

Guide to Offering Sexual Assault Survivors Continual Support

The information in this brief applies to cold case sexual assaults as well as current case sexual assaults. Mentions of sexual assault apply to both types of sexual assault cases.

The time it takes for an individual to heal after a sexual assault varies. No two sexual assault victims, also known as survivors, will experience the same healing journey. Victims on their path towards recovery will need support throughout the process— both shortly after experiencing the trauma of sexual assault and for many years after the assault.

A victim has the right to seek and receive medical care after a sexual assault. In addition to a victim's healthcare needs, they may choose to have a sexual assault forensic examination. During this exam, a medical professional collects DNA samples for a sexual assault kit (SAK), also known as a rape kit. SAKs are then sent to crime laboratories for testing.

Each SAK represents a victim of sexual assault.

Delays in submitting and testing SAKs lead to delays in bringing suspects to justice and may cause victims to feel uninformed about their sexual assault case. Through the National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI), a program supported by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, jurisdictions have received funding to send SAKs to crime laboratories for testing as well as for the re-investigation and possible prosecution of cold case sexual assaults. The renewed activity in a case could mean law enforcement officials and/or victim advocates notify the victim of the SAK results to ask them to reengage in the criminal justice process.

A sexual assault victim who is notified after their SAK has been tested will likely experience painful, traumatic memories and feelings. That notification and engagement with law enforcement as well as the criminal justice system may encourage a loved one to disclose their assault to you as a way to cope with and process this most recent update.

The SAKI resource [Compassionate Response to Disclosure: Advice for Supporting a Victim of Sexual Assault](#) provides insight about how to respond when someone shares their story about sexual assault. Your response is critical to

assuring the victim that they are safe, you believe them, and you value the trust they have placed in you. Demonstrating continued support and understanding are important in a survivor's healing. If someone trusts you enough to disclose the assault, you can show your long-term support in the following ways:

- ◆ **Avoid judgment.** Watching a survivor struggle in the aftermath of sexual assault can be difficult, and you might not understand what causes their traumatic feelings to resurface. Avoid responding in a way that suggests the victim is taking too long to recover. A response along the lines of, "You've been acting like this for a while now," or, "How much longer will you feel this way?" is not helpful to the victim and may cause them further emotional pain. Your patience and compassion are necessary to help a survivor feel supported and safe.
- ◆ **Check in periodically.** The assault may have happened months or even years ago, but that doesn't mean the pain is gone. Check in with the survivor to remind them that you still care about their well-being and you believe them. Let them know that you are there for them if they want to talk more.
- ◆ **Don't talk, just listen.** A survivor's interactions with the criminal justice system can feel overwhelming as there are many moving pieces and individuals. Throughout the many steps, the survivor can experience triggers that cause complex emotions to resurface. The survivor may need time to process a recent notification about their case. The most important thing you can do is to listen and let them know they are not alone.
- ◆ **Know your resources.** It is not uncommon to struggle with your own emotions and questions as you support a family member or friend who has been sexually assaulted. No matter how supportive you want to be for your loved one, you cannot manage someone else's physical and mental health. But that doesn't mean you can't help. Become familiar with resources you can recommend to them; check out the Resources section on the next page for more information.

◆ **Serve as a personal supporter for the survivor.**

Contact your local sexual assault service provider for advice on medical care and laws surrounding sexual assault. If the assault happened recently and the survivor chooses to seek medical attention or plans to report the assault, offer to be there. Your presence can offer the support they need.

- ◆ **Remind the survivor about self-care.** Encourage your loved one to practice good self-care, especially because it isn't always easy to prioritize. Physical self-care includes eating well, sleeping, dressing and bathing, and exercising. Emotional self-care may include keeping a journal, spending time with people who provide a sense of safety and support, and taking time to meditate or read inspirational words from a favorite author.

Resources

**National Sexual Assault Hotline:
800.656.HOPE (4673)**

If you or someone you know has been affected by sexual violence, you are not alone. The assault was not your fault. Call to speak to a local sexual assault service provider; help is available 24/7 through the hotline.

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:
800.273.TALK (8255)**

If you believe someone you care about is considering suicide, learn the warning signs, and offer them help and support. For more information about suicide prevention, call the lifeline any time, day or night.

For additional resources about how to support survivors of sexual assault, visit the National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative website at www.sakitta.org. Please note that SAKI does not provide professional/primary support services for survivors of sexual assault; SAKI resources are intended for individuals who want to learn more about cold case sexual assault and ways to offer support during a victim's healing process.

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