

WHEN SOMEONE YOU KNOW HAS BEEN VICTIMIZED

It is often difficult to know what to do, how to respond, or where to refer a victim/survivor for help. Friends and loved ones may feel they don't have a role in healing or recovery because they don't know where they fit into the process.

Many people have limited knowledge about victimization, which can be based on stereotypes that do not reflect the norm of what most victims experience. There are many books, agencies, and online resources that can help you better understand the specific kind of victimization that your friend or loved one experienced, and how to best support them given their specific concerns. Below are just some of the national listed links that may be helpful when you are seeking support or questions to some of the victims concerns. There are many resources available and can be explored by searching the internet for assistance.

How to Help a Victim of...

- **Bullying:** <https://www.stopbullying.gov/respond/support-kids-involved/index.html>
- **Child Sexual Abuse:** <https://www.d2l.org/get-help/being-the-trusted-adult/>
- **Domestic Violence:** National Domestic Violence Hotline - <http://www.thehotline.org/help/help-for-friends-and-family/>
- **Homicide (When a loved one has been murdered):** http://griefwords.com/index.cgi?action=page&page=articles%2Fhelping15.html&site_id=2
- **Stalking:** The National Center for Victims of Crime's Stalking Resource Center - <http://victimsofcrime.org/our-programs/stalking-resource-center/help-for-victims>
- **Sexual Assault:** The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) - <https://www.rainn.org/articles/tips-talking-survivors-sexual-assault>
- **Teen Dating Violence:** <http://www.loveisrespect.org/for-someone-else/>

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP? – Recommendations for supporting victims of crime.

Remember that one person's reaction to victimization can be vastly different from another person's. What might seem like it is no big deal to one victim, may feel devastating to another. It might be helpful to check out information that is specific to the type of crime your friend or loved one experienced, as there can be unique responses and concerns common to different types of victimization. Especially for invasive personal crimes like sexual assault or stalking, it is important that you demonstrate that you **believe them**. Remind the victim that healing takes time.

- Listen. Be there. Communicate without judgment.
- Don't question the details they share, as they may think that you are questioning their honesty. Allow the investigators to do that job.
- Encourage the victim to seek supportive resources and if applicable, a local crisis hotline or victim advocacy organization. Staff at these resources can

explain options, help consider pros & cons of each option, provide crisis support, accompany the victim to resources, and make referrals to resources specific to their needs.

- If the victim seeks medical attention or plans to report, and they are not working with an advocate, offer to be there. Your presence can offer the support they need. Allow the victim to make decisions about what is best for them, rather than interject your own opinions about what they should do.
- Be patient. There is no timeline for recovering from trauma. Avoid putting pressure on the victim to engage in activities they aren't ready to do yet. It may take weeks, months, years for the person to integrate what happened into their life experience.
- Encourage them to practice good self-care during this time especially.

Consider using these phrases:

- **"I'm sorry this happened."** Acknowledge that the experience has affected their life. Phrases like "This must be really tough for you," and, "I'm so glad you are sharing this with me," help to communicate empathy.
- **"It's not your fault."** Victims of all types of crimes can sometimes blame themselves, especially if they know the perpetrator personally. Remind them, maybe even more than once, that they are not to blame.
- **"I believe you."** It can be extremely difficult for victims to come forward and share their story. They may feel ashamed, concerned that they won't be believed, or worried they'll be blamed by the people who mean the most to them. "Why" questions can come across as blaming and put victims on the defensive — but your job is to support this person. Be careful not to interpret calmness as a sign that the event did not occur—everyone responds differently. The best thing you can do is to believe them.
- **"You are not alone."** Remind the victim that you are there for them and willing to listen to their story. Remind them there are other people in their life who care and that there are service providers who will be able to support them as they recover from the experience.
- **"Are you open to seeking medical attention?"** The victim might need medical attention, even if the event happened a while ago. You can support them by offering to accompany them or find more information. It's okay to ask directly, "Are you open to seeking medical care?"
- **"I'm honored that you trust me enough to share this with me."** Let the victim talk about their experience if they come to you.
- **"It took a lot of strength & courage for you to... [seek help, report, tell me, etc.]"**
- **"You are having a normal response to an abnormal situation."** This will validate their reactions and help them feel more "normal" and less alone.
- **"Whatever you did to survive was the right thing because it worked."** Some victims beat themselves up about what they did or didn't do. It's important for them to understand that they may have been having a trauma response, which is a subconscious process that they could not control and were not even aware was happening. Focusing on their resilience & survival is affirming.

HOW MIGHT THE VICTIM FEEL?

It is natural for victims to feel a range of emotions. Keep in mind that **no two victims have the same emotional reaction or behaviors**. It is common for victims of crime to feel a tremendous loss of power and control over many aspects of their lives after situations like home invasion/robbery, sexual assault, domestic or dating violence, stalking, cyberstalking, sexual harassment, or murder of a loved one. The best way to know for sure how your loved one is feeling is to ask them. But don't push them to talk about their emotions if they resist. Reassure them that you are available to listen and support them if, and when, they would like to talk about it.

Symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder:

In the first weeks, even couple months, after a traumatic event, many of the symptoms listed below are common & normal responses. The person could be experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder if symptoms persist over time. If this is the case, it is recommended that the victim seek counseling to assess whether it is PTSD and to address the symptoms. Below is a list of symptoms:

Reliving the event (re-experiencing symptoms)

Memories of the traumatic event can come back at any time. The person may feel the same fear and horror they did when the event took place. Examples:

- Having **nightmares**.
- Feeling like they are going through the event again, a **flashback**.
- Seeing, hearing, or smelling something that causes them to relive the event. The neuro-biological response kicks in, causing a trauma response even when a trauma is not happening. This is called a **trigger**. Coming into contact with stimuli, especially registering through the 5 senses, that was present during the trauma can be triggering. Examples: Hearing news reports, smelling the perpetrator's cologne, being in a similar room, etc.

Avoiding situations that remind them of the event

The person may try to avoid situations or people that trigger memories of the traumatic event. They may avoid talking or thinking about the event. Examples:

- Avoiding a certain profile/race/ethnicity of person who victimized them.
- Avoiding the kinds of things that equate in their mind with the event (ex: if it was a car accident, avoiding driving; if it was a sexual crime, avoiding sex or romantic relationships; if it happened in a certain setting, avoiding that location or type of place; if they were drinking at the time, avoiding drinking.)
- Keeping very busy or avoiding seeking help in order to keep from having to think or talk about the event.
- Avoiding crowds, because they feel dangerous.

Negative changes in beliefs and feelings

The way they think about self & others changes because of the trauma. This symptom has many aspects, including the following:

- May not have positive or loving feelings toward other people and may stay away from relationships.
- May forget about parts of the traumatic event or not be able to talk about them.
- May think the world is completely dangerous, and no one can be trusted.

Feeling jumpy (hyperalert, hyperarousal)

The victim may be jittery, or always alert and on the lookout for danger. Might suddenly become angry or irritable. This is known as hyperarousal. Examples:

- Difficulty sleeping.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Easily startled by a loud noise or surprise.
- Intentionally sitting with their back to a wall in a restaurant or waiting room or at events, needing to constantly scan the room and be aware of who is coming or going.

If they have reported to authorities, used a hotline, sought medical care, gone to counseling, sought financial assistance, sought housing assistance, had to tell a loved one, or their supervisor, then they have already had to retell the story multiple times, both in detail and in summary. Re-telling can be re-traumatizing and triggering. To minimize this, keep your own curiosity in check and only have them talk about it if THEY seem to want or need to tell you.

If they have not done any of these things, you can provide options. But it is imperative that you let the victim decide whether or not to pursue these resources. Be accepting of the victim's decisions. Remember, the victim has been robbed of a sense of control over his/her own life. Making decisions on their own, no matter how minor, will help them begin to regain a sense of empowerment and self-determination. [Caveat: Over time, it may be appropriate to gently remind them of resources if they haven't utilized any. And if they seem to be emotionally deteriorating, then you may need to be more directive, or take a more assertive role in helping them get to psychological resources.]

Be cautious about how you share your own strong emotions – especially anger, unless it is clear that your anger is at the perpetrator. The victim may misinterpret your anger as directed at them. You don't want to worry the victim that you might act as a vigilante and try to take matters into your own hands. That may worry them and won't be helpful. You also don't want them to feel they must be your caretaker if you are having a strong emotional response.

Avoid saying things like: "It's ok" or "It's going to be ok." You may want to try to instill hope that things will get better by focusing on their strength or how they have overcome other obstacles in life. But it really isn't "ok" right now for them, so if you say that, they may conclude that you don't see the situation as a valid or serious problem. People can't just "get over it."

Respect the victim's need for **confidentiality** and do not share what they have told you with others, unless you have their permission. This is really important. Violations of privacy are trust violations, and this may make them feel violated all over again.

Keep in mind that you are not a counselor, and if you are a counselor by profession, your role in supporting a loved one is not to be their counselor. You cannot take on responsibility for the victim's wellbeing. You can be a support, within reasonable boundaries. It's important that you refer them to helping professionals and not allow them to excessively lean on you in place of seeking professional assistance.

WHAT MIGHT I FEEL?

When someone you care about tells you they've been victimized, it can be a lot to handle. A supportive reaction can make all the difference, but that doesn't mean it comes easy. While you are with the victim, avoid allowing your own emotions to take priority over theirs. But don't ignore your own emotions. You might feel overwhelmed. You may need to talk to someone yourself. Don't hesitate to seek outside support for yourself.

You may feel:

- Pain, sorrow, disgust, self-blame (thinking you could have done something to protect your loved one)
- Sympathy or Empathy for the person
- Anger at the perpetrator(s); wanting revenge
- Protectiveness toward the victim
- Impatience with their recovery process
- Frustrated with other's reactions
- Frightened or Anxious about your own safety

Furthermore, if you are a survivor of violence, this may activate some of your own feelings of victimization and you may want to revisit your own healing process. Or, it may activate any experiences and feelings of loss that you have struggled with in the past. It is important to stop, listen and attend to those feelings.

WHAT CAN I DO?

- Talk to someone you trust about how you are feeling. This may be a crisis for you as well and it is important that you respond to your emotional needs.
- Engage in self-care. Use healthy coping mechanisms that you have used in dealing with other crises.
- If strong feelings persist, you may want to talk to a counselor or attend some form of support group for friends & loved ones.
- Educate yourself about trauma & victimization by attending relevant educational events in your area. The colleges and universities in Delaware often sponsor programs on these topics which are open to the public. The Victims' Rights

Task Force of Delaware plans an annual Victims' Tribute, held in Dover in April every year.

CAMPUS, LOCAL & NATIONAL RESOURCES:

Delaware State University's Sexual Assault Response Advocates – Victim Advocacy for members of the DSU community. To reach an advocate, contact DSU's 24 Hour Rape Crisis Line at 302-420-5751.

University of Delaware's Sexual Offense Support (S.O.S.) – 24 Hour Victim Advocacy: **302-831-1001, press 1 for SOS**

Provides crisis intervention/victim advocacy for members of the UD community who have experienced sexual assault, dating/domestic violence, sexual harassment & stalking, and those assisting survivors. Clinician will take a first name & phone number and the advocate will call back within 10 minutes.

www.udel.edu/sos

University of Delaware Helpline 24/7/365 – 24 Hour Helpline for psychological and emotional issues: **302-831-1001**, press 1 for SOS, press 2 for immediate counseling assistance

YWCA's Sexual Assault Response Center – 24/7 rape crisis for New Castle County: **1-800-773-8570**

<http://www.ywcade.org/sarc>

ContactLifeline – 24/7 rape crisis for Kent & Sussex Counties, & statewide Suicide Hotline: **1-800-262-9800**

www.contactlifeline.org

Delaware Domestic Violence Hotline – **302-762-6110** – New Castle County
302-422-8058 – Kent & Sussex County

Psychological Mobile Crisis Unit – will go to the person in distress during psychological crises and provide care, transport to inpatient treatment if needed: **1-800-652-2929**

Survivors of Abuse in Recovery (SOAR) - a Delaware counseling agency specializing in sexual assault & relationship abuse. Services on a sliding fee scale & takes insurance: **302-655-3953**

<https://www.survivorsofabuse.org/>

National Sexual Assault Hotline through the Rape Abuse & Incest National Network: **800.656.HOPE (4673)** or via online chat at <http://online.rainn.org>.

National Domestic Violence Hotline – **1-800-799-7233** and online chat: <http://www.thehotline.org/>

National Dating Violence Hotline – **1-866-331-9474** & online chat: <http://www.loveisrespect.org/>