

Chapter 12

Significant Others

“We will surely get to our destination if we join hands.” ~Aung San Suu Kyi

OBJECTIVES FOR THIS CHAPTER

- Become more familiar with issues that significant others of sexual assault victims often face
 - Be able to assist significant others in identifying feelings and concerns, and offering support (validate)
 - Learn about what information significant others may need to deal with their own feelings (educate)
 - Learn about what information significant others may need in order to be support to the survivor (educate)
-

In this chapter, you will learn the important role that family and friends play in the healing process of a rape victim. We will refer to this group of people (including family, friends and partners), as significant others. When someone is a victim of sexual assault, often their significant others become “secondary trauma” victims.

It is important to provide crisis intervention services to significant others for two reasons. The first is that the significant other is also experiencing a traumatizing event and will benefit from emotional support and information. Second, and just as important, is that the significant other will likely have contact with the victim. It is our goal to help them be a good support person.

How do we best accomplish the goal of offering emotional support to the significant other and assisting them in being a good support person? Our formula for meeting this two-fold goal will be to validate and educate.

Validate means acknowledging the feelings and concerns the significant other is experiencing. You will use your empathy, additive empathy, and exploratory question tools to indicate to SOs that you understand their feelings and responses to the assault, and to gain additional information to further meet SOs needs.

Educate involves offering the SO information that will both help them deal with their own feelings and concerns, and how to be a good support person for the victim. Your information tool will be helpful here.

Most significant others are anxious to help the victim and are open to ideas and information you will share with them. When working with some significant others, it may become apparent that they will be unable to be supportive to the victim. For example, the significant other may be unwilling or unable to believe the victim's story. Your role with these SOs is to help them understand that they may not be able to support the victim, or even that their actions or responses may be hurtful and a hindrance to the victim's healing. You can explore with the SO other options that might be supportive.

The information that follows is written for significant others. It will help give you language for talking with significant others and consider issues and concerns commonly expressed by significant others. Try to read this information as if you were a family member or friend of a victim and let the material digest in that context. This may give you a greater understanding of the special needs of the callers we refer to as significant others.

WORKING WITH SIGNIFICANT OTHERS: PARTNERS/FAMILY/FRIENDS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT VICTIMS

Each victim's reaction to being raped is individual. It follows that the victim's pain and needs will be unique as well. Therefore, any advice about how to help, including the following information, should be considered only as a starting point.

Let the victim take the lead in recovery. Sexual assault often leaves the victim feeling a loss of control over their life. Right now the victim needs to be in control of their own actions – so do not force the victim in any way. Regardless of how sincere you are, being pushy or coercive will not be helpful.

For instance, if the victim wants to talk, be open to listening. If you are not comfortable listening, rather than telling them not to talk, help to find someone who can listen. If the victim does not want to talk, do not try to force it — the victim needs to set the pace. Ask, "How can I be helpful to you?" If the victim is contemplating some decision (i.e., getting a medical exam, reporting to the police, moving), help explore the options and then let the victim have control over the decision.

Recognize that nothing you can do will erase the rape. There is no way to change the fact that the sexual assault happened. Understanding this will likely take a huge burden off you. You are not supposed to change history—just be a loving and non-judgmental friend, relative or partner.

You could not have prevented the rape. Friends and family often feel as though they should have been able to stop this from happening. Remember, only the rapist can stop rape. Often friends and family are angry that this happened to their loved one and want to seek revenge on the offender. This response often frightens the victim and adds further anxiety to an already traumatic event. Victims may “shut down” or try to take care of the angry friend or family member. This makes it more difficult for the victim to focus on healing. If you are experiencing feelings of rage about the assault or thoughts of revenge, it is essential that you seek help in dealing with your feelings. The victim should not have to deal with your reactions of anger and revenge.

Face your own fears and prejudice about rape. Rape is ugly. It is scary. You may be uncomfortable thinking about it. However, some of these feelings may be the result of misconceptions about rape and rape victims. Much of what you see and hear about rape can reinforce your misunderstandings about it. You cannot deny your own feelings, but do not let them interfere with the concern and aid you are trying to give. You may find that you experience anger at the victim or at the rapist. You may feel fearful. You may feel guilt at not having been able to prevent the attack. There are a number of other feelings you may have that may affect your relationship with the victim. Your own emotional pain may prevent you from understanding what your friend, relative or partner is going through. Educate yourself about rape. RVAP has literature that gives basic information about rape, as well as specific information for partners, family and friends on how to be helpful. It is important to understand that rape is always a crime. The rapist is the criminal. It is the rapist’s fault. Victims do not cause their attacker’s behavior, so do not blame the victim.

You may decide that you are unable to be a support person for the victim. Perhaps the emotional or time burden seems too great. Perhaps you are unable to set your own wishes or opinions aside and let the victim make choices. Maybe you are unable to give up the myths and misinformation about rape and rape victims. If you find yourself, for whatever reason, unable or unwilling to offer support, it is important to acknowledge that to yourself and understand you are entitled to that limitation. Perhaps you can offer the victim local rape crisis resources or direct the victim to other friends or family that may be more comfortable to offer support.

Seek counseling for yourself if you need it. Rape counselors are aware that sexual assault affects others close to the victim. They can respond directly to your questions

and concerns. RVAP offers counseling to friends and families of victims. Your willingness to get support for yourself and information for the victim will help the healing process for everyone.

Accept the victim's experience the way it happened. Do not second-guess the victim's behavior. "You-should-haves" or "you-shouldn't-haves" can only increase the pain after the fact (e.g., "you should have had locks on the windows," "you shouldn't have been doing the laundry at that time of night," "you should have fought," "you shouldn't have fought," "if you hadn't gone over to his/her apartment it wouldn't have happened"). These kinds of statements are not helpful to the victim. Do not focus on the victim's behavior when it is the rapist's behavior that should be condemned. Nothing the victim did or did not do caused the rape.

Leave comparisons alone. It does not help to compare the victim's experience with others who have been raped. Someday the victim might want to learn more about the reactions of other rape victims, but any such discussion should be at the victim's own request. In addition, do not compare what did happen with what could have happened. The victim already knows how much worse it could have been. Remember that during the attack, it is not uncommon for victims to fear for their lives. It is up to the victim to decide whether or not they were "lucky" to have survived and not been more seriously injured.

Face the issue. Well-meaning people often tell the victim of a crisis, "don't worry/don't cry/don't think about it." This is asking the impossible and it is not helpful to someone who has been raped. Telling the victim to deny or downplay the experience might suggest how uncomfortable you are rather than how concerned. Neither the crime nor its aftermath will go away by ignoring them.

Be ready to listen. It is helpful to let the victim know they can discuss this experience with you. Some victims need to process the experience by repeating details or talking about feelings. Other victims may want to talk, but not about the particulars of the rape. Try to listen non-judgmentally and do not ask specific questions. Your interest in knowing the details of the sexual assault should not overpower your desire to be supportive and gentle with the victim. Offer the opportunity to talk, but never insist that talking will "cure" the victim. Remember, the victim has just been coerced and will not be helped by further coercion, however well meant.

Respect the victim's wishes for confidentiality. Your friend or family member needs to have control over the details of the assault, including who knows about the assault and how much is shared. Ask the victim what information, if any, should be shared.

Do not offer more than you can give. If you want to help your friend, relative or partner in concrete ways, be creative, but recognize your limitations. Try to think about what kind of support you can offer now and in the future. Withdrawing support because you overcommitted can be hurtful to the victim. Any assistance, however small it seems to you, will demonstrate your concern and care. Your care and help can aid your friend, relative or partner in recovery and healthy adjustment.

Going out: Sometimes the daily routines of life will be threatening to a person dealing with the aftermath of rape. Traveling home late from work, an evening class, or even grocery shopping may be frightening. If your friend, relative or partner expresses concern about safety in these situations, you might offer a ride home or accompany the victim on public transportation.

Domestic concerns: For some time after the attack, routine chores and responsibilities may seem burdensome for your loved one. This person may be grateful for assistance with errands, childcare, laundry, etc. To the extent that you are able, offer to help with these tasks and be prepared to follow through.

Home security: Regardless of where the rape occurred, the victim will probably be concerned about the safety of their house or apartment. You can help install locks on the doors and windows, or help with other security measures the victim wants to take. This person may decide to move to a new apartment or house. You can help search for one or assist with the moving chores.

Need to get away: Depending upon the circumstances of the attack, your friend, relative or partner may appreciate having a place to stay for a while. Alternatively, the victim may appreciate having a companion stay with them. For victims of rape, fear is a predominant emotion for a considerable time afterwards. It can surface any time, especially when the victim is feeling vulnerable. It may intensify when the victim is alone. Consider making your home available as a temporary refuge. Or consider spending a few days at the victim's home. If your family or other responsibilities prevent you from making this kind of commitment, you might offer to arrange a schedule of regular phone calls.

Note: Keep in mind that sheltering the victim or offering assistance is a serious responsibility. The victim's pain will be closer to you as you take on the role of comforter. Make sure you are prepared to make a commitment of this nature before offering. Knowing and respecting your own limitations is important. Try to think about what kind of support you can offer now and weeks from now. Withdrawing support because you overcommitted can be hurtful to the victim.

Medical concerns: If the assault is recent, you may want to suggest that the victim seek medical attention. In Iowa, the sexual assault medical exam and prophylactic drugs are paid for by the state. The victim will be offered free medication to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. Evidence can be collected in case the victim chooses to report to law enforcement now or sometime in the future. Most importantly, the victim will be examined to make sure she/he is physically okay. It is important to have an advocate present during the hospital process and RVAP provides this service at no charge. Offer the medical exam as an option and respect the victim's decision about whether or not to receive one.

Financial concerns: For many victims, rape has considerable financial consequences. The victim may not be compensated for time lost from work, whether immediately after the attack or later during the trial. The victim may incur the expense of moving to a new home, or making other lifestyle changes that increase living expenses. Do not assume that an offer of financial help from you would seem insensitive.

Professional help: Make sure that your friend, relative or partner knows that there are community resources to contact for support. If the victim seems interested, offer to help get information. RVAP offers free short-term counseling and can help with referrals to local therapists for longer-term counseling. If the victim chooses to seek counseling or therapy from a psychologist or a psychiatrist, the victim should be aware that not all have training in the special needs of rape victims. You might offer to help do some screening of potential therapists by calling and asking them if their areas of expertise include counseling for rape victims. If you do help with the screening, present your friend, relative or partner with the options, from which to choose. Resist the temptation to choose for the victim.

Legal Concerns

Often family and friends believe that victims should report their assault to the police and pursue legal options. This may be an option that is acceptable to some victims, but for most victims, this is not something they choose to do. While the criminal justice system can provide a sense of justice for some victims, for others it feels like re-victimization. Until society puts the blame for the assault on the offender, holds offenders accountable, and stops blaming victims, many victims will choose not to pursue legal recourse. It is not the victim's responsibility to stop the offender from raping again.

If the victim chooses to report the assault, the attacker is caught, and your friend, relative, or partner decides to prosecute, your support will be critically important. There will likely be numerous contacts with the prosecutor as well as one or more hearings

and trial dates. The victim may have to go to court several times. It would be helpful to have an advocate from RVAP accompany the victim through the legal process. In Iowa, victims have the right to an advocate during all medical and legal processes. The victim might appreciate you and perhaps other supportive people attending the trial. It is helpful to encourage the victim to separate the healing process from the outcome of the criminal case. While the victim cannot control the legal outcome, she/he can be fully in control of healing.

Personal Support

After the crisis seems to have passed, and in your judgment it seems that things should be “getting back to normal,” your friend, relative or partner may be having difficulty adjusting because what was “normal” changed. The victim may need to talk about feelings long after you have lost interest in listening. They may still feel traumatized even though from your perspective, they should be fully recovered or functional. Keep in mind that the psychological effects can last for years. This might be a good time to suggest to the victim that you understand that healing takes a long time and they might benefit from the support of an RVAP counselor or private therapy. Try to help the victim resist putting timelines on their healing. Even more importantly, be sure that you are not putting timelines on their healing.

RESUMING OR STARTING A SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP¹

Rape can affect a victim’s feelings about sex for some time after an assault. Some victims find that sex stirs up frightening feelings, which they associate with the rape experience. A victim might be more comfortable if physical contact is limited to holding and hugging. Other victims do not have trouble in this regard, distinguishing between rape and consensual sex, and might welcome their partner’s desire for intimacy. A lover must recognize the possibility of temporary change in an intimate relationship.

If your partner wants to refrain from sexual activity for a while, it is essential that that you honor their wishes. Otherwise, your partner may feel rushed or frightened by your desire to be sexual. Try to talk openly about this issue even if you have never talked openly about this subject before. It is vital to communicate now. If they have not brought up the subject, gently ask about it. As in other aspects of their recovery from rape, your partner’s needs should be of primary importance and should guide your actions. Let your partner know you are willing to follow their lead.

¹ *Women Helping Women*. Web. November 2003. <<http://www.womenhelpingwomen.org/>>

Your partner's attitude about sex will likely affect you. The opportunity to talk about this with someone outside the relationship has been helpful to others who have been intimately involved with a rape survivor. Consider seeing a rape counselor or therapist to discuss your feelings. Remember that even though some things change between you and your partner for some time, most victims recover from the trauma of rape and re-establish loving and full lives.

The empathy and concern you demonstrate during this critical period can aid in recovery and strengthen the bond between you. Your relationship can emerge strong and intact.

Trust your own honest feelings to guide your response to your friend, relative, or partner in this time of need. Think about the times in your life when you have felt vulnerable or faced a crisis: the death of someone you loved, the end of a marriage, a life-threatening illness, or loss of a job. Remember what helped you the most. Chances are it was not any one conversation or any one action, but rather the knowledge that friends believed you, empathized with your pain, were on your side, and were committed to seeing you through hard times.

CONCLUSION

As an advocate, you should have an understanding of the issues that significant others deal with when someone they care about has been a victim of a sexual assault. It is very rewarding to assist significant others in dealing with their own emotions and preparing them to be a support person. As you work with significant others, know that you are helping two people: the significant other and the victim.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- Common issues facing significant others
- To best assist significant others, validate and educate
- Your goals in working with significant others are to offer them support and help them become a better support person for the victim
- Help the significant other understand that the victim needs to be in control of decisions and healing

FOR FURTHER READING

McEvoy, Alan W. and Jeff Brookings. *If She is Raped: A Guidebook for Husbands, Fathers, and Male Friends*. Florida: Learning Publications Inc., 1991. Print.

Ledray, Linda E. *Recovering from Rape: Practical Advice on Overcoming the Trauma and Coping with Police, Hospitals, and the Courts—For the Survivors of Sexual Assault and Their Families, Lovers, and Friends*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1998. Print.

Cameron, Grant. *What about Me? A Guide for Men Helping Female Partners Deal with Childhood Sexual Abuse*. Carp, Ontario: Creative Bound, 1994. Print.

Levine, Robert B. *When You Are the Partner of a Rape or Incest Survivor: A Workbook for You*. San Jose, CA: Resource Publications, Inc., 1996. Print.

OBJECTIVES FOR THIS CHAPTER.....185

**WORKING WITH SIGNIFICANT OTHERS: PARTNERS/FAMILY/FRIENDS
OF SEXUAL ASSAULT VICTIMS.....186**

RESUMING OR STARTING A SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP191

CONCLUSION192

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW192

FOR FURTHER READING.....193