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Services for Individuals Affected by Sexual Assault Offered at No Cost

Support Guide for Partners

You're likely reading this because your partner (in a dating relationship or your spouse) has been sexually assaulted recently or sexually abused in the past. You may have just found out about this, or you may have known for some time and are now recognizing some of the effects this has had on your loved one and on your relationship. Your partner needs your love, strength and support as she/he moves through the stages of healing and recovery.

You want to be a caring and nurturing partner, but you may feel challenged by some of the feelings and experiences your partner and you are having at this time. Her/his behaviours or reactions to you may have changed since the assault or disclosure, and this may be very confusing.

It's important to know that changes you see in your partner's behaviour or emotional state probably have nothing to do with you personally. Sexual assault and sexual abuse are life-changing experiences that often shake the survivor to the core. Their sense of the world as a safe place, their trust in themselves -- and especially their trust in others -- will be powerfully impacted by sexual assault.

You may feel guilty or helpless because you're unable to do much to lessen their pain or move their recovery forward, but your patience, support, and belief in your partner's ability to recover will contribute to their healing. You very likely feel anger toward the person that has created such turmoil in your loved one's life, and yours. This is a normal response. You may want to share these feelings with your partner, and it's fine to do this within limits (more on this below).

But as the other half of your partner's most intimate human relationship, you have a very special role to play as they travel their healing journey. The suggestions below may be of help to you.

How to support your partner following a sexual assault

Be a rock. Your partner needs someone solid and dependable to hang onto, both emotionally and physically. Reassure her/him that your feelings of love haven't changed. Tell her/him that you believe in their ability to heal and recover fully from the experience.

Listen well. Encourage your partner to express the confusing spectrum of emotions they may be experiencing, while giving them the freedom to determine when and how to do this. When your partner opens up to you, just listen. Don't interrupt or inject your own feelings, and don't suggest what they should be feeling. Expect both positive and negative emotions. If the perpetrator was someone your partner knows well (such as a family member), she/he may have mixed feelings about what's happened.

Let your partner know you believe them. One of your partner's biggest fears may be that you won't believe their story; it's possible that she/he will only disclose details they feel you can be trusted to hear. Through calm, accepting and encouraging responses, you'll demonstrate that you're prepared to take what you're told as the truth. If you minimize, deny or mistrust her/his experience, your partner's fears will be strengthened or confirmed, and it's likely that they will retreat into silence. DO NOT push for details, especially sexual ones.

Share your own feelings, but do it carefully. It's OK for you to share your own feelings of grief, sadness, even anger. It may even be helpful for your partner to hear your expressions of outrage or pain about their terrible experience. But overdoing this can cause your partner to feel that they need to support you, to feel guilty about causing you pain, or to shield you by holding back their own emotions. If this starts to happen, you should seek alternate support for yourself. You can obtain information, support or counseling from AASAS member agencies. Your partner needs to focus on self-healing and regaining a sense of control over their life.

Tell your partner that this was not their fault. Talk to your partner without judgment or analyzing their experience. Don't criticize the choices they made, or for being unable to prevent the assault. Reassure your partner that whatever she/he may have done (or not done) at the time, it was the right choice that enabled her/him to survive. By always putting TOTAL responsibility on the offender, you will help your partner reduce feelings of guilt, denial and self-blame. SEXUAL ASSAULT IS NEVER, EVER THE SURVIVOR'S FAULT.

Don't make decisions for your partner. It's extremely important that your partner regain a sense of control in their life and confidence in their own judgment. Attempts to protect your partner by discouraging their involvement in old or new friendships, activities, or interests will not support their healing. The experience of sexual assault or abuse may lead to your partner making changes that affect her/his relationships, including the one they have with you. If you find it difficult to support the choices your partner is making, it may be beneficial for you to seek support for yourself at this time.

Validate the impacts of her experience. Regardless of the specific impacts of the assault or abuse, or the length of time since the experience, your partner's life has been changed. If your partner's experience isn't recent and they're just telling you now, what's important is that they trust you enough now to share this. Not telling you sooner is simply not important.

If your partner was a child when the abuse happened, remember that sexual abuse is very hard for a child to talk about. Often, children try to tell but are not believed, understood or supported -- and often they're threatened or frightened into silence. Regardless of your partner's age at the time of their abuse or assault, they coped with their experience the best way they could.

As your partner moves forward in their healing, they may recognize impacts from the abuse in their present day life. These are connections only the survivor can make, and only that person can sort out whether and how they should address these impacts.

Ask before you touch. Even if you share a longstanding physical relationship, don't automatically assume that physical contact, even in the form of a gentle touch or hug, will be comforting to your partner. At first, particularly if the assault was recent or if your partner has just disclosed to you, unwanted touch may remind your partner of the assault/abuse.

It's up to your partner to decide whether hugging or holding will be comforting or stressful, so give your them all the space they need, and try your best not to take her/his reactions personally. You can quietly signal your openness to physical contact by sitting with an open posture and an upturned palm.

Respond to discomfort about sexual intimacy with love and patience. In order to heal, your partner may need to stop engaging in sexual activity until she/he feels comfortable with it. It's important that you acknowledge this possibility to your partner, and that you tell them that this is OK. Talking openly about this is key to your partner's healing and to the health of your relationship. Talking may make your partner feel safer and help both of you to remain close emotionally. Be extremely patient, and be open to other ways of sharing closeness while your partner is recovering.

Accept that you won't be able to "fix" it. No matter how much you care and how hard you try, you can't remove your partner's pain or speed up their healing journey. Sometimes, the hardest -- but best -- thing to do may be to do nothing at all. Your most valuable support may simply be to be a loving, understanding and patient partner while she/he is recovering.

Know your own limits. No matter how much you love and want to support your partner, your own emotional resources aren't limitless. If you try to give too much, you may find yourself resenting or withdrawing from them when your partner needs you most. No one person can give any person all the support they needs. Encourage your partner to spend time with others who also care about her and who support her healing process.

You may also want to speak to a trusted, supportive person who can help you "download" your own stress and express your own feelings about what's happened. Make sure to get your partner's permission before talking about the assault with someone else. You can get more information, support or counselling from AASAS members across the province.

Take care of yourself, too. Don't completely immerse yourself in supporting or worrying about your partner. No matter how much you love and care about them, you also need to consciously set aside time for your own needs. Find diversions that will lighten your emotional load and recharge your ability to give support. Get engrossed in your favourite sport or hobby, go for a walk, see a movie, read a book. Despite this challenging time for your partner and your relationship, you have a right to enjoy yourself and your life.