

If your partner has recently been sexually assaulted

If your partner has recently been sexually assaulted you may feel;

- Helpless
- Angry
- Sad

You most probably will want to do 'the right thing'. This information sheet provides some guidance to help you support your partner in dealing with the impacts of sexual assault. You will also have your own feelings to cope with, but be aware that your reactions are important. The attitudes and actions of those closest to the person who was assaulted will influence how he/she will cope with it. Most people who have been raped do not react to the sexual aspects of the crime, but instead they react to the terror and fear that is involved. Often an immediate reaction of the survivor is 'I could have been killed'. Some people around him/her, may find themselves concerned with the sexual aspects of the crime. The more this preoccupation is communicated to the survivor, the more likely he/she is to have difficulties in dealing with their own feelings. Probably the best way to understand their feelings is to try to remember or imagine a situation where you felt powerless and scared. You may remember feeling very alone, fearful and needing comfort.

Above all a person who has been sexually assaulted needs:

- To be listened to
- To decide for themselves how to deal with the assault
- To be believed

How can I help him/her through this?

You can support your partner by following a few suggestions;

- Listen to them. Really listen. Is it normal for a person who has been sexually assaulted to cry, scream, sob, rant or feel angry. That is their right. It is also their right to be withdrawn and silent, and want some space.
- He/she should make every decision in response to the assault. The important thing is for the survivor to regain a sense of control over their life, having been denied this by the offender.
- Ask him/her what they want to do. Offer options, suggest alternatives, help them weigh the pros and cons, but leave all decision making up to them.
- Do not become the injured party or start ranting and expressing rage. Your partner does not need to see you angry. They might feel responsible for your distress or feel that you are angry with them.

Dealing with the assault

The initial shock which follows a sexual assault can lead to feelings of numbness, loss of memory, loss of concentration or disorientation. As mentioned previously, talk to each other about whether or not to report to Police. Remember that it is important for your partner to make their own decisions about what to do next. If he/she decides to report, they will be required to make a statement to the police which may take several hours. He/she may also need to undergo a medical examination for forensic evidence. It is also important that he/she has some follow up health checks/tests for sexually transmitted diseases etc.

Counselling and support can be provided for both you and your partner. The Sexual Assault Crisis Line is a 24 hour service offering support and advice from sexual assault counsellors.

How long will it take until things are OK again?

Within a week or two after the assault many people begin to resume their normal lives. This can be a painful process because many people feel certain that their lives can never return to normal. Some adopt a 'what's the point of anything' attitude. A supportive partner can try to provide some perspective on this understandable reaction. A person's life may never be exactly the same as it was before the assault, but it can return to some sort of normality.

You should continue to encourage your partner to discuss their feelings about the assault and support them to take any steps that they feel appropriate. Any action that he/she decides is right for them at that time is the right course of action.

Some people remain quite disoriented for a while. Headaches, nightmares, insomnia, paranoia and depression are common reactions, sometimes taking a long time to subside. Some people may leave their jobs, want to move house or join self defence classes etc. If it takes your partner a while to deal with the assault, then that is OK as they will go at their own pace. As the months pass, your partner will slowly begin to come to terms with what has happened. The process is similar to the way people deal with any personal tragedy. Don't think of your partner as a victim. Don't see them as weak, sick or permanently damaged. Instead, hold the attitude that he/she is a whole human being going through some difficult struggles. See him/her as courageous and determined. Concentrate on their strengths and reflect those strengths back to him/her.