

If someone you care about has been raped...

If someone you care about has been raped, you have been affected by the rape as well. You may feel pain, frustration, guilt, anger, confusion, or a variety of other emotions. You may not know exactly how to deal with the situation. It is important to remember that you are one of the most valuable resources for the rape survivor. Your support will show her that she is not alone as she recovers from the rape.

What is rape?

Rape is an act of violence and control, using sex as a weapon. It is not motivated by sexual desire, but by the desire to overpower and dominate the victim.

Rape is dehumanizing. The rapist treats the victim as an object that he can control, rather than as a human being.

Rape is frightening. Whether or not a weapon is used, the woman feels that her body is in danger. She may feel that her life is being threatened as well.

Rape is an intrusion. The rapist invades the woman's body by force. Afterwards, the survivor will probably feel that she has lost control not only over her body, but over her entire life.

Statistics show that one out of three women will be raped in her lifetime. Rape affects women from every race, class, and age group. As many as eighty percent of all rape victims had some acquaintance with their attackers.

Rape is defined as penetration against the victim's will of a bodily orifice (vagina, anus, or mouth) by a penis or other part of the body, or by an object. It is important to remember, however, that any woman who is sexually assaulted experiences intense reactions, whether or not the assault fits the legal definition of rape.

What to expect after the rape:

Every woman reacts to rape in her own unique way. Her response will probably be similar to her reactions to past crises. Some women express their emotions -- they may talk, cry, or scream -- while others prefer to keep their feelings inside. Some women tell lots of people about the rape, while others remain relatively silent. Some women talk right away, while others wait months or years before discussing the rape. It is important to respect each woman's choices and individual style of coping.

Despite individual differences in style, there are stages which almost every rape survivor goes through:

Immediate crisis stage:

Right after the rape, the woman focuses on what has just happened to her. Her primary need is safety. If someone you know calls you right after the rape, make sure she is safe. Find out where she is. Ask if she wants to have someone with her. Try to judge whether there is any danger that the rapist will come back to find her. Let her know that you're available to be with her and support her, if she wants your help. During the initial crisis stage, the woman may have any or all of the feelings listed below:

Loss of control: She may feel out of control or crazy. Because her control was taken away during the rape, she may fear that she'll never have control over herself or her life again.

What you can do: Because the survivor is in crisis, you may be tempted to take charge of the situation and make decisions for her. You can help her most in the long run, however, by allowing her to make her own decisions. Ask her questions to help her sort out her thoughts and feelings. Offer your ideas and suggestions about what she might do. The final decision, however, should be hers.

Guilt: She may feel that somehow the rape was her fault, and that she "led the rapist on" or failed to prevent the rape.

What you can do: Remember that no one asks to be hurt or violated. Don't dismiss the survivor's feelings as unimportant, but tell her clearly that you believe the rape was not her fault.

Fear: After the rape, the survivor may be extremely fearful. She may fear that the rapist will come back or that someone else will attack her. She may be afraid to be alone or in the dark. She may have nightmares and be unable to sleep.

What you can do: You can offer to be with her at night or to drive her places she needs to go. You can help her to put an extra lock on the front door or windows. Let her tell you what she needs in order to feel safer. Right after the rape, she may need extra support from you in order to feel safer. You or she may worry that she's relying on you too much. Reassure her that her dependence won't last forever, and that she will gradually start to feel better. As she recovers from the rape, she will want to start doing things alone and taking risks again. You can help by being available when she needs you, and by not being overprotective when she needs to take control.

Vulnerability: She may feel that she is vulnerable to attack. She may have difficulty trusting others, even those whom she knows well. It may be difficult for her to see the world as a safe place.

What you can do: Let the survivor know that she can trust you. If she asks you to keep her story confidential, don't tell anyone about it. If she is relying on you

for help or for company, make sure you keep your commitments. You can show that you are trustworthy by listening carefully, without being judgmental or telling her what to do.

Difficulty with sexual intimacy: After the rape, she may have trouble being sexually intimate. Sex may make her feel vulnerable, just as she was vulnerable during the rape.

What you can do: If you are sexually involved with the survivor, be sure to respect her limits. It may be hard for you to understand why she can't be sexually intimate with you; after all, you're not the rapist. Remember that she is not rejecting you. She is avoiding a vulnerable experience which may bring back painful memories.

At the same time, don't assume that she doesn't want any physical closeness. She may need to be held or comforted. Again, let her determine what level of intimacy feels comfortable.

Isolation: She may feel that she is completely alone, that she is the only person who has been through this experience. She may think her reactions are "abnormal" or "crazy."

What you can do: Let her know that she is reacting normally to a horrible experience. She may benefit from talking to a counselor familiar with common reactions to rape. A rape crisis counselor can help her to sort out her emotions.

Anger: She may feel outrage that the rape happened to her. She may talk about wanting to kill the rapist. Her anger may extend to other men as well. Conversely, she may not feel anger after the rape; many women do not get angry until months or years later.

What you can do: If the survivor is angry, let her know that her anger is okay. She may worry that she is becoming a violent person because she has violent feelings about the rapist. Remind her that there's a difference between her thoughts and her actions. She has every right to feel extremely angry about the violation of her body.

Even if she is not angry, you may be. Often friends and family of the survivor want to kill or maim the rapist. Remember that threats to do such things won't help the survivor and may in fact make her more frightened. You may want to talk with someone else about how angry you feel.

You may notice that the survivor is feeling many of the feelings listed above, and you may feel strongly that she should get counseling. Many people worry that if a survivor does not get counseling right away she will be permanently damaged by the experience. This is not true. A woman will benefit most from counseling when she is ready for it.

The survivor may be faced with some practical decisions after the rape, such as calling the police or going to the hospital. Remember: she has been through an experience in which her control over her body and her life were taken away. You can help her regain that control by letting her make decisions.

Outward adjustment stage:

Shortly after the rape, the woman may return to her normal routine. She may make adjustments in her life, such as moving or buying new locks to make sure she feels safe. In general, though, she will just want everything to be “back to normal.” To you, it may seem that she is denying the rape, pretending it never happened. She is actually trying to regain control over her life by returning to her ordinary routine. She is attempting to reestablish her identity as a person, rather than seeing herself only as a “rape victim.” At this point, you can let her know that you are willing to listen if she wants to talk, but that you will not force her to discuss the rape.

Resolution stage:

A rape survivor may not start talking about the rape again until months or even years later. Something usually happens to trigger the memories of the rape. Often, anniversaries of the event are difficult. A period of stress may bring out her feelings. Changes such as moving, starting a new job, or entering an intimate relationship can reactivate her feelings of crisis. This can be a lonely time for the survivor. Even if she had support during the initial crisis phase, she may not have support now. People around her may not understand why she hasn’t “gotten over it.” She may not understand either.

Throughout this stage, the survivor will probably experience many of the same emotions she felt right after the rape -- guilt, lack of trust, fear of sexual intimacy, etc. She may feel more anger than she did in the first stage. She may be worried about “burdening” her friends with her feelings. Let her know that you will support her, and that there are also other people she can talk to. She may want to talk to a rape crisis counselor or psychotherapist.

She may question whether she actually coped with the rape at the time it happened. She may worry that she has been fooling herself into thinking she’s okay. Tell her that she dealt with the rape as much as she could at the time, and that now she may need to do some more thinking and talking about it.

You can help by acknowledging that it is hard for her to talk about the rape again. Let her know that recovery takes time, and that you will be patient as she recovers. This is a time for her to see how the rape affected her life. While she reevaluated the effects of the rape, she may also reevaluate other aspects of her life. This stage of recovery is often a time of growth and change, even though it can be painful. Often, the hardest step in the process is asking for help at first. Encourage her to feel good about herself for seeking the help she needs and deserves.

General guidelines for helping:

Listen: Often, a person in crisis just needs someone to hear her story. You can show you're really listening by nodding, looking her in the eye, etc.

Help to clarify what you think she's saying: Listen carefully and then tell her what you think she's saying about her feelings. She may be talking about her emotions in a way which seems jumbled to her. You can help by sorting out and repeating back what you think she's saying.

Let her decide what she wants to do: Don't push her to talk about something if she's not comfortable. If you feel you need to ask questions, ask them gently, so she doesn't feel that you're prying. Ask general questions, e.g. "Do you want to talk about what happened?" rather than "How did he rape you?"

Show that you care: Remind her that you care about her, and that this crisis hasn't changed that fact. You can show your affection by hugging her, telling her that you love her, or even just sitting quietly with her. You may not feel that you're doing much, but your presence will mean a lot to her!

Remind her to have compassion for herself: She has been through a very difficult experience. Remind her that now she needs to be good to herself. Encourage her to do something nice for herself every day. She may criticize herself for not recovering fast enough. Remind her to give herself credit for each step she takes toward recovery.

What you can do for yourself:

Supporting a rape survivor can be emotionally draining for you. You may feel angry, confused, inadequate, etc. It is important to recognize those feelings and to share them with someone you trust.

You may wish you could make the survivor's pain go away. It is extremely difficult to see someone you care about in pain. No matter how helpful you are, though, you can't make the rape disappear. The best thing you can do is to help the survivor find ways to help herself.

It is important to recognize your own limitations. Every individual has a limit to how much he or she can give. If you try to do more than you are emotionally capable of doing, you will not be able to help effectively. Think realistically about what you can and can't do. Then tell the survivor clearly the ways you think you can help. If there are things you feel you can't do, you can help her to find other sources of support.

Be aware of your own reactions to rape. You may feel powerless and out of control in the situation, just as the survivor does. Often, the survivor's friends and family become more sensitive to violence, safety issues, dynamics between men and women, etc. You can use your own reactions to understand how the survivor may feel.

Sometimes you may be tempted to do things which may make you feel better, but which may not be helpful for the survivor. For example, if you are worried about her safety, you may push her to report so you don't have to be concerned. However, she may feel that talking to the police will make her feel too vulnerable. Try to distinguish what you're doing to make yourself feel better from what you're doing to help the survivor.

At the same time, remember that your needs are important too. You have also lived through a crisis. Take time to take care of yourself and to be with people who aren't in crisis. Give yourself credit for all the support you are providing. It is important for you to have your own support people to talk to. You can talk with friends or family. A rape crisis counselor or psychotherapist is also available to talk with you about how the rape has affected you and what you can do to feel better.