Supporting Survivors of Sexual Assault

What is Sexual Assault?
The law defines sexual assault as any form of unwanted sexual contact. It can include unwanted kissing, rubbing, grabbing, intercourse, etc. Sexual assault is a violent crime where one person asserts power and control over another person.

How is a person affected by Sexual Assault?
Sexual assault often leaves survivors feeling powerless. It can affect many aspects of a survivor's life including their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health. Some common feelings survivors have include guilt, shame, fear, depression, anger, loss of trust, etc. A survivor may also be worried about their physical health (STIs, pregnancy, HIV). While some effects of sexual assault are due to the physical assault itself, survivors are also greatly affected by sexual assault myths which often blame survivors for the violence they have experienced. Due to this, many survivors choose not to tell anyone about their assault.

Many survivors also develop coping mechanisms. Coping mechanisms are survival strategies that people use to deal with overwhelming or unbearable emotions. Coping mechanisms may include minimizing their experience, dissociation, increased use of drugs or alcohol, disordered eating, self-harming behaviours, self-isolation, an increase/decrease in sexual activity, etc. It is important that survivors are not judged for the way they cope. Validate it as a natural reaction to a very difficult, painful experience. If the survivor is concerned that the way they are coping is not healthy or helpful, assist them in finding resources or different coping mechanisms that they are more comfortable with.

Immediate Support
Survivors of sexual assault often express their emotions in two different ways. There is an expressed style, where survivor actively express emotions such as fear, anxiety, and anger. They may also express themselves in ways that seem 'inappropriate' such as laughter. There is also the controlled style, where survivors seem very calm and composed, although it may not seem like a survivor is in crisis, they are. No matter how a survivor appears, it is important to be sensitive, caring, and respectful, and to listen to their needs.

There is help!
WAVAW can support you. Our free services include: community referrals, transportation to and from Vancouver General Hospital for the Sexual Assault Support services, 24 hour Crisis Line, One to one counselling, support groups, aboriginal outreach and counselling, and a victim service team to help with legal forms, police reporting, and court support. For more information, contact our office: 604 255 6228 or visit our website at www.wavaw.ca.

Women against violence against women
Rape Crisis Centre
2405 Pine St.
PO Box 46851 Station D
Vancouver, BC V6J 5M4

24hr CRISIS LINE:
604 255 6344
1877 392 7583
Support Tips:

LISTEN to what the survivor says. Acknowledge the strength and courage it takes to talk about their experience. Thank them for trusting you with their personal information. Help them find the resources they need. Support the decisions they make, even if you believe they should do something different. This is an important part of a survivor’s healing process. Do not interrupt or ask a lot of questions. Being asked a lot of questions can feel like being interrogated and can leave a survivor feeling more vulnerable. It is important to respect a survivor’s need for privacy. Let the survivor disclose what they are comfortable with. Don’t worry if they stop talking for a while, silences are okay.

BELIEVE the survivor. Tell them you believe them. It’s also important to think about what you say. You will have been influenced, as we all have, by the many myths in our society about sexual assault. Make sure your responses do not reinforce any of these myths.

CONTAIN your own feelings. It’s important not to show shock or horror. This may reinforce a person’s sense of shame and this may deter them from seeking more support. Avoid talking about getting revenge. Talk of revenge can create anxiety for a survivor and can put your own safety at risk. It is normal to be angry and to fantasize about revenge. Please talk about these feelings instead of acting on them. Supporting the survivor will require you to remain calm and in control of your feelings.

REASSURE them by saying, “it’s not your fault.” No on ever asks or deserves to be sexually assaulted. The only person to blame for a sexual assault is the perpetrator.

AVOID BLAMING by not asking questions like, “what were you doing there anyways?” As well, try to avoid asking questions using the word “why.” Even with the best intentions the question may sound accusatory to the survivor.

BE CAREFUL about touching (e.g. hugging) the person if they have not initiated the contact. Some people may be upset by physical contact. If in doubt, ask the survivor if touching is okay and always ask permission before making physical contact.

GET INFORMATION and help the survivor find existing resources including legal, medical, and/or emotional support.

BE AWARE that the person may not hate the offender, they may have very conflicting feelings especially if the offender is a partner, acquaintance, or relative.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF. Sexual violence is difficult for everyone, especially for those close to the survivor. You may experience many emotions, such as disbelief, anger, or guilt. It is important that you get the support you need from someone other than the survivor, while maintaining the survivor's confidentiality.

If an assault has just occurred...

It is important to consider your health. The Sexual Assault Service at Vancouver General Hospital can provide specialized medical care and support to anyone 13 years and older who has been sexually assaulted in the past 7 days. This includes answering questions, offering STI and/or pregnancy prevention medications, doing a medical exam, and collecting forensic samples. A WAWA staff woman can come to support you at the hospital. WAWA staff are also able to support a woman through the criminal justice system, if she decides to report to police. If a woman is unsure about reporting, it is important to know that forensic samples can be kept at the hospital for up to one year. If collecting forensic samples is of interest, a survivor should consider not showering, eating, or changing clothes after the assault.

WAVA supports all self-identified women who are 13 years or older.

women against violence against women

Rape Crisis Centre
2405 Pine St.
PO Box 46851 Station D
Vancouver, BC V6J 5M4

24hr CRISIS LINE: 604 255 6344
1 877 392 7583