



Sexual Assault Response Services *of Southern Maine*

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EMOTIONAL FIRST AID FOR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS

Sexual assault is a violent crime, motivated by power and anger and using sex as a means of controlling the victim. It is not about sex, passion, or love. Sexual assault survivors may experience a wide variety of physical, emotional and behavioral responses to an assault. Many families and friends of sexual assault survivors, often neglected “secondary victims,” experience their own series of emotional and behavioral responses.

If your friend or family member has been assaulted, you are a secondary victim. You may experience things that you don’t understand or feel comfortable with. That is normal, but it is important for you to express those feelings with someone who understands what you are going through, both to facilitate your own recovery process and so you can best support your loved one. Common responses of significant others to a sexual assault may include:

- 1. Blaming the survivor.** This may help you feel some control about an out of control situation. You may feel that the rape was the victim’s fault because of where s/he was, who s/he was with, what s/he was wearing, or what s/he was doing. Feeling this, although it may seem to help you cope, is in reality detrimental to your recovery and the survivor’s. It is important to know and accept that rape is a crime, and that the survivor is not responsible. The survivor did not want to be raped, and s/he did not enjoy it. The rape was a violation of the survivor’s body and his/her emotions, no matter who, what, when, where, why or how s/he was assaulted.
- 2. Treating the survivor as if s/he is ruined for life.** Sexual assault may disrupt many aspects of the survivor’s life and yours. S/he may feel depressed, angry, withdrawn, fearful or ashamed. You may feel any or all of these emotions too. Although your life will never be exactly the same as if the rape hadn’t happened, recovery is possible for both of you.
- 3. Guilt.** You may feel that you should have been able to prevent the assault or protect your loved one. But most sexual assaults are premeditated in some manner, and isolated people are prime victims. You may not have been able to prevent the assault, even if you were there. At this time, recovery is the crucial point; not what anyone should or shouldn’t have done.
- 4. Denial.** It is important to not deny that the sexual assault occurred and that both of you have been emotionally affected. Maintain open communication between the two of you to facilitate the healing process.
- 5. Anger.** Anger is a very common response. You may feel angry with the survivor, perpetrator, yourself, and the world. This is a healthy emotion as long as it is expressed responsibly. Talking with a friend, counselor, or SARS advocate may help diffuse the anger and release the feelings of helplessness and defenselessness that may be underneath.

Help, Hope, and Healing