

Sexual Assault

HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT SOMEONE?

WHAT IS SEXUAL ASSAULT?

Sexual assault includes a broad range of unwanted sexual behaviours including verbal suggestions, harassment, touching and rape.

Sexual assault is

- Ψ Any sexual activity that is forced, coerced, or where consent is not given, or cannot be given
- Ψ An act of violence. It is about power and control acted out in a sexual way, not about passion or sexual desire
- Ψ A crime, whether the offender is a stranger, partner, family member, friend or care giver

Sexual Assault can happen to anyone regardless of age, gender, ethnic background or social situation. Both men and women are more likely to be sexually assaulted by someone they know and trust than by a stranger.

EFFECTS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

Sexual assault is a traumatic event which can have lasting effects. People manage traumatic situations in many different ways - there is no right way to act or feel.

People who have been sexually assaulted may experience many emotional, physical and behavioural effects. These are normal reactions to a traumatic event and may be intense and overwhelming. They may occur within hours, days, weeks or months after the assault or develop over a long period.

Some emotional effects

Shock, depression, fear, anxiety, self-blame, guilt, powerlessness, lack of trust, humiliation, relief, rage and anger and flashbacks.

Some physical effects

Nausea, fatigue, pain, muscle tension, chest tightness, sexual difficulties and headaches

Some behavioural effects

Alcohol and drug problems, eating problems, sleeping difficulties (such as nightmares, early waking and insomnia) and lack of concentration.

In supporting someone close to you who has been sexually assaulted,

IT IS IMPORTANT TO

- Ψ Help her/him to feel safe
- Ψ Believe
- Ψ Listen
- Ψ Allow her/him to make decisions
- Ψ Respect and support these decisions
- Ψ Recognise the harm that was done
- Ψ Respect her/his need to express these feelings
- Ψ Recognise her/his need to be alone at times
- Ψ Respect privacy
- Ψ Respect that healing takes time, space and energy
- Ψ Let her/him choose which family members or friends to whom he/she disclosed
- Ψ Offer suggestions of help, such as child care, company
- Ψ Ask how best to provide support (encourage her/him to seek support); acknowledge your limits
- Ψ Be patient
- Ψ Be sensitive to fears about sexual activity

IT IS IMPORTANT NOT TO

- Ψ Ignore what has happened
- Ψ Take charge or be over protective
- Ψ Blame, accuse or judge her/him
- Ψ Insist on reporting to the police if she/he does not want to
- Ψ Make threats against the perpetrator
- Ψ Sympathise with the perpetrator
- Ψ Press for details of the assault
- Ψ Tell anyone else what happened without permission
- Ψ Offer support you are unable to provide
- Ψ Expect her/him to respond to your feelings
- Ψ Tell her/him "its over now, get on with life"

Remember: Healing and recovery take time and there is no one way to deal with the impact of sexual assault. However by being patient, understanding and non-judgemental you will be communicating through support. Resist seeing the person who has experienced sexual assault as a victim: trust that she/he will use their strengths to heal and recover.

