

## My friend has been sexually assaulted

**If you have a friend who tells you that she has been sexually assaulted, she has taken the first step towards her recovery. She has chosen a trusted person to confide in. The way you respond to her is very important. You will have feelings of your own to deal with. You may feel upset and confused because of the emotional stress of listening to what she is telling you. You may feel like crying, or giggling. You may not feel that you are able to support her in what she is going through.**

These are some really important, practical things you can do:

### Listen

Listen to what your friend has to say. Try not to interrupt her, or ask lots of questions.

Let her tell you at her own pace. Don't worry if she stops talking for a while, silences are OK - you don't have to rush to fill them with words.

Here are some of the ways in which other young women have responded when a friend has told them she has been sexually assaulted:

'I said "It must have been tough (frightening)".'

'I cried with her.'

'I reached out and touched her hand and put my arm around her shoulder. (I was hesitant to touch her at first because she was talking about touch as a bad experience, but it worked out).'

'I was afraid to open my mouth. Even though I didn't think it was funny, I felt a giggle coming on. But I didn't let myself giggle. I concentrated on breathing deeply and the giggle went away.' [Goulburn North East CASA]

Sexual assault has for too long been a crime that victims feel they cannot talk about. Your friend has chosen to tell you and it is important that you respect her trust and not talk about what she has told you with your other friends.

### Believe

The way you can help your friend is to believe her. People rarely make up stories about sexual assault. You will have been influenced, as we all are, by the myths in our society about sexual assault - that women were 'asking for it', that it was her fault in some way and that children lie about incest.

So it is not helpful to say things which may instinctively come into your head like 'why did you go there?' or 'you know what he's like, you shouldn't have gone out with him.' Messages like that just let him off the hook.

Anyway, your friend is probably telling herself the very same things, blaming herself for what has happened. If your friend is disclosing to you that she is a victim of sexual assault in the home (incest), it is important that you encourage her to tell a trusted adult who can do something about it, perhaps a relative, a school counsellor or teacher, or a worker at your local Centre Against Sexual Assault.

Remember that sexual assault is never the fault of the person who has been assaulted. It is always the fault of the person who did the assaulting.

### Inform

The third thing that you can do is to help her to decide the best course of action to stop the assault, if it is still happening, and to find out where she can get more information and assistance.

A good starting place is to check the Contacts section. There you will find a list of all the Centres Against Sexual Assault in Victoria, as well as some other agencies which can be of assistance.

There will be a CASA near your home or school. Encourage your friend to telephone the CASA. If it's after business hours (after 5.30 p.m.), during week-nights, or on a weekend or public holiday your friend can contact the after hours number on 03 9349 1766, or (freecall Australia wide) 1800 806 292. As somebody supporting a victim of sexual assault, you can also telephone this number for advice. There will always be someone on the other end of the phone to whom your friend or you can talk, who will believe, understand, and be able to offer assistance.