

Do

SUPPORTING a Survivor of Sexual Violence

Do

listen to and believe your friend. Be mindful of your tone—if you sound doubtful or disbelieving, they may feel unsupported and be less likely to seek help from other sources.

Do

validate your friend's feelings about the assault. Tell them what happened was not their fault, and that they did not deserve it. If your friend is blaming themselves, remind them that the only person responsible for the assault was the person who hurt them.

Do

help your friend find resources in case they want to report the assault or press charges. These may include the University's sexual misconduct policy, legal protections offered through Title IX and the Clery Act, or accommodations through the Dean of Students Office. Most schools have at least one confidential resource for survivors, such as a counselor, advocate, or faith leader. Community rape crisis centers are also a great resource and may offer free medical services including forensic exams, STI prophylaxis and Plan B.

Do

ask if your friend needs somewhere to stay. Offer to share your room or couch if it is feasible. If your friend lives close to the perpetrator, such as in the same residence hall or apartment building, help them find another short-term place to stay. Walk them to their room and help them pack necessary items, like clean clothes and a toothbrush, if they are going to be staying somewhere else.

Do

continue to support and care about your friend. Engage them in activities they find enjoyable. Make small gestures—cooking dinner together, picking up a favorite dessert or snack, or sending funny articles—that let them know you are thinking of them. If your friend is upset, taking a couple of hours to spend time with them can make a big difference.

Do

encourage your friend to be patient with themselves. Processing a trauma can take time, and expecting a friend to move past it quickly ignores the level of trauma that sexual violence causes.

Do

remind them they aren't alone. Remind your friend that they are intelligent, strong, and have people in their corner who love and support them. This may seem obvious, but reminding your friend may help them address feelings of self-blame.

Do

warn your friend in advance. If you suspect or know that the perpetrator will be in the same room or building as your friend, let them know, and help them create a plan to address the situation.

Do

understand your own limits. As much as you want to be there for your friend, licensed psychologists, counselors, and psychiatrists have the training to offer long-term support. Take care of yourself and your own mental health, and encourage your friend to see a counselor.

Do

call the National Sexual Assault Telephone Hotline at 800.656.HOPE (4673). A trained medical professional can help your friend navigate the support, policy, and care that is most effective in responding to sexual violence.

Don't

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Do Not

ask for details about what happened. Never ask what your friend was wearing, things they believe they did to encourage or discourage the assault, or how much alcohol/substances were used. Don't make assumptions about the perpetrator's gender or expect your friend to behave a certain way—people react to trauma differently and there is no "right" or "wrong" way to behave after experiencing sexual violence.

Do Not

ask whether it was "violent." All acts of sexual assault are violent, regardless of how they look from the outside. Asking this question can invalidate the trauma that your friend experienced and make them feel unsupported.

Do Not

minimize what happened to your friend. Saying things like "Well, they didn't hold you down, right?" make it seem as if your friend did not survive a vicious crime (see previous point).

Do Not

force your friend to report the assault. Nor should you force them to go to the hospital. It is important for your friend to regain a sense of self-control—offering options and respecting their decision can help them regain a sense of control over their life.

Do Not

tell other people without the permission of your friend. Your friend may want and need privacy at this time, and having their name thrown into a rumor mill can cause more anxiety and trauma. If in doubt, you can always ask—"Is it okay if I talk to my mom about this?" or "Do you want to also tell X and Y friend? I think they would want to support you through this too."

Do Not

set a timeline for when they should be "over it." Sexual violence is traumatizing, and everyone handles it differently. It can take years for someone to process the violation that happened to them and their body, and PTSD can be a life-long disorder. Saying "You have to stop acting like this" or "Don't you think that's enough?" can be very damaging to someone struggling to fully recover from a traumatic event.

Do Not

let your anger about what happened to your friend get the best of you. You may want to physically harm the perpetrator, but you can protect your friend and other members of your campus in other ways. Channel your anger creatively—use it to help your friend get justice through legal channels or to educate your peers and help create a campus environment that is supportive of survivors and intolerant of sexual violence.

Do Not

walk on eggshells around your friend. You need to be sensitive, but your friend may want more than anything to feel a sense of normalcy and routine. Being yourself may help your friend feel more like themselves.

Ending sexual
violence on
college campuses

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Student Affairs Administrators
in Higher Education

Culture of Respect is dedicated to strengthening sexual assault prevention and response on college campuses. For more information, visit CultureofRespect.org or contact Allison Tombros Korman, senior director, Culture of Respect at akorman@naspa.org.