



## Supporting survivors of sexual assault: what you can do if someone tells you they have been sexually assaulted

This fact sheet provides information for people who are supporting an adult who has been sexually assaulted.

If you are the parent, carer or family member of a child who has been sexually assaulted, please see our fact sheet titled *About Child Sexual Assault - information for parents, carers and family members*. You can also find more information about responding to sexual assault in our SASS booklet *What are my options?* both resources are available on our website, or by contacting SASS).

'Sexual assault' means being forced, tricked or threatened into any form of sexual contact that the person either does not consent to, or is not able to consent to due to age or other circumstances (e.g. being asleep, intoxicated or otherwise incapacitated).

Sexual contact includes a range of behaviours legally defined as sexual crimes such as rape, sexual assault with implements, being forced to watch or engage in pornography, forced prostitution, and being made to perform sexual acts with friends of the perpetrator.

Sexual assault can be highly traumatising for survivors and the people close to them, like family members and friends. For the survivor, it may feel like their body, emotions and sense of self have been attacked or violated.

Most people feel disorientated after an assault. Other common responses include anxiousness, nightmares, insomnia, headaches, depression, fear of certain people or places, denial, emotional numbness, guilt, and shame.

It can take some time for these to subside. People need to progress at their own pace through the healing and recovery process.

If someone close to you has been sexually assaulted, you may feel:

- Helpless.
- Sad.
- Angry or shocked.
- Confused about what to do and how to support them.

While there is no 'right thing' to do, how you react may influence the feelings or choices of the person who has been assaulted.

### What support can I give?

You can support someone who has been sexually assaulted by:

- Listening to them
- Believing what they tell you.

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- Validating their feelings. Pain, hurt, fear and anger are natural reactions to traumatic events like sexual assault.
  - Respecting the fact that it often takes time and space to heal.
  - Recognising the harm that was done to them.
  - Acknowledging their strength and courage.
  - Being non-judgmental.

Self-blame is a common reaction. The survivor may say or think things like:

- 'Maybe I gave out the wrong signals'.
- 'I shouldn't have gotten into that car'.
- 'I shouldn't have gone there alone'.
- 'I thought he/she was my friend'.

Sexual assault is never the victim's fault - responsibility lies with the person who committed the assault.

It is essential that you understand this if you intend to support someone through the healing process.

Many people feel that their life will never be the same again. But it is possible to heal from the effects of sexual assault and regain a sense of control and personal power.

It may be tempting to 'take over' and make decisions for someone in distress but this should be avoided - each person knows their own needs best. It is important to support the survivor in the choices they make (the exception is if someone is putting their own or another's life at risk); this includes supporting them if they decide not to report the assault to the police.

Survivors often give a lot of consideration to who they can trust, and who is likely to listen. If someone chooses to talk about their thoughts, feelings and choices with you, the most important thing is to listen without judgement. Be clear about what you are able to offer, and don't make commitments or promises that you can't keep.

Where you can, provide information about other available relevant resources and supports (such as counselling services). It is vital that survivors of assault receive accurate information about options and supports available to them.

## Do's and Don'ts

**DO** help the survivor to regain a sense of safety and control over their life by allowing them to make their own decisions.

**DO** offer options, make suggestions, and help to weigh up the pros and cons, but let the survivor make their own decisions.

**DO** ask the survivor what they need from you.

**DO** help in practical ways, such as contacting support services (with permission).

**DO** encourage them to get support.

**DO** seek support for yourself, without breaching the survivor's confidentiality.

**DO** seek help if there is a risk of suicide.

**DO** educate yourself about sexual assault and the issues surrounding it.

**DON'T** blame the survivor for the abuse.

**DON'T** sympathise with the abuser.

**DON'T** take charge.

**DON'T** ignore what has happened to the survivor by telling them to 'forget' or 'get over' it.

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## Sexual Assault Support Service

Ground Floor, 31-33 Tower Road  
New Town, 7008

03 6231 0044 (9am–5pm, Mon–Fri)

admin@sass.org.au | www.sass.org.au

24 hour sexual assault response and

counselling service: **1800 MYSUPPORT**

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**1800 697 877**

Sexual Assault Support Service (SASS) Inc. receives funding from the  
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SASS holds Quality Improvement Council (QIC) accreditation.

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