

Responding to a Disclosure of Sexual Violence

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When someone has survived sexual violence, receiving caring responses from the people around them is crucial to the healing process and can help prevent or lessen trauma.

Being a support person is an important role. If someone discloses to you, it means they look to you as someone who can provide support.

You may hear disclosures on a regular basis, or this may be the first. You don't need to be a professional to be there for someone who has survived sexual violence.

Support can take many forms. Each victim/survivor will have different experiences and needs, so it is important to ask them how they want to be supported.

Some victims/survivors simply want someone to believe them, listen with compassion, and validate their feelings.

If the assault was recent they may want someone to accompany them to get medical attention.

Others may want long-term support. This could include checking in regularly, providing emotional support if they report to police, or accompanying them to appointments.

They may not know what they need right away, and that is okay.

You may not know how much support you are able to provide going forward, and that is okay too. During an initial disclosure, you don't need to figure out your long-term involvement; focus on being present and the person's immediate needs.

A range of reactions

People who have been sexually violated respond in many different ways.

They may be visibly upset or completely calm. People use different coping mechanisms and have different ways of expressing themselves. They may need time to process their emotions.

If someone seems calm and composed, this does not mean that they have not been violated. It could mean that they feel numb or that they are dissociating from the trauma.

Do not judge them or make assumptions based on how they seem. No matter how the person is responding, what they need is your support and compassion.

"The first principle of recovery is the empowerment of the survivor. She must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery. Others may offer advice, support, assistance, affection, and care, but not cure."

Judith Lewis Herman

Restoring choice and power

It is important to give people who have been subjected to sexual violence **control over all decisions** related to their survival, coping, and recovery. This is part of restoring a sense of power and control to the victim/survivor, something that is taken away when someone is sexually violated.

When supporting victims/survivors, some ways you can help to restore choice and foster empowerment include:

- Inviting them to freely express their thoughts and feelings
- Responding in non-judgmental ways

- Working together to explore available options
- Supporting them in making the decisions that are best for them
- Working to equalize power imbalances in relationships. Some ways to do this include: acknowledging social power imbalances and historic mistrust of people in positions of power (including service providers), providing adequate information, and empowering them to make the decisions.

Fostering safe, caring and nonjudgmental responses

1. Believe and affirm — Validate their feelings. Let them know that you believe them and that the sexual violence was not their fault.

2. Build safety and trust — Address their immediate needs around safety and address issues of confidentiality.

3. Listen and be compassionate — Listen and let them tell their story in their own words and at their own pace. Be comfortable staying silent and ask them how they want to be supported.

4. Respect and restore choices — Ensuring that the victim/survivor is in control of what happens next is crucial to restoring their sense of power and control.

5. Be aware — Be aware of the impacts of trauma and systemic oppression on victims/survivors. Also acknowledge your own boundaries as a support person.

1. Believe and affirm

a) Believe them and validate their feelings.

First of all, believe them. It likely took courage to tell you that they have been sexually violated. They might feel confused, afraid, angry, sad or any other (combination of) emotions.

Many victims/survivors worry that people will not believe them. You can reassure them that you believe them, they are not alone, and you are there to listen and support them.

Assure them that their feelings are natural and common by saying something such as: “Your anger is valid” or “you are not alone.”

b) Reassure them that the violence was not their fault.

Due to the prevalence of victim-blaming, many victims/survivors feel guilt or shame, or blame themselves. You can tell them that many people have these emotions, and it’s okay to express those types of thoughts and feelings to you. Also let them know that they have nothing to be ashamed of, they did nothing to cause the sexual violence.

See the “Rape Myths” section of **Sexual Violence: An Introduction** for a refresher on victim-blaming and how to counteract it.

c) Believe them and validate their feelings.

As a support person, you can help the victim/survivor identify or remember their strengths. You can also help them to identify the (community, school, friend, family etc.) supports they have at their disposal.

2. Build safety and trust

a) Address immediate needs.

If the sexual violence was recent you will need to address the victim's/survivor's immediate needs. You can start by asking if they are safe and if they need medical attention.

Some ways to do this include (but are not limited to):

- Are you currently somewhere that you feel safe?
- What can we do to help you feel safer?
- Do you want me to stay on the phone with you until you get somewhere that you feel safer?
- If the person has messaged or emailed you: Do you want me to call you? What is the best number to reach you at? Is now an okay time to call?
- Because of what you've been through, there are some medical issues we should think about. If you don't want to talk about this right now, that's okay. I just want you to know that there are supportive places that you can go to when you're ready. I can come with you, if you like.

If they are in immediate danger, work with them to get out of that situation. This could include calling 911. Remember that some people do not feel comfortable or safe calling the police.

Download the **Choices Following Sexual Violence** handout for more information.

Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner

If the assault(s) took place within the last five days, the victim/survivor will be able to access the services of a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE). If the person you are supporting is pre-pubescent it is recommended that they see a SANE within 24 hours as evidence can be difficult to collect.

These registered nurses have advanced training in providing non-judgmental, confidential support as well as conducting medical exams, and collecting forensic

Medical Considerations

After being sexually violated a victim/survivor may want to seek medical attention for the following:

- Physical injuries (external and/or internal);
- Pregnancy (testing, emergency contraception, and counseling regarding pregnancy options including abortion);
- Tests and treatments for Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs); and
- HIV testing and treatment if they have reason to believe they were exposed to the virus.

It is completely up to the person who has been violated if and when they want to seek medical attention. Remember that the person may have complicated feelings about seeking medical attention and that is okay. Some people may feel vulnerable or be triggered by medical exams, especially if they involve physical contact since this can bring back memories of sexual violence.

evidence. People of any gender can access this service so long as they are 13 years of age and older (except in the Halifax region, where Avalon's SANE program serves all ages).

The SANE program operates 24/7 in the Halifax Regional Municipality, Antigonish, Guysborough, Strait, Lunenburg, and Queens.

The SANE program is currently under expansion and services will soon be available in both the Eastern and Western regions of Nova Scotia.

Download the **Choices Following Sexual Violence** handout for more information.

b) Address confidentiality.

If you are a counselor, social worker, or other service provider, you will be bound by rules of confidentiality central to your profession. If you are a friend, family member, or other support person, it is also important to assure the person that you will keep what they tell you confidential, and then do so.

If you suspect or know that someone under the age of 16 is being abused or neglected, you have a legal duty to report it to your local child welfare agency. This is also

the case for anyone under the age of 19 who is being/ has been abused or neglected by a parent or guardian.

Additionally, if someone tells you that they are transgender, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, intersex, asexual, Two-Spirit, etc., it is important to keep that information confidential.

c) Understand potential triggers.

A trigger is something that brings back traumatic memories or makes someone feel that they are back in that situation. Feeling triggered can be an overwhelming and emotional experience.

Triggers can include (but are not limited to):

- Violent images
- A raised voice.
- An environment that reminds them of where they were violated.
- Sights, sounds and/or smells that remind them of the sexual violence.
- Seeing someone who looks or acts like the person who violated them.
- A certain word/name that they were called during the assault.
- Hearing about sexual violence in the media, particularly if the media coverage includes victim-blaming.

As a support person, you can help a victim/survivor by being aware of potential triggers and doing what you can to make an environment comfortable.

A good way to help someone feel comfortable is to ask how they are feeling and what they need.

Ways to do this include:

- Is this a good place for us to talk?
- Is there anything you need to feel more comfortable?
- What can I do to make this space safer for you?
- Would you like to talk about the things you are feeling?
- What are some of the things you are feeling?

Download the **Grounding Techniques** handout for help coping with triggers.

3. Listen and be compassionate

a) Listen and be comfortable with silence.

One of the best thing a support person can do is simply listen without trying to “solve” the situation.

b) Ask them how they want to be supported.

It is key to give victims/survivors control over all decisions related to their recovery, including how they want to be supported. This is part of restoring their sense of power and control. One way to do so is asking “What do you need to feel supported?”

c) Let them tell their story in their own words and at their own pace.

Remember that the victim/survivor chooses how much, or how little, to disclose. Do not press for more details than they offer. Leave it to that person to share as much or as little detail as they are comfortable with. You do not need to know every detail in order to support a victim/survivor.

In some circumstances, you may need to ask difficult questions such as “have you thought about whether you want to get an STI test?” Remember to be sensitive.

Let the person you are supporting know that it is okay to take a break in telling their story. You can assure them that they can take as much time as they need.

You might suggest that they take a few minutes to breathe deeply and sit quietly. They can pick up where they left off when they are ready.

Again, it is not necessary for someone to tell you their story or details of what happened to them for you to be a support person.

4. Respect and restore choices

a) Respect their experiences and concerns.

Only the victim/survivor knows what they have been through and what is best for them. They may have fears and concerns that you don’t understand. For example, a person’s experience of sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, poverty, and classism (for example) may make them reluctant to access particular resources or services.

Even if you have had a different experience or have a differing opinion, it is important to acknowledge and respect the person's experiences and concerns.

b) Respect their decisions and restore choices.

Ensuring that the victim/survivor is in control of what happens next is key to restoring someone's sense of power and control. You can start by asking something such as: "What would you like to happen next?"

Before offering ideas it is important to ask if that would be helpful and then share them only when the person you are supporting gives permission.

You can review options with the victim/survivor, however, you should not try to influence their decision(s). This includes whether or not they report what happened to police, which is a personal decision.

If they are not ready to discuss options for moving forward, you can say something such as: "You don't have to decide next steps now. We can just talk."

c) Respect their gender identity and pronouns.

It is important not to assume someone's gender based on their appearance, name, voice, mannerisms, etc.

When someone tells you their gender, believe them. Many victims/survivors already worry that they will not be believed and will be asked to somehow prove that they were violated.

A transgender person may also worry that they will be asked to prove their gender.

Using the correct pronouns (he, she, they, etc.) is also crucial. Misgendering is when someone uses the wrong pronoun (for example, using the pronoun "he" when the person's pronoun is the gender-neutral "they") or refers to the person as the wrong gender. For transgender, non-binary, and gender diverse people, misgendering can be very hurtful and/or harmful.

Sexual violence can also be used to enforce gender roles. For example, a transgender man may be assaulted by someone who refuses to regard him as a man. In this case, misgendering may be particularly triggering.

d) Respect language choices.

Let the person tell their story in their own words.

Try as best you can to reflect the language that the victim/survivor uses when it comes to what they call the sexual violence, how they refer to the person who violated them, as well as how they refer to themselves.

They may be reluctant to use words such as sexual violence, sexual assault, or rape.

Give them space and time to process what happened and decide if and how they want to name their experience.

Most victims/survivors know the person who perpetrated the sexual violence, and may have a relationship or emotional bond with them. It may be overwhelming or alienating if you refer to the person who perpetrated the sexual violence as a perpetrator, rapist, or abuser (unless the victim/survivor uses these words).

If they use words such as friend, partner, relative, or co-worker, consider using these words.

You can, however, remind the person you are supporting that what happened to them was not okay and that no one deserves to be sexual violated.

5. Be aware

a) Only make promises you think you can keep and take on what you think you can handle.

You can't do everything for a victim/survivor, and that is okay. Let them know what you are able to do. For example, if you aren't certain if you can go with them to appointments, it is best to be honest and clear.

b) Learn about how systemic oppression impacts victims/survivors.

It is important to recognize how survivors are impacted by forms of systemic oppression such as sexism, racism, transphobia, homophobia, ableism, xenophobia and classism. It is also important to think about how these forms of oppression intersect and how these intersections impact victims/survivors.

Individuals of different identities, backgrounds, and experiences may require different forms of support

and accommodations. Victims/survivors have a right to access support of their choosing, including support tailored to their particular identities.

Refer to the **Sexual Violence: An Introduction** handout for an introduction to systemic oppression.

c) Recognize trauma responses and their impacts.

The brain reacts to trauma with a fight, flight, or freeze response. These are involuntary responses to help

the person survive. The freeze response can be why a victim/survivor did not physically struggle during the violence. Additionally, trauma's impact on the brain contributes to why a victim/survivor may have difficulty remembering or recounting details of the sexual violence.

Supporting a child or youth who has been sexually abused

As with any other victim/survivor, start by validating their feelings and acknowledging the courage it took for them to tell you. Let them know that you believe them and that the sexual violence was not their fault. Listen to them and let them tell their story in their own way.

When the victim/survivor is under the age of 16 you cannot promise them confidentiality and are required by law to report the abuse to your local child welfare agency. This is also the case for anyone under the age of 19 who has been abused or neglected by a parent or guardian. It is important that you clearly explain any actions you take and what might happen next.

Providing support that is trauma informed

What is trauma?

Trauma is a normal response to an overwhelming event including:

- A single event, such as an assault.
- Repetitive acts of violence, abuse, and harassment.
- Ongoing systemic oppression as a result of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism and xenophobia, etc.

“Trauma lives in the nervous system. The body reacts immediately to perceived danger before our thinking brain can accurately name what is going on.”

**The Trauma Informed Toolkit,
Klinic Community Health Centre**

Sexual violence is one of the most common events that causes someone to be traumatized. Whether a person is traumatized by something depends on

how they personally experience the event(s). The types of responses and care a person receives after the traumatic event can also play a role. Positive responses can help the healing process whereas negative responses can worsen trauma and further harm the person.

Pre-existing/historic trauma

Additionally, if and how someone is traumatized can be influenced by the presence of pre-existing trauma, including historic trauma. Historic or intergenerational trauma is felt across generations.

These forms of trauma are experienced by many Indigenous and African Nova Scotian people due to the historic and ongoing impacts of colonization, cultural genocide, slavery, racism, and displacement.

Many Indigenous people live with intergenerational trauma stemming from residential schools, the

60's scoop, mass incarceration, discriminatory treatment by the child welfare system, and the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Colonization, cultural genocide, racism and their connection to sexual violence are discussed in more depth in the **Indigenous Perspectives** handout.

People of African descent have fought for their survival from the moment they were stolen from Africa and brought to the Americas, including the Maritimes. Over 1,000 enslaved Black people were brought to the Maritimes by British settlers in the late 1700s.

The first African Nova Scotian communities were established by Black Loyalists in the 1700s and there are currently over 20,000 African Nova Scotian people living in the province. These communities continue to work to overcome historic trauma, including from systemic racism.

The impacts of trauma

There are a number of ways in which trauma can manifest in someone who has survived sexual violence:

Emotional: Depression, crying, anxiety, extreme vulnerability, panic attacks, fearfulness, anger, irritability, emotional numbness, difficulties in relationships.

Cognitive: Memory lapses, loss of time, recollections of the trauma, difficulty making decisions, decreased ability to concentrate, thoughts of suicide.

Behavioural: Self harm such as cutting, substance abuse, alcohol abuse, self-destructive behaviors, isolation, unhealthy relationships, disordered eating, suicide attempts, hypervigilance.

Physical: Eating and sleeping disturbances, pain, low energy, headaches, panic and anxiety.

Spiritual: Guilt, shame, self-blame, self-hatred, feeling damaged, feeling like a "bad" person, questioning one's own purpose.

Trauma's impact on the brain is one of the reasons that a victim/survivor may have difficulty remembering or recounting details of the sexual violence.

When supporting a person who has been traumatized, you may observe the following trauma responses:

- Change in breathing (breathing quickly or holding their breath)
- Muscle stiffness, difficulty relaxing
- Flood of strong emotions
- Rapid heart rate, increased blood pressure
- Startled response, flinching
- Shaking
- Staring into the distance
- Becoming disconnected from present and losing focus
- Inability to speak, concentrate, or respond to instructions

If you observe any of the above, pause the conversation and support the person in connecting to the here and now. Download the **Grounding Techniques** handout for guidance.

You don't have to be a counsellor to provide support that is trauma informed.

Trauma informed support is not about treating trauma but about many of the things we've already addressed AND:

Acknowledging trauma as a normal response to an overwhelming event.

Being aware of the prevalence and impacts of trauma.

Understanding how trauma may lead to behaviours perceived as "challenging" or "difficult".

Remember, it is not necessary to ask the person to share the details of the traumatic event.

Self-care for support people

Being a support person is an important role that may bring up a variety of emotions. Your feelings are valid. If you have survived sexual violence, the disclosure may bring back memories. It is important to acknowledge and tend to your own needs.

It is also important to be realistic about your capacity. If you do not think you are able to support the victim/survivor at this time, you can help them find others who are.

Overview of how to respond to a disclosure

To recap, some key steps for supporting someone who has survived sexual violence include:

- Believe them and validate their feelings.
 - Reassure them that the violence was not their fault.
 - Acknowledge the person's strengths.
 - Address immediate needs.
 - Address confidentiality.
 - Understand potential triggers.
 - Listen and be comfortable with silence.
 - Ask them how they want to be supported.
 - Let them tell their story in their own words and at their own pace.
 - Respect their experiences and concerns.
- Respect their decisions and restore choices.
 - Respect their gender identity and pronouns.
 - Respect language choices.
 - Only make promises you think you can keep and take on what you think you can handle.
 - Learn about how systemic oppression impacts victims/survivors.
 - Recognize trauma responses and their impacts.

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