

## **HOW TO SUPPORT SOMEONE WHO HAS BEEN SEXUALLY ASSAULTED**

### **A guide for friends and family members**

A person who has been sexually assaulted needs the support of friends and family. In fact, most survivors of sexual violence will tell people they know first. You do not have to be a counsellor to be helpful.

#### **Messages to share:**

- I am sorry that this happened to you
- This was not your fault.
- I am glad you told me
- I will do my best to support you

#### **1. Believe**

People very rarely lie about sexual assault. The fear of not being believed or of being blamed for the assault often prevents victims from disclosing. Communicate to your friend or family member that no matter the circumstance, it was not their fault. No one asks to be sexually assaulted. Listen without judgement or doubt.

#### **2. Listen**

Let your friend or family member set the pace and decide how much to share. Details are not important, so avoid intrusive questioning. Avoid questioning their actions or behaviours at the time of the assault or afterwards, as this can imply that they were responsible for what happened. "Why" questions in particular often imply judgement and blame (ie why didn't you leave, why did you go to their room, etc).

#### **3. Don't tell them how to feel**

There is no right way to act and feel after an assault. Fear, crying, shock, numbness, disbelief, embarrassment, anger, self-blame, guilt and grief are all common reactions. Don't minimize what happened to your friend/family member by saying it could have been worse. Avoid telling them to "*get over it, move on*" or to "*forgive and forget*".

#### **4. Don't excuse or defend the perpetrator**

There is no excuse for sexually assaulting a person, even if the perpetrator was drunk or stoned; or even if they had been dating or had sex previously. A victim may minimize what happened in order to protect the perpetrator, who is often known, or because they fear retaliation.

#### 5. Support your friend/family member by respecting their choices

The feeling of loss of control is often an effect of sexual assault. It is therefore important to help a victim feel that they are in control over what happens next. Ask if they want to report to police, seek medical attention or want counselling. Support their decision and maintain a neutral position, even if it is not what you would do. Ask how you can help.

#### 6. Accompaniment to police or hospital

Your friend/family member may ask you to accompany them to the police or hospital. As a support person, you can be a comforting and reassuring presence. During the medical examination or police interview, it is important that you do not add information, prompt your friend or family/member or express your own opinions. Be aware that there will be parts of the interview or examination that are very personal, and your friend/family member may wish for privacy at those times. You may also be asked by police or medical personnel to remain outside the room for parts of the interview or examination.

#### 7. Afterwards

If your friend or family member discloses information to you, respect their confidentiality by not talking about it with others. Check in regularly to see how they are doing. If they are having intense reactions long after, experiencing intrusive memories and flashbacks, using more than the usual amounts of drugs and alcohol, feeling numb and spaced out, appearing fearful and anxious, avoiding people and withdrawing from usual activities, they may benefit from talking to a professional. A counsellor can help work through any thoughts or feelings about the assault, help understand the impacts that the assault has had, and explore new ways to cope and manage feelings.

Here are some community resources that can be helpful:

#### **The PEI Rape and Sexual Assault Centre**

Main Office: 902-566-1864

Counselling: 902-368-8055

[www.peirsac.org](http://www.peirsac.org)

#### **Victim Services**

Queens and King County:

902-368-4582

Prince County:

902-888-8218