A GUIDE FOR SUPPORTING SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

Sexual assault can happen to anyone. It can be very difficult and overwhelming to hear that someone you care about 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 the survivor feel safe and supported. Students at Colorado State University and in the greater Fort Collins community 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 the survivor be allowed to experience and process through these feelings without the fear of having them invalidated or dismissed.

The Basics of Survivor Support

1. First and most importantly, believe them when they confide in you. Do not place blame on them for the sexual assault (there is NOTHING they could have done to deserve or cause what happened to them), and don’t pressure them to talk. It is better to go slowly and let them set the pace. Focus on the survivor’s needs, and remember that every person’s healing process is unique.

2. Check and make sure they are not in any serious danger or displaying suicidal behaviors. If they are in danger or considering suicide, help them create a plan to be safe. This might include notifying police or family, keeping them company, or helping them change to an anonymous location.

3. Check on the survivor’s health and, if necessary, help them seek medical attention.

4. As long as immediate safety and health care are not issues, restore choices. In order for you to help facilitate healing for someone who had choice taken from them by the attacker, you have to give them choices in every instance you can. It can be small things like, “would you like to sit on the couch or in the dining room?” Or, it can mean restoring choice in big decisions like, “do you want to report to the police or go to the hospital?” Also, open-ended questions (“What do you want to do?”) can be overwhelming so try to give specific options.

5. When you discuss options with the survivor you may need some extra support from an advocate. The survivor can talk to an advocate or, if they are not ready, you can talk to an advocate and bring the information to the survivor at an appropriate time. One option may be to contact the police. It is important to know that 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. Numbers for college and community advocates are included at the end of this guide.

6. Make sure the survivor gets the professional care and support they may need. Counseling can be very helpful in assisting with the healing process of coping with the sexual assault.

7. Take care of yourself. When you are supporting a survivor, you need to make sure the focus is on them and not on you (this may be difficult if you find that you have some very strong emotional reactions about the event and being a support person). Taking care of yourself might include talking with an advocate or a counselor. The more emotional clarity and strength you have when you are with the survivor, the better you will be able to support them.
### Key Phrases to Use When Talking about the Sexual Assault

- I’m so glad you told me.
- 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 the survivor 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.
- Don’t take it personally if they did not tell you right away. 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 care about.
- **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 them to see themselves as a strong, courageous survivor who is reclaiming their own life.

### Don’ts

- Do not criticize the survivor 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. The survivor needs your absolute support.
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 contraction and/or treatment of STDs. In addition, if the student decides to report the sexual assault, police may authorize a medical forensic examination, which must be performed at the local emergency room. Usually a forensic exam is only an option for 72 hours after a sexual assault.

Emotional Healing - University Counseling Center
PH: (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, the 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 the student has difficulty fulfilling their academic commitments. Encourage them to contact an advocate in the Office of Women’s Programs and Studies about their options.
University Disciplinary Options - Conflict Resolution & Student Conduct Services

PH: (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), the student may choose to make a report to the Conflict Resolution & Student Conduct Services office. A Hearing Officer may determine there is 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 the 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 the 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 Sexual Assault Victim Advocate Center in Fort Collins also provide community advocates and counseling to survivors of sexual assault. 24-hour hotline (970) 472-4200; office (970) 472-4204.
- Medical Center for the Rockies Emergency Room (970) 624-2500
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 & Friends 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:

National Sexual Assault Hotline (24-hour, confidential): 1-800-656-HOPE
National Online Sexual Assault Hotline (live chat, confidential); www.rainn.org