How to Help Someone Who Has Been Sexually Assaulted
A Guide for Family and Friends

It’s normal to feel upset when someone you know or care about has been assaulted, it is normal for you to feel upset and confused. At a time when you may want to help most, you will be dealing with a crisis of your own. This guide may help you know what you can do to support person who has been sexually assaulted. The victim needs your support. Your support at a time like this can be extremely helpful to a sexual assault victim. Consider the following guidelines to help you through this time:

**Believe the victim.** Believe her/his experience without question.

**Do not blame her/him.** Whatever the circumstances s/he was not looking for or asking to be assaulted. It is very common for the victim of a sexual assault to blame her/himself. Reassure her/him that the blame for rape rests squarely and only with the assailant and that s/he has no way of knowing what would have happened if s/he had acted differently.

**Respect the victim.** Respect her/his fear. Assailants commonly threaten to kill or seriously harm the victim if s/he does not comply. Most victims feared that they would not survive the assault. This fear does not go away when the rapist does. This fear is real. Help her/him deal with it by finding ways to increase her/his safety.

**Accept the victim.** Accept her/his strong feelings. S/he has the right to any emotion. S/he has the right to be numb, sad, angry, in denial, terrified, depressed, agitated, withdrawn, etc. Being supportive is an attitude of acceptance of all her/his feelings, an atmosphere of warmth and safety that s/he can rest in. Tolerate her/his needs, be there for her/him.

**Listen to the victim.** Let her/him know you want to listen. It does not matter so much what you say, but more how you listen. Try to understand what s/he is going through. S/he did the very best s/her knew how in a dangerous situation. S/he survived. Give her credit. Let her/him talk, do not interrupt. Find time to focus on the victim. Ask her/him what s/he needs from you. You may feel nervous about stalls and silences. They are okay, just let them happen. If s/he needs help to continue talking, try repeating back to her/him the things she has said.

**Reassure her/him that s/he is not to blame.** Blaming questions such as, "Why didn't you scream?" or "Why did you go there?" are not helpful. Instead, you might say, "It's difficult to scream when you are frightened" or "Going someplace unfamiliar is risky, but you were not asking to be assaulted."

**Take her/him seriously.** Pay attention. This will help her/him validate the seriousness of her/his feelings and her/his need to work them through. Sexual assault is a shattering experience which a victim does not get over in a hurry or alone. It may be months or years before s/he feels fully recovered. Recovery is a process of acceptance and healing which takes time.
**Stay with the victim.** Stay with her/him as long as she wants you to. One of the most upsetting losses experienced by rape victims is the loss of independence and solitude. For a while, many victims feel too frightened and vulnerable to endure being alone. This will pass with time. Meanwhile, be good company.

**Let the victim make her/his own decisions.** Do no pressure her/him into making decisions or doing things s/he is not ready to do. Help her/him explore all the options. It is essential to respect her confidentiality. Let her decide who knows about the sexual assault.

**Care.** Care about her/his well-being. In order to care about your friend, you may need to cope with some difficult emotions of your own. If you are experiencing rage, blame or changes in how you feel about your friend/relative, you can be most helpful to her/him by finding ways of coping with your own emotions.

Sexual assault is not provoked nor desired by the victim. In fact, sexual assault is motivated by the assailant’s need for power and control and his desire to humiliate and degrade the victim.

*From the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault Website*