



## Responding to Disclosures of Sexual Violence

It can be hard to talk about sexual violence. Those who have been harmed by sexual violence often struggle with feelings of guilt and shame – thinking the abuse was in some way their fault. They are often fearful that they will not be believed. It can take a lot of courage to seek support.

It can be difficult to know what to say or do when someone tells you that they have been sexually harassed, abused, or assaulted. Here are some positive and supportive ways to respond to a disclosure:

### Remain Calm

Do your best to remain outwardly calm. It can be difficult to hear about the harm someone has experienced. If your immediate response is one of sadness, shock, dismay, or anger, that's okay and normal. Take a deep breath.

Explain that you are not upset with them. Let them know that you are sad/mad that someone has hurt them in this way, not because they told you.

### Thank Them

*Thank you for trusting me with your story.*

Thank them for trusting you with their story. Let them know that they do not need to share any more than they are comfortable sharing.

### Listen

*Take your time, I am here to listen.*

Listen actively and attentively. Keep in mind that this may be the first time they have talked about the harm they experienced. Let them tell their story in their own way and at their own pace.

Try not to ask too many questions. Avoid *why* questions as they can suggest blame. Often, you do not need to know the details of what happened to provide support.

Allow them to express their feelings openly and without fear of judgment.

### Believe

*I believe you.*

The most important thing you can do for someone who discloses is to accept that what you're being told is the truth. Often a survivor's biggest fear is that their support people won't believe them.

Even if you know everyone involved, assume that what you are being told is true. It is very rare for people to lie about sexual violence.

Clearly demonstrate, through your calm, accepting, and encouraging responses, that you do believe them.

## Validate

*This is not your fault. Your feelings are valid. It is okay to not be okay.*

People often react to the harm of sexual violence in ways that may be confusing or surprising to them. They may express feelings of shame, guilt, fear, sadness, confusion, anger, numbness, among many other feelings. Let them know that it is okay to feel the way that they are feeling and that the harm they experienced was not their fault. Be mindful of your language. Avoid language that assigns blame, dismisses or minimizes the harm they have experienced.

Sometimes an individual may not want anything more than to tell someone what happened and have their feelings validated.

Offer supportive messages such as:

- *That feeling makes sense in response to the harm you have experienced.*
- *It is okay to not have the words, I am here for you.*
- *Nothing that you did, or could have done differently, makes this your fault.*
- *No one has the right to hurt you.*

## Provide Information, Choice, and Control

*You are not alone. You get to choose what to do next. I support your decisions.*

Once the person has finished telling you what they wanted to share, this may be an appropriate time to explore their next steps. It is important to provide information and explore options in an open, non-judgmental way that allows them to make their own decisions.

Consider suggesting that they reach out to a sexual assault centre for information and support. You can call for them or be there with them when they call. To find the nearest sexual assault centre visit [www.aasas.ca](http://www.aasas.ca), or call or text Alberta's One Line for Sexual Violence at 1-866-403-8000.

Options may include:

- calling a helpline to speak with someone who can give them information and support;
- (if applicable) going to the hospital to receive medical care for injuries, sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections, or pregnancy;
- reporting to law enforcement (there's no time limit – if they choose to, they can report anytime);
  - reporting to campus security;
  - reporting to an employer or the Alberta Human Rights Commission (for workplace sexual harassment);
- seeing a counsellor or joining a support group;
- choosing to do nothing at the moment.

Respecting their decisions about which option(s) they choose is an important way for them to regain control after an assault. Exploring options is far more helpful and empowering than giving advice.

## Take Care of Yourself

It is never easy to hear that someone has been sexually harassed, abused, or assaulted. While being sure to respect the privacy of the person who disclosed to you, find someone to talk to about your feelings such as a counsellor or support worker at a sexual assault center.