergy focus on healing within a religious context.

## Support Yourself

One of the best things you can do for your loved one is get support for yourself. Knowing about the violation may make you angry but expressing that to the survivor may not be helpful. Supporting someone else is hard work. Focusing on their needs can be draining and it is important not to forget yourself.

Any of the counseling options listed above might be helpful.

- 26 A WISE advocate can support you as well and help you figure out the best ways to take care of yourself.

It is the policy of WISE to provide services to victims/survivors of sexual violence, domestic violence and stalking regardless of gender, age, health status (including HIV-positive), physical, mental or emotional ability, sexual orientation/identity, gender identity/expression, socioeconomic status, race, national origin, parental responsibility, language, immigration status, or religious or political affiliation.

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**support is available  
every hour, every day**

**24-hour crisis line  
866-348-9473**