



# SUPPORT GUIDE



## How to Support A Friend or Loved One Who Has Experienced Sexual Violence

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*Talking about an experience of sexual violence can be hard for everyone and its not always easy to know how to respond. When someone you know and care about has experienced any form of sexual violence, it is normal to feel saddened, upset and confused. Sexual violence does not just impact the person who has experienced it, it also impacts their support system.*

## The Truth About Sexual Violence

- Sexual assault is **never** the fault of the person who experienced it.
- Violence is never okay or justifiable.
- You did not cause the abuse and are not to blame for anyone else's behaviour.
- Sexual assault has nothing to do with who your friends are, what you are wearing, your sexual past or where you hang out.
- Sexual assault impacts people of all genders.
- Sexual assault happens impacts people of all sexual orientations.
- Sexual assault is committed by dates, partners, co-workers, friends, acquaintances or strangers. But most of the time (88%), sexual assault is committed by someone you know.
- The person who chooses to sexually assault another is 100% responsible.

**We're here to help. If you are feeling impacted by sexual violence, what you are going through is very normal. Get in touch if you need support.**

## Key Messages

### I Believe You

*One of the most powerful things you can do is believe them.*

It is very difficult for people to share their experiences of sexual violence. They may fear that they won't be believed or worried that they will be blamed. There are many situations where people who share their experiences are met with "why" questions (e.g. why didn't you leave sooner). These questions can incite feelings of shame or blame. It is important for supports to understand the positive impact of their first response to be "I Believe You".

*I believe you*, can be communicated verbatim but can also be said and shown in a variety of different ways. We communicate belief through facial expressions, tone of voice, word choices, and the questions we do or do not ask. Simply by believing them we are identifying ourselves as a supportive person in their life.



### It's Not Your Fault

*One of the main messages we can convey is that the assault was not their fault, no matter what.*

Many people who have been sexually assaulted experience feelings of shame, and blame themselves for what happened, especially if they know the person who chose to use sexual violence. They often feel as though the assault was their fault, that they brought it on in some way, or that they did something that contributed to the sexual assault happening.

The fault and responsibility of sexual violence always lies 100% with the person who chose to be sexually violent towards another person.



## Your Feelings Are Normal



*Let them know that it is okay to have mixed feelings about their experience and that it is really common.*

When someone has been sexually assaulted, they may be feeling lots of different things and showing those feelings in different ways. They could be visibly upset, or silent, or appear as if it were any other day. There are a wide range of emotions that can follow an experience of sexual violence. Keep in mind that as a support person, that you may have a range of emotions too.

## Your Needs Come First

*Let the person know that they deserve to have their needs met and to honor the impacts that they are experiencing.*

The person disclosing is the one to tell us what they need. We can provide options for them and ask how they can best be supported.

It is normal for supporters to be impacted when someone we care about shares an experience of sexual violence. But, it is important that we prioritize supporting them and not them supporting us. Be mindful of how your emotions might be perceived and be transparent about them.

## I Support Your Decisions

*One of the ways we can help people feel that sense of control again is by supporting their decisions.*

We let them take the lead on their path to recovery and healing. Be careful about what our biases are about what people "should" do after an experience of sexual violence and make sure we don't let those biases impact how we are supporting someone. Explore options with them together rather than just telling them what they "should" do. Let them know what is available to them and talk to them about how each option might fit best in their life. Once you've explored all the options, make sure to let them be the one to make any decisions.



## How You Can Be Supportive

### Listen

*Let them know you are there for them if they need to talk. Telling their story can be emotionally draining and can bring back memories. You don't need to mend their feelings or lessen their pain. There is immense power and support in simply listening.*

Try to stay neutral with your language so that they can define their own experiences. Avoid labeling someone a 'victim' or 'survivor', unless they do so first. Consider phrasing it using person-first language such as 'the person who experienced sexual violence' and 'the person who chose to use sexual violence'.

### Encourage Self-Care

*Encourage them to get as much support as they need. It's important to make self-care a priority and practice self-compassion.*

Some people might benefit from maintaining habits, going for walks, doing grounding exercises, or meditating. Self-care looks different for everyone.

### Be Patient

*People need to heal at their own pace and in a way that works for them.*

It is important to support their choices and their healing process, even if it differs from your own preferences. Healing is about restoring a sense of trust, safety and hope. There isn't just one way to heal. It is a process that can take weeks, months or years. Slow progress is still progress and is worthy of recognition.



**Reach out if you  
need information  
or support  
403-237-5888**

## What to say to someone who needs support..



### Try Saying...

I believe you. You are not alone. This is not your fault. I am here for you. Let me know how I can support you. I'm so glad you told me. How can I help? you are reacting normally to a very hard and scary situation.

## Continued Support

Continue to show your support; healing takes time and looks different for everyone. Check in once in awhile to let them know that you still care and are there to support them. Avoid prying, leading, or judgmental questions. Avoid asking any unnecessary information can be re-traumatizing or trigger them into having a flashback. Be aware of your own limitations and abilities to support them. It can be helpful to refer them to resources and agencies that specialize in supporting people impacted by sexual violence.

### CCASA Contact Information



CCASA Support & Information Line  
9am-9pm – 7 days a week  
403-237-5888

Alberta's One Line for Sexual Violence  
9am-9pm – 7 days a week  
Phone/Text | 1-866-403-8000  
Chat | [calgarycasa.com](http://calgarycasa.com)  
TTY Line 403-508-7888

