

“How to Respond to a Survivor” Rainn.org

When someone you care about tells you they've been sexually assaulted or abused, it can be a lot to handle. A supportive reaction can make all the difference, but that doesn't mean it comes easy. Encouraging words and phrases can avoid judgment and show support for the survivor.

Consider 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.”** Survivors may blame themselves, especially if they know the perpetrator personally. Remind the survivor, maybe even more than once, that they are not to blame.
- **“I believe you.”** It can be extremely difficult for survivors to come forward and share their story. They may feel ashamed, concerned that they won’t be believed, or worried they’ll be blamed. Leave any “why” questions or investigations to the experts—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 survivor 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 survivor might need medical attention, even if the event happened a while ago. You can support the survivor by offering to accompany them or find more information. It’s okay to ask directly, “Are you open to seeking medical care?”
- **“You can trust me.”** If a survivor opens up to you, it means they trust you. Reassure them that you can be trusted and will respect their privacy. Always ask the survivor before you share their story with others. If a minor discloses a situation of sexual abuse, you are required in most situations to report the crime. Let the minor know that you have to tell another adult, and ask them if they’d like to be involved.
- **“This doesn’t change how I think of you.”** Some survivors are concerned that sharing what happened will change the way other people see them, especially a partner. Reassure the survivor that surviving sexual violence doesn’t change the way you think or feel about them.

Continued Support

There's no timetable when it comes to recovering from sexual violence. If someone trusted you enough to disclose the event to you, consider the following ways to show your continued support.

- **Avoid judgment.** It can be difficult to watch a survivor struggle with the [effects of sexual assault](#) for an extended period of time. Avoid phrases that suggest they're taking too long to recover such as, "You've been acting like this for a while now," or "How much longer will you feel this way?"
- **Check in periodically.** The event may have happened a long time ago, but that doesn't mean the pain is gone. Check in with the survivor to remind them you still care about their well-being and believe their story.
- **Know your resources.** You're a strong supporter, but that doesn't mean you're equipped to manage someone else's health. Become familiar with resources you can recommend to a survivor, like the National Sexual Assault Hotline 800.656.HOPE (4673) and [online.rainn.org](https://www.online.rainn.org).
- **Remember that the healing process is fluid.** Everyone has bad days. Don't interpret flashbacks, bad days, or silent spells as "setbacks." It's all part of the process.