

A Guide for Friends and Family of Sexual Assault Survivors

**Survivor Advocacy Services
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WHAT IS SEXUAL ASSAULT?

Sexual assault is physical contact of a sexual nature in the absence of clear, knowing, and voluntary consent. An individual cannot consent who is: obviously incapacitated by any drug or intoxicant; who has been purposely compelled by force, threat of force, or deception; who is unaware that the act is being committed; whose ability to consent or resist is obviously impaired because of mental or physical condition; and/or who is coerced by supervisory or disciplinary authority. It includes rape and attempted rape, sexual touching and fondling, child molestation, sodomy, and sexual harassment. Though assailants can be strangers, acquaintances, friends, or family members, it is important to note that most perpetrators are someone the victim knows. According to the U.S. Department of Justice's National Crime Victimization survey of 2013, 80% of victims know their offenders, and 80% of rapes go unreported on college campuses (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015).

Rape and sexual assault is always more about the use of force or power to humiliate, control, hurt, or violate a person than about sexual desire or passion. The characteristics of the person in terms of gender, status, age, cultural/spiritual background, occupation, or previous relationships is irrelevant; any person can suffer sexual assault or rape. *A victim of sexual assault is never responsible for the assault. No one ever "asks for" or "deserves to be" sexually assaulted.*

SURVIVOR ADVOCACY SERVICES

If you feel like you have been sexually assaulted, are currently or have been in an abusive relationship, or stalked, you can contact Survivor Advocacy Services, housed in the Center for Women & Gender Equity, at 423-425-5648 for free and confidential services.

Survivor Advocacy Services has an advocate on call 24 hours a day to provide (this is not an exhaustive list):

- Crisis counseling
- Safety planning
- Coordination of safe housing
- Facilitation of evidence collection
- Court accompaniment
- Academic accommodations
- Information and referrals
- Case management

If you need assistance, please call the Center for Women & Gender Equity at 423-425-5648 during regular business hours to schedule an appointment or to speak with an advocate.

For assistance after-hours, call The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga Police Department at 423-425-4357 and ask to speak to the victim advocate on call. You are not required to give any identifying information.

For more information about Survivor Advocacy Services you can visit www.utc.edu/WaGE

AFTERCARE FOR SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

Aftercare is crucial for sexual assault survivors and their loved ones because of the possible effects resulting from the victimization. Aftercare for survivors can be provided by a variety of individuals in human service professions. Survivor Advocacy Services provides confidential advocates on-call 24 hours a day to respond to sexual assaults. The advocate is available to accompany the victim to the Partnership of Family and Children, if the victim desires, immediately following the assault to collect forensic evidence through a sexual assault examination, often referred to as a rape kit. All services provided by the Partnership are *free* and *confidential*.

Having a sexual assault examination is a time sensitive matter. Critical evidence may be lost if it is not collected via rape kit within 120 hours after an assault occurred. If you are able to, try to avoid activities that could potentially damage evidence such as:

- Bathing
- Showering
- Using the restroom
- Changing clothes
- Combing hair
- Cleaning up the area

A victim advocate can provide the victim with emotional support and guide them through working with the Partnership staff for follow up care. Remember, all aftercare decisions are the victim's to make. Survivor Advocacy Services is available regardless if the victim receives a sexual assault examination or not.

Free counseling services are available for students, faculty, and staff at the UTC Counseling Center to help the victim work through the long-term effects of the sexual assault. It is important that the victim is encouraged, but not pressured, to obtain counseling as soon as possible. In many cases, counseling is beneficial for the victim to manage the issues associated with the sexual assault and incorporate the experience into their life. Friends and family of victims are also eligible for Survivor Advocacy Services at no cost. In addition, the victim advocate can assist with providing referrals and information for the Chattanooga area and in other cities should you or the victim relocate.

PHYSICAL/EMOTIONAL EFFECTS ON SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

Sexual assault can have psychological, emotional, social, and physical effects on a survivor. Survivors often have severe stress reactions similar to those of people who have survived other life-threatening events, such as war or a natural disaster. Feelings of loss and grief, which are normal and natural responses, often occur as a result to events such as these, and in reaction to sexual assault. These effects aren't always easy to deal with, but with the right help and support they can be managed.

While trauma can incorporate grief, the two states are very different in how a survivor experiences them and what effects they can have. Grief is a normal reaction to loss, and though it may be difficult to acknowledge, there was a loss encountered as a result of the sexual assault. Feelings may include a loss of: physical control, safety, autonomy, of the life the survivor knew before the assault, etc.

Physical effects of sexual assault can range from varying degrees such as fatigue, pain, shaking, etc. Symptoms specific to the attack could be mouth and throat irritation such as bleeding, pain, and swelling caused by oral penetration. The body often becomes a gateway for expressing pain and trauma. Sleep pattern disturbances are

common and the survivor may have trouble sleeping. Eating pattern disturbances can include decreased or increased appetite, nausea or vomiting, or stomach pains.

We all handle trauma in different ways. The following is a list of a *possible* range of reactions for victims:

- Shock/disbelief
- Fear about personal safety/hypervigilant
- Embarrassment/shame
- Depression
- Anxiety/panic attacks
- Flashbacks of the assault
- Tension headaches
- Stomach/digestive issues
- Engaging in risky behavior
- Normalizing the assault

EFFECTIVE RESPONSES FOR FRIENDS & FAMILY TO SAY TO SURVIVORS

When someone you care about discloses that they were a victim of sexual violence, you may experience some of the following emotions: anger, anxiety, confusion, guilt, sadness, etc. However, how you *respond* to the survivor telling you of their assault is critical and could positively or negatively impact them and their healing process. Consider the following ways of showing support:

- Listen to and believe the survivor.
- Affirm the survivor's decision to confide in you.
- Refrain from asking questions about the assault.
- Communicate without judgement.
- Encourage the survivor to get support. Share resources like the National Sexual Assault Hotline, UTC's Survivor Advocacy Services, and the UTC Counseling Center, but realize that only they can make the decision to get help.
- Tell the survivor "You did NOTHING to cause the sexual assault. Regardless of the circumstances that led up to the sexual assault, it is not your fault. It is important that you don't blame yourself for the sexual assault."
- The survivor's safety is the most important concern. If they feel they may be in danger, contact the victim advocate with Survivor Advocacy Services to assist with a safety plan.

SELF-CARE FOR FRIENDS & FAMILY

When someone is a victim of sexual violence, it affects not only the survivor, but it can also affect people close to them. Good self-care enables you to better care for others, especially if there is someone in your life who has survived sexual violence. The principles of self-care for friends and family is similar to the self-care concepts for survivors:

- **Maintain your lifestyle.** Maintaining your lifestyle, daily routine, and continuing to do what you enjoy is important for your emotional wellness. If you enjoy painting, exercising, spending time with friends, or other activities, keep them up. It may seem challenging to make time to do these activities, but they can be helpful self-care strategies in the long-run.

- **Make plans.** Sometimes talking about what happened can help you cope with your feelings, and other times it can make you feel more stuck. Make plans that give you a break from talking or thinking about the assault. It could mean starting a new hobby or revisiting one you already enjoy. You could go to dinner with a group of friends who understand this isn't a time to discuss what happened. Maybe you prefer a solo activity, like going on a long walk.
- **Reach out and talk about it.** It is normal to have a difficult time processing the sexual assault of someone you care about. It can continue to be difficult as time goes on and the survivor begins the healing process. You can call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at (800) 656-HOPE to talk to someone who understands what you're going through. You can also consider talking to someone who is trained professionally to help you deal with these thoughts and feelings, like a mental health professional. An advocate with Survivor Advocacy Services can give you a referral to mental health resources in your community.
- **Take time to relax.** Relaxation looks different for everyone. You might consider meditation or deep breathing exercises. Maybe journaling helps you sort through your thoughts and find peace. Build time into your day for these moments of relaxation so that you don't overtax yourself.