A GUIDE FOR PARENTS OF SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

Talking with Your Student after the Assault

Sexual assault can happen to anyone. As a parent’s worst nightmare, it can be very difficult and overwhelming to hear that your loved one has been sexually assaulted. At times like these, it is often hard to know how to act or what to say. The most important thing you can do is help your college student feel safe and supported. Students at Colorado State University have a number of resources available to assist them in dealing with the aftermath of sexual assault.

Every person responds differently to sexual assault. Frequent responses include feelings of fear, distress, humiliation, anger, confusion, numbness, and guilt. It is important that your student be allowed to experience and process through these feelings without the fear of having them invalidated or dismissed.

Overview of Steps to Take

1. First and most importantly, believe your student when they confide in you. Do not place blame on them for the sexual assault, and don’t pressure them to talk. It is better to go slowly and let them set the pace. Focus on your student’s needs, and remember that every person’s healing process is unique.

2. Take the necessary steps to protect and ensure both your student’s and your safety.

3. Seek medical attention, but understand that your student has the right to decide what medical attention is necessary. It’s important that your student regain control of their body.

4. Discuss with your student their options and ask them what they want to do next. This may or may not include contacting an advocate and/or the police. Reporting a sexual assault crime is often a very difficult, long, and painful process for survivors. It is not an appropriate option for everyone, but a trained advocate can help you both navigate through your student’s options.

5. Make sure your student gets the professional care and support they may need. Counseling can be very helpful in assisting your student and you through the healing process of coping with the sexual assault.

Key Phrases to Use When Talking about the Sexual Assault

- I’m so glad you told me, and I’m very proud of you.
- I am here for you. You can tell me as much or as little as you need to right now.
- Regardless of ________ (how you were dressed, how much you drank, if you were flirting, etc) there is no excuse for sexual assault. No one deserves to be raped.
- Whatever you did to survive the situation was the right thing to do.
- Let me know how best I can support you. I will do my best to help you stay safe however I can.
- That must have been a very disturbing/ scary/ confusing/ uncomfortable/ frightening experience.
- You are not crazy. You are reacting normally to a very difficult and scary situation.
**Do’s**

- Listen and try to understand. Reassure them that they have your love and support.

- Help your student distinguish between “if only” and “guilt.” It is common for survivors to blame themselves for what happened. Reassure them that it was not their fault and that the only person responsible is the perpetrator.

- Listen to their reasons if they didn’t tell you immediately. They may have been scared of your reaction, felt shame or embarrassment, or tried to protect you. It is very common for survivors to wait before sharing with people they love.

- **Give control to the survivor.** This means allowing them to speak for themselves unless they specifically want you to. Sexual assault is a crime that takes away an individual’s power. It makes them feel invaded, changed, and out of control. It is crucial for survivors to be able to make their own decisions in order to regain power over their own lives.

- Encourage your student to see themselves as a strong, courageous survivor who is reclaiming their own life.

**Don’ts**

- Do not criticize your student for being where they were, not resisting more, etc. The only person responsible for the sexual assault is the perpetrator. Everyone has the basic human right to be free from threat, harassment, or attack. Whatever they did to survive the situation was the right thing to do.

- Do not over simplify what happened by saying it wasn’t that bad or that they should forget about it. Let them say exactly how they feel.

- Do not sympathize with the abuser. Your student needs your absolute support.

- Do not blame your student, spouse/partner, or yourself. Avoid asking “why” questions as much as possible because these often imply blame.
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How to Help Your Student

During this critical time, your focus needs to be on supporting your student, not taking on the role of detective, judge or jury. Realize that “legal justice” and “emotional healing” are two different things; for many survivors, legal justice is not the primary goal. It’s okay to have doubts about what to say or how to react when your student tells you they have been sexually assaulted. Recognize your own needs, and accept that there will very likely be changes in your relationship with your student as they heal.

How to Help Your Loved One

• Most importantly, believe what your student tells you (even if they sometimes doubt themselves, their memories are vague, or if what they tell you sounds extreme). Don’t become frustrated if the story changes. The details will likely come out in bits and pieces.

• Listen and help your student process through all of the confusing and painful feelings. Validate their anger, pain, and fear. These are natural responses that need to be felt, expressed, and heard. Validate the damage (all sexual abuse and rape is harmful, even if there are no physical scars or visible indicators of struggle). There are no positive or neutral experiences of sexual assault.

• It is okay to tell your student that this is a difficult topic for you to talk about. Let them know that you are open to talk about anything, even if it is uncomfortable.

• Control your own emotions. Don’t panic. If you show great emotion, your student may find it harder to talk with you and may even feel guilty for upsetting you. Share your feelings, but make sure your feelings don’t overwhelm theirs. As a loved one of a survivor, you may have reactions of anger, sadness, and shame. Find a supportive person or counselor with whom you can share your strong feelings with so that your conversations with your student can focus on their needs.

• Separate the anger you may feel at your student for having broken any rules or using poor judgment from the anger that you feel at the abuser. The offender is the only one responsible for the assault. No matter how badly you need to vocalize your anger, don’t vent it on your student or other family members.

• Recognize your student’s need for privacy. Their boundaries have been violated and reclaiming personal space is important. Respect the time and space it takes to heal after a sexual assault.

• Seek immediate professional help if your student displays any suicidal behaviors or if you are worried about their emotional or physical well-being.

• Take care of yourself. Educate yourself about sexual assault and the healing process. Realize when you’ve reached your own limitations, and encourage your student to talk to a professional.
Suggested Readings and Resources

Books Available for Checkout in the OWPS Library

Recovering from Rape (2nd Ed). Linda Ledray. (1994)
I Never Called it Rape. Robin Warshaw (1994)

Other Suggested Readings for Parents of Survivors of Sexual Assault.

If it Happens to Your Child, It Happens to You! A Parents Help Source for Sexual Assault. Christine A Golderg (1987)

Videos Available for Checkout in the OWPS Library

Breaking the Silence (2002) 20 mins
Men, Sex, and Rape (Peter Jennings Reporting) (1991) 50 mins
Rape Is… (2003) 32 mins
Sex Without Consent- "When a Kiss is Not Just a Kiss"(1994) 36 mins
Someone You Know- Acquaintance Rape (1986) 30 mins

Websites

Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network: http://www.rainn.org
Resources for Allies and Partners: http://twhj.com/allies.shtml
Friends and Family Allies Support: http://incestabuse.about.com
Parents and Loved Ones of Sexual Abuse and Rape Victims: http://www.geocities.com/HotSprings/2656

Hotline:

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Campus Resources and Options

Victim Assistance Team
(970) 491-7111 *ask to speak to an advocate

Trained Advocates are on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to provide confidential emotional support and information to survivors of sexual assault. Advocates are volunteers (students, staff, and faculty) who complete an extensive training program. They understand the complexity of the aftermath of sexual assault and can assist students in making decisions and obtaining resources. They are educated about legal, university, medical systems, and the psychological ramifications of sexual assault. Advocates can help students navigate decisions about reporting to police or university authorities. Ultimately, the decision is the student’s unless there is an identifiable threat to another person.

Medical Concerns - Hartshorn Health Services
Medical Clinic (970) 491 – 7121  Women’s Clinic (970) 491 – 1754

Taking care of medical concerns is an important part of the recovery process for survivors. Medical options to consider include: medical evaluation and treatment, emergency contraception, and medications to lower the risk of contractration and/or treatment of STDs. In addition, if your student decides to report the sexual assault, police may authorize a medical forensic examination (rape kit), which must be performed at the local emergency room (in the Fort Collins area, forensic exams are done at the Medical Center of the Rockies in Loveland). Usually a forensic exam is only an option for 72 hours after a sexual assault.

Emotional Healing - University Counseling Center
(970) 491 – 6053  After Hours: (970) 491 – 7111 *ask to speak to a UCC counselor

The University Counseling Center offers a number of programs including individual therapy and 24-hour emergency services. These services are free of charge for students. During office hours, your student may call or stop by Hartshorn Health Services to speak with on-call counselors.

Academic Concerns

One of the common after affects of sexual assault is the loss in the ability to concentrate. Don’t be surprised if your student has difficulty fulfilling their academic commitments. Encourage your student to contact an advocate in the Office of Women’s Programs and Studies about their options.
University Disciplinary Options - Conflict Resolution & Student Conduct Services

(970) 491-7165

The Colorado State University Student Conduct Code applies to all students and persons residing on university property. Sexual misconduct, including sexual assault is a violation of the Code of Conduct. If the perpetrator of the crime is a student (or lives in university housing), your student may choose to make a report to the Conflict Resolution & Student Conduct Services office. A Hearing Officer may determine there to be sufficient reason to conduct an additional investigation into the sexual assault and disciplinary sanctions may be taken against the perpetrator.

Legal Options

Choosing to report sexual assault crimes is not an appropriate option for everyone, and a trained advocate can help your student navigate through their options. Investigations are often very difficult, long, and painful processes for survivors. Some survivors find they want to seek resolution through the legal system, and others do not. Deciding to report does not mean agreeing to testify; a survivor can always make the decision about testifying later. In Colorado, victims don’t “press charges” – they are considered witnesses to a crime. They can decide not to participate at any point in the investigation and, upon choosing to make a police report, have rights as a crime victim under Colorado law.

If your student chooses to report the sexual assault, the investigation can take from several weeks to several months. To ensure the success of the investigation, the offender should have absolutely no contact with your student. Do not tell the offender that the investigation is in progress. When the investigation is complete, it will be sent to the District Attorney’s Office for a decision about filing charges. The victim has the right to be informed about this decision and to share their feelings and wishes with the District Attorney’s office. A victim advocate through the DA’s office will be assigned to each crime victim. This person is an excellent resource for information about the legal process.

Police Resources

Police Emergency (on or off campus) – 911
CSU Police Department - Non-Emergency (970) 491-6425
Fort Collins Police Department Non-Emergency (970) 221-6540
Fort Collins TTY (Deaf Accessibility Line) Emergency (970) 221-3490
Larimer County Sheriff’s Department Non-Emergency (970) 498-5141
Larimer County District Attorney’s Office Victim/Witness Division (970) 498-7285

Other Community Resources

- Non-profit agencies such as the Sexual Assault Victim Advocate Center in Fort Collins also provide community advocacy and counseling to survivors of sexual assault. 24-hour hotline (970) 472-4200; office (970) 472-4204.
- Medical Center of the Rockies Emergency Room (970) 624-2500