



Sexual Assault Response Services

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Eleven Things Not to Say to Sexual Assault Survivors (and what to say instead)

1. ***"Only crazy people need therapy."***

Some experiences, like rape, are traumatic for virtually anyone, no matter how well adjusted they are. Psychotherapy and rape crisis counseling can be very helpful for victims/survivors with mild, moderate, or severe problems due to sexual assault.

2. ***"I'll kill the guy who did this to you."***

While anger is a natural reaction, it can be very harmful because the victim, who has faced one perpetrator whose anger was out of control, must now try to calm down another person so there won't be more violence.

3. ***"It's better not to talk about it."***

Studies show that talking about stressful events speeds recovery, if people are allowed to talk at their own pace. Let her/him know you're willing to hear when or if they're ready to talk.

4. ***"What are you afraid of me for? I didn't do it."***

Rape and incest often make victims/survivors fear sexual intimacy, at least for awhile. It also causes confusion about the relationship between sex and intimacy. Survivors may need to exert and feel more control in a relationship than they did prior to the assault.

5. ***"It was my fault."***

Victims often blame themselves. Many partners and family members also insist on blaming themselves. In fact, sexual assault is no one's fault except the perpetrator's.

6. ***"Going to the police (or testifying in court) will just make things worse."***

In fact, some studies show that reporting to police and testifying, though painful, actually helps victims/survivors recover. These actions also help get sexual perpetrators off the street, and convey the message that our society does not condone violence against anyone.

Help, Hope, and Healing

7. *"Why can't you just forget about it?"*

Forgetting may be impossible because the reminders are constant: sex, interactions with men, harassment on the street, being in vulnerable positions, and pornography are all possible reminders.

8. *"When you fall off a horse you have to jump right back on."*

This saying may be true of some fears, but it does not apply to resuming sex after a sexual assault. Let the victim/survivor decide when they're ready to have sex. Watch out for subtle pressures on the survivor to have sex. If recovery time seems excessive, seek couples counseling.

9. *"What's the big deal?"*

For many reasons sexual assault is a very big deal, even for sexually active people, even if it happened many years ago. An assault can totally upset a person's belief that the world is a safe place, that the survivor is in control of their sexuality and body, and that she/he knows who to trust. Rape is not sex; it is a life-threatening act. Incest is not sex; it is betrayal.

10. *"Why didn't you fight?"*

Freezing, submitting, and fighting are all natural responses to being attacked. Since your partner survived, she/he did the right thing. Learning self-defense is recommended for all people, but untrained individuals must use their instincts to either fight or submit. Neither one is wrong.

11. *"Nothing I can say (or do) will help."*

Yes it can! Allow but don't force her/him to talk about it and express their feelings. Listen without criticism, judgment, or condemnation. Patience and love have healed many wounds.

Adapted from Laurence Cohen's original work