

After Sexual Assault: What friends can do to help

Rape or sexual assault is any sexual contact manipulated, coerced, or forced on a person. It can be by a stranger or someone they know. It can be hugging, kissing, touching, or intercourse. It is never the victim's fault. The assailant is always responsible.

Each person's reaction to being sexually assaulted is unique.

Your friend may be calm or upset, eager or reluctant to talk, willing or unwilling to take action, able to continue daily activities or in need of non-routine time and space to heal.

As a friend:

- **Believe what you are told.** Accept the description of the experience as described. Don't second-guess your friend's behavior.
- **Assure your friend about who is responsible for the assault.** Many survivors of assault blame themselves for the attack. Let your friend know that no one deserves to be assaulted and that the attacker is responsible for the assault.
- **Let your friend take control of the recovery.** Sexual assault is an experience in loss of control. It isn't helpful to further rob your friend of control by pushing. The decisions your friend makes about how to cope with the assault will depend on many variables. *You can help your friend by identifying options and possible outcomes while not controlling the decisions.*
- **Encourage your friend to seek medical attention.** Physical injuries from sexual assault can range from scratches and bruises to severe trauma and are not always visible. Survivors of rape need to protect themselves from STDs and pregnancy. If your friend decides to press charges, a properly conducted physical examination can provide important evidence.
- **Provide emotional support.** Your friend has confided in you because she/he trusts you and needs your comfort. Follow your comforting instincts; let your friend express any and all emotions and thoughts. Use touch, tone of voice, or whatever seems appropriate to communicate your caring. Ask about what helps.
- **Listen. Listen some more.** After the immediate aftermath of the assault and into the long-term (sometimes months or more) healing process, your friend may need to review what happened over and over or just be with you without talking.
- **Get support for yourself.** You have your own reactions to the assault. They may include anger, vengeance, helplessness, sadness, and confusion. Find your own support person to help you talk about what you are experiencing.

Cabrini College Counseling Services provides free and confidential counseling for Cabrini students. To make an appointment, call 610-902-8561 or stop by the office in Grace Hall, Room 174.