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Supporting Survivors

As a family member, your loved one may come to you and disclose an experience that they have had related to sexual assault. Although there are no “perfect” things to say in a situation like this, we hope that the following examples will provide some guidance. Above all else, kindness, compassion, care, and concern can go a long way.

****Note:** We often use the term “survivor” in place of “victim.” Language and terminology can have a significant impact on the way in which we are viewed and the way that we view ourselves. By deliberately using the term “survivor,” we choose to stand in solidarity with those who continue to persevere despite trauma. That said, your loved one may have a preferred term for themselves in relation to what they have experienced, so let them guide you in the language that you use.

Helpful Things To Say:

“I believe you.” – It is important for a survivor to know that they are believed, especially by those close to them.

“This isn’t your fault.” – One of the first things that many victims of sexualized violence experience is self-blame. A sexual assault is never the fault of a survivor, and it can be incredibly powerful to hear this reminder from those that they care about.

“I’m so sorry that this happened to you. You didn’t deserve this.” – As self-evident as this statement may seem, it can be incredibly powerful. Self-blame is a common occurrence following a sexual assault, and survivors may benefit from this important validation, particularly when coming from a loved one.

“I admire your strength in sharing this.” – For some survivors, the process of telling their story to those that they care about can be a difficult one. It is important to acknowledge that sharing such a personal experience can be challenging, and takes a great deal of strength. Validating this with a simple acknowledgement can be profound.

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“You are not alone.” – Each year, it is estimated that 1 in 5 college women and 1 in 20 college men will experience an act of sexualized violence. These rates tend to be even higher for members of the LGBT community. While any act of sexualized violence is surely unacceptable, it can be important for survivors to know that they aren’t alone. Many college campuses or local counseling centers have survivor-specific support groups, and a wide variety of supports exist online as well. See the FAQ/Resources section for more information.

“There is help available.” – Even if your loved one is not in a place where they are interested in seeking help, it’s important to let them know that it exists. The choice to report an assault or seek help must be that of the survivor alone, but it can be helpful to let them know about available resources should they decide that is something that they are interested in pursuing. It’s also important to note that while it may be tempting to act on behalf of your loved one, it is important to allow the process to be their own. This can be a powerful step towards regaining a sense of power and control that is often taken away through an assault.

“You are allowed to feel the way that you do.” – The process of healing from a sexual assault can be a complicated one, and survivors often experience a multitude of emotions around it. It is important to be compassionate and supportive during this experience. Try to avoid telling the survivor how they “should” feel, or how you think that you’d feel if it happened to you. Each survivor experiences a unique healing journey, and there is no right or wrong when it comes to the emotions that come with it.

“I’m here for you.” – This is an important message to send, under the condition that you truly can be there for a survivor should they need it. The experience of a sexual assault can often leave a survivor feeling unsure of who they can trust. As such, it is crucial that upon making this statement you are also prepared to back it up.

Still at a loss for words? It’s okay. It’s important to know that if a loved one is assaulted, you may find yourself experiencing a variety of emotional reactions as well. For some additional resources on supporting a loved one while also taking care of yourself, check out the Frequently Asked Questions section.