A GUIDE FOR SUPPORTING SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

Sexual assault can happen to anyone. It can be very difficult and overwhelming to hear that someone you care about 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 the survivor feel safe and supported. Students at Montana State University Billings and in the greater Billings community have a number of resources available to assist them in dealing with the aftermath of sexual assault.

THE BASICS OF SURVIVOR SUPPORT

1. First and most importantly, believe them when they confide in you. Do not place blame on them for the sexual assault (there is NOTHING they could have done to deserve or cause what happened to them), and don't pressure them to talk. It is better to go slowly and let them set the pace. Focus on the survivor's needs, and remember that every person's healing process is unique.

2. Check and make sure they are not in any serious danger or displaying suicidal behaviors. If they are in danger or considering suicide, help them create a plan to be safe. This might include notifying police, medical services or family, keeping them company, or helping them change to an anonymous location.

3. As long as immediate safety and health care are not issues, restore choices. In order for you to help facilitate healing for someone who had choice taken from them by the attacker, you have to give them choices in every instance you can.

4. When you discuss options with the survivor you may need some extra support from an advocate. The survivor can talk to an advocate or, if they are not ready, you can talk to an advocate and bring the information to the survivor at an appropriate time.

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

6. Take care of yourself. When you are supporting a survivor, you need to make sure the focus is on them and not on you. Taking care of yourself might include talking with an advocate or a counselor. The more emotional clarity and strength you have when you are with the survivor, the better you will be able to support them.

KEY PHRASES TO USE WHEN TALKING ABOUT THE SEXUAL ASSAULT

- I'm so glad you told me.
- 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.
- 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 the survivor 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.
- Don’t take it personally if they did not tell you right away. 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 care about.
- 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 them to see themselves as a strong, courageous survivor who is reclaiming their own life.

**DON’TS**

- Do not criticize the survivor 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. The survivor needs your absolute support.

**WEBSITES:**

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