

How to Support a Survivor

You don't have to be a professional to support a person who has been impacted by sexual harassment, sexual assault, stalking, or relationship abuse (SVSH). A survivor's community can play an important part in supporting healing from traumatic events. Often the best support comes from a friend or family member.

The Do's and Don'ts of How to Respond

Do

- Recognize that experiences of SVSH are disempowering. Follow the survivor's lead and respect their choices. They are the expert about their experiences.
- Prioritize the survivor's safety, whatever that means for them.
- Understand that the most dangerous time for a person in an abusive relationship is when they attempt to leave.
- Validate and affirm all feelings, even those that seem extreme or confusing to you.
- Demonstrate that you believe them, by avoiding questions or comments that imply the survivor is at fault.
- Show empathy and caring about the survivor's experience, even if you aren't sure of all the facts. Listen actively and non-judgmentally. You don't need to know the details to provide support.
- Ask what kind of support would be helpful. Offer choices, resources and support the survivor in seeking out and exploring options.
- Familiarize yourself with confidential resources on and off campus.
- Offer to connect your loved one with CARE
- Respond in a calm manner, avoiding over-reaction.
- Practice your own self-care, maintain boundaries, and seek support for yourself.

Don't

- Don't be directive. Don't pressure the survivor into making decisions they are not ready to make.
- Don't tell the survivor to be more assertive or to engage in confrontation.
- Don't call the police or make a report without the survivor's permission.
- Don't expect or assume the survivor will react in any particular way.
- Don't define an experience as SVSH or rename the experience as something else.
- Don't express doubt and don't investigate their experience.
- Don't ask "why" questions, or probing questions, and don't ask that they recount the experience. You don't need to know the details of what happened to be able to provide support.
- Don't focus on details such as their behavior, appearance, and/or location of where the harm took place.
- Don't admonish, shame, or blame someone who stays in an unhealthy relationship or remains in contact with the person who has caused them harm.
- Don't become offended or angry if the survivor doesn't want support.
- Don't compare or measure against your own experiences.

What to Expect

Everyone's situation and reaction will differ. There is no "right way" to respond to a traumatic event, however, there may be some common experiences.

Possible Impacts of SVSH

- Self-blame, guilt, shame, worthlessness, low self-esteem
- Shock, denial, confusion
- Fear, not wanting to leave the house, social isolation
- Depression, despair, hopelessness, feeling like no one can help, suicidal thoughts
- Easily becoming triggered, irritable, or upset by seemingly "small" things
- Hypervigilance: increased alertness, fear, or paranoia
- Hyperarousal: easily startled, anxious, angry, in physical pain
- Hypoarousal: disassociated, fatigued, emotionally or physically numb
- Consumed: only wanting to talk about the traumatic events, difficulty concentrating
- Anger, blaming others, frustration with support systems
- Constant feeling of being watched or being unsafe
- Maldaptive coping techniques: substance use, self-harm, isolation
- Post traumatic symptoms: intrusive thoughts, nightmares, flashbacks
- Inability to concentrate, forgetfulness
- Somatic symptoms: changes in sleeping and eating, energy level, exacerbation of stress-related disabilities and health problems, hair loss, digestive problems, lowered immune system, fatigue.

Adapted from UC Berkeley, PATH to Care Center