

Basic Sexual Assault Response

The goal of this training is to leave participants with a basic understanding of how to effectively respond to a disclosure of sexual assault. An effective response does not require professional counseling skills; what is more important is that the responder is aware of the societal factors that make it difficult for victims/survivors to access services and support. The following basic rules can make all the difference to a survivor of sexual assault; they appear simple, but their importance cannot be stressed enough.

1. Be a compassionate supportive listener.

A compassionate support person authentically listens to how a client is feeling and responds in a sensitive way. Small details can make a big difference here: relaxed and open body language, tone of voice, and what and how things are said are all important. The goal is to immediately create a pathway for a rapport to develop. Listening is an essential skill in establishing rapport: you should be able to do this without talking or thinking about yourself or your own experiences, interrupting, giving advice or asking inappropriate questions. Reflect back to the client, what emotions you think that you hear the client is expressing. Ask open-ended questions and validate her feelings irregardless of how she presents them.

2. Make sure the survivor understands that you believe her.

The mainstream media tends to report almost exclusively on the statistically least common aspects of sexual violence: stranger assaults and false reporting. This selective coverage paints a false picture for the general public: that many women lie about having been sexually assaulted, and those who are ‘real’ victims are attacked by strangers and can be identified by the extreme physical violence that they have sustained. In a culture that perpetuates the falsehood that, ‘real’ rapes are violently perpetrated by strangers and where women ‘often’ lie about having been raped”, it is extremely difficult for the vast majority of victims to come forward. Simply, women are afraid that they won’t be believed, and many don’t bother telling anyone, let alone reporting the assault to the police. In order for the survivor to feel safe and supported, you must make sure she understands that you believe her.

3. Make sure the survivor understands that this is not her fault.

We live in a society that places the responsibility for the prevention of rape on the victim, which is apparent in that most mainstream prevention messages are aimed at monitoring the behavior of potential victims, (don't dress a certain way, don't get drunk, etc.) not at changing societal attitudes or preventing perpetrators from offending. In a culture that expects women to prevent rape, survivors (and responders, support people, family, etc) are left to scrutinize the behavior of victims, and to figure out what they did wrong in failing to prevent the assault. Most assaults are planned and all assaults are the sole responsibility of the person who perpetrated the assault. She didn't do anything wrong, and didn't deserve the assault; make sure she understands this.

4. Respond in a non-judgmental way.

Upon hearing a disclosure, you may immediately begin to think about what could have been done to prevent the assault. You may also immediately think of what you would have done differently, if you had been in the situation instead of the victim. A direct extension of these thoughts would be to ask the survivor questions about her decisions, to make her aware of other possible approaches to the situation. This kind of response is completely inappropriate: your goal is to support the survivor, and passing judgment on her actions will not help her in any way. The assault has already taken place: such questions are irrelevant. Also, it will destroy any kind of rapport you may have established up to this point. Your goal is to make her feel believed and supported, and asking irrelevant questions will make her feel judged and scrutinized. Think about your role in this situation, and what your goals are. Making her feel worse and conducting an investigation are not on the list of support person goals.