Talking with Your Student after the Assault

Sexual assault can happen to anyone. As a parent's worst nightmare, it can be very difficult and overwhelming to hear that your loved one has been sexually assaulted. At times like these, it is often hard to know how to act or what to say. The most important thing you can do is help your college student feel safe and supported. Students at Montana State University Billings have a number of resources available to assist them in dealing with the aftermath of sexual assault.

Every person responds differently to sexual assault. Frequent responses include feelings of fear, distress, humiliation, anger, confusion, numbness, and guilt. It is important that your student be allowed to experience and process through these feelings without the fear of having them invalidated or dismissed.

Overview of Steps to Take

1. First and most importantly, believe your student when they confide in you. Do not place blame on them for the sexual assault, and don't pressure them to talk. It is better to go slowly and let them set the pace. Focus on your student's needs, and remember that every person's healing process is unique.

2. Take the necessary steps to protect and ensure both your student's and your safety.

3. Seek medical attention, but understand that your student has the right to decide what medical attention is necessary. It's important that your student regain control of their body.

4. Discuss with your student their options and ask them what they want to do next. This may or may not include contacting an advocate and/or the police. Reporting a sexual assault crime is often a very difficult, long, and painful process for survivors. It is not an appropriate option for everyone, but a trained advocate can help you both navigate through your student's options.

5. Make sure your student gets the professional care and support they may need. Counseling can be very helpful in assisting your student and you through the healing process of coping with the sexual assault.

Key Phrases to Use When Talking about the Sexual Assault

- I'm so glad you told me, and I'm very proud of you.
- I am here for you. You can tell me as much or as little as you need to right now.
- Regardless of (how you were dressed, how much you drank, if you were flirting, etc.) there is no excuse for sexual assault. No one deserves to be raped.
- Whatever you did to survive the situation was the right thing to do.
- Let me know how best I can support you. I will do my best to help you stay safe however I can.
- That must have been a very disturbing/scary/confusing/uncomfortable/frightening experience.
- You are not crazy. You are reacting normally to a very difficult and scary situation.
Do’s

− Listen and try to understand. Reassure them that they have your love and support.
− Help your student distinguish between "if only" and "guilt." It is common for survivors to blame themselves for what happened. Reassure them that it was not their fault and that the only person responsible is the perpetrator.
− Listen to their reasons if they didn't tell you immediately. They may have been scared of your reaction, felt shame or embarrassment, or tried to protect you. It is very common for survivors to wait before sharing with people they love.
− Give control to the survivor. This means allowing them to speak for themselves unless they specifically want you to. Sexual assault is a crime that takes away an individual's power. It makes them feel invaded, changed, and out of control. It is crucial for survivors to be able to make their own decisions in order to regain power over their own lives.
− Encourage your student to see themselves as a strong, courageous survivor who is reclaiming their own life.

Don’ts

− Do not criticize your student for being where they were, not resisting more, etc. The only person responsible for the sexual assault is the perpetrator. Everyone has the basic human right to be free from threat, harassment, or attack. Whatever they did to survive the situation was the right thing to do.
− Do not over simplify what happened by saying it wasn't that bad or that they should forget about it. Let them say exactly how they feel.
− Do not sympathize with the abuser. Your student needs your absolute support.
− Do not blame your student or yourself. Avoid asking "why" questions as much as possible because these often imply blame.

WEBSITES:

Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network: http://www.rainn.org

HOTLINE:

National Sexual Assault Hotline (24-hour, confidential): 1-800-656-HOPE

National Online Sexual Assault Hotline (live chat, confidential): www.rainn.org

CAMPUS RESOURCES:

Student Health Services: University Campus: (406) 657-2153, 2nd Floor Petro Hall; City College: (406) 247-3027, 2nd Floor Tech Building

Campus Advocacy Program (24-hour, confidential): (406) 794-3829

YWCA Billings: (24-hour, confidential): (406) 259-8100