



**Kitchener-Waterloo
Sexual Assault Support Centre**

151 Frederick St, Suite 201,
Kitchener, Ontario, N2H 2M2

**24 Hour Crisis &
Support Line** (519) 741-8633

Business Line (519) 571-0121
Fax Line (519) 571-0522
TTY/TDD (519) 571-0864
Website www.kwsasc.org

If Someone You Love is Sexually Assaulted

If someone you love has been sexually assaulted, you know how much they have been hurt. As a loved one you suffer too. You may feel many of the same emotions the victim feels-- powerlessness, anger, guilt, depression and fear.

Sexual assault creates a crisis for loved ones as well as for victims. Recovery can take a long time and depends on many factors. Those closest to the victim can influence how successful recovery will be. To best help the victim, it is important that you understand their reactions as well as your own so that you will be able to give love and support when it is needed most.

The Victim's Reaction

Sexual assault is always traumatic and those who survive often have severe stress reactions similar to those of people who have survived other life-threatening events, such as war or a natural disaster. There are four basic stages of reaction to a sexual assault:

Crisis Stage: In the moments immediately following the attack, shock and denial are common. It's hard to believe the sexual assault really happened and impossible to understand why. The victim may feel strong emotions and appear very upset, crying or shaking. Or they may be in shock, feel no emotion at all, and seem calm and composed or even cold and detached. All of these reactions are normal.

During the crisis stage, the most common emotion is fear--fear of the attacker returning, of being alone, of places like the one where the sexual assault occurred or of people who remind the victim of the attacker. Victims often feel angry, depressed, confused and irritable. Many also feel guilty, ashamed and "dirty" because they believe the myths that blame victims for the sexual assault.

There are many physical reactions after sexual assault, including pain, soreness, eating and sleeping disturbances. Some sexual assault victims may want to talk about their experience soon afterwards; others may wait until much later or may never feel comfortable talking about it. Some victims do not want to be touched after an assault and others want increased physical affection.

Denial Stage: During this stage, the victim may deny any effects from the assault and may assure you that things are fine. This may be because they think everyone is tired of hearing about the rape or because the victim is trying to shut out the pain and get back to "normal." In an effort to put the rape behind them, the victim may also want to change lifestyles, jobs or residences. This stage can be brief or can last for many years. Sometimes while in the denial stage, victims may turn to destructive behavior (alcohol, drugs, overeating or overworking) to numb their feelings and go on.

Suffering Stage: This stage is when the reality of the sexual assault sinks in. It is characterized by depression and feelings of loss. The victim's sense of security and control over their life has been devastated. Common reactions include fear, nightmares, changes in sleeping and eating, sexual problems, physical aches and pains, difficulty concentrating and loss of interest in usual activities. Anger, guilt, and shame are common. Victims may have frequent, disturbing memories of the rape and "flashbacks," when it seems the rape is happening again. This stage is very painful for victims. Mood swings are common and it is not unusual for victims to misdirect anger towards loved ones or themselves at this time.

Resolution Stage: This stage begins when the victim starts the long-term process of resolving their feelings about the sexual assault, the attacker and themselves. The goal of this stage is to move from

"victim" to "survivor" and to integrate the rape as an accepted, although painful, event in one's life. If integration is not achieved, the survivor may continue to have problems in many life areas.

Although all rape survivors pass through the four stages of healing, the passage is not always smooth or straightforward. A survivor may be in two stages at the same time, may return to a previous stage for a time, or get stuck in one stage. A local rape crisis center can help with information, counseling and support during any stage of recovery.

Your Reaction

Disbelief: Family and friends may react to the rape of a loved one with many of the same feelings and physical reactions that the survivor experiences. Initially you may respond with shock and disbelief, especially if the survivor still looks the same or there are no visible signs of attack. You may even doubt that the rape happened. This is called "denial" and it happens after a traumatic experience.

Fear: You may feel intense fear for your own or the survivor's safety. You may try to protect them from future assaults by being extremely cautious and over-protective. It may be hard to let the survivor out of your sight or let them return to everyday activities. All this concern may be reassuring soon after the assault, but too much caution on your part can make it difficult for the survivor to feel capable and in control again.

Anger: Often loved ones experience anger and even rage after a sexual assault. Your first reaction may be to seek revenge--to find and kill the attacker. This is a normal feeling, but you will not be doing yourself or the survivor any good if you end up hurt or in jail and they have to worry about you. Sometimes you may feel anger towards the survivor, especially if they did something you warned against, like hitchhiking or going to a party that ended in sexual assault. If you find yourself blaming the survivor for the assault, make sure that you have someone other than the survivor who can listen to your angry feelings. Remember, even if the survivor used poor judgment, it is the attacker who committed the crime and is totally responsible for it.

Depression: It is not unusual to feel hopeless and depressed. A rape brings up feelings of powerlessness in victims and those who love them, and you may feel that your life is out of control. Your security and trust have been drastically violated. If depression lasts more than a few weeks or becomes serious, get support for yourself.

Guilt: Guilt is a common reaction when a loved one has been sexually assaulted. Those closest to the survivor may blame themselves. But whatever you did or did not do, you are not to blame if someone you love has been raped. It is solely the fault of the attacker. Instead of wasting time blaming yourself for something you had absolutely no control over, concentrate on the positive things you can do now.

What You Can Do To Help

- Believe the survivor's account of the assault.
- Reassure the survivor that you still love them and that you know the assault was not their fault.
- Let the survivor know that they did the right things during the assault. Don't question or judge what they did to survive. They had to make life and death decisions in an instant. Survival is evidence that they handled the assault correctly.
- Encourage the survivor to get medical attention as soon as possible, even if they think there was no injury.
- Going through a medical examination and/or the legal system can feel like further victimization. It will help if you or a sexual assault crisis center counselor can be there with the survivor.
- Respect the survivor's decision to report or not report the assault to the police. There are tremendous personal sacrifices involved in prosecuting a sexual assailant and the survivor may not feel able to make them.
- Call the sexual assault support centre 24 hour crisis and support line at 741-8633.

- Don't take control. Sexual assault makes people feel invaded and out of control. It is crucial that they be able to make their own decisions and regain influence over what happens in their lives in order to rebuild trust and strength. Ask them how they want to be helped, and in trying to do this you'll help rebuild their trust.
- Be sensitive to what makes them uncomfortable. Don't come up behind them or touch them unexpectedly. They may want to be held and comforted, or prefer not to be until they feel safe - ask what feels best. Don't feel offended if they find it difficult to be close, emotionally or, if you are their partner, sexually, after the sexual assault. It is not that they feel you might hurt them but that it may bring up feelings of violation and fear. Encourage them to say what is comfortable and safe and this will help to re-establish feelings of closeness and trust.
- Encourage the survivor to talk about the assault at their own pace. This may be difficult. Hearing repeated details about the assault can be upsetting; silence can be frustrating. Keep in mind that it is the survivor's needs that are most important now. Explain that talking and expressing feelings promotes healing. Tell the survivor that you are there to listen and give support whenever they are ready to talk, but do not push.