

Responding to Disclosures of Sexual Violence as a Mentor

If a mentee chooses to disclose to you, it means they trust you. Your response can have a lasting impact on their recovery. When a person tells you that they have been sexually assaulted or raped, it is sometimes difficult to know how to respond in a way that is genuine, appropriate, and empowering.

Research shows that the first few responses that a survivor receives when they disclose are critical to their healing. Any mentor can provide a safe place that empowers a survivor to **seek** what they need by providing a safe space, an empowering attitude, an empathetic response, and your knowledge about sexual violence.



Safe space

Privacy and confidentiality: Ensure that the survivor understands the limitations of the confidentiality of the situation. Make sure they understand any mandated reporting requirements before they disclose to you.

Immediate physical concerns:

- Do they have immediate medical needs?
- Does the survivor have a place to go and a safe way to get there?
- Is there anyone who can stay with them or they can stay with?
- If the survivor is not safe, how can they be safe?

Immediate emotional concerns:

- Are they feeling safe emotionally?
- Are they suicidal or homicidal?
- Are they able to find support if/when they need it?
- How will they cope right now?

Empowering attitude

- Sexual assault takes away a person's power and feeling of control. Regaining a sense of control is a key step to healing. Making decisions is a simple, yet important, way to feel powerful again. Let the survivor decide the following:

- What to talk about
- When to talk
- The amount of detail to go into
- Help the survivor understand their options and where to find more information. Be respectful of a survivor's decisions, even if you may not agree with them.
- Use empowering language that reinforces that the survivor can make their own decisions. For example, instead of saying, "You should go to the hospital," say, "Do you think you want to go to the hospital?"

Empathetic response

- Believe. Survivors of sexual assault often worry that they will not be believed. Tell the survivor directly, "I believe you." Try not to ask questions that sound like you don't believe their story—for example, questions that start with "Why did you . . . ?" When a survivor feels believed, you have helped them start to heal.
- Actively listen to the survivor. It is natural for the responder to get involved in their own thoughts and feelings about what they are hearing. It is important to stay focused on what the survivor is saying and what they need.
- Be aware of your body language. Empathetic words have to be supported by empathetic body language. Recognize that a survivor may not feel comfortable with physical contact.
- Use responses that are genuine. Don't use: "It's not your fault"; instead, put it in the context of what happened. For example, "You did not ask for this to happen. You trusted this person." Communicate that survivors are never to blame for an assault.

Knowledge

- Find out the facts about sexual violence. It's estimated that one in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused or assaulted in their lifetimes.
- Learn about survivors' common reactions to an assault. Survivors can respond with a range of emotions—all of which are common, normal reactions to trauma.
- Be aware of local resources, including hotline numbers and your local rape crisis center. The National Sexual Assault Hotline is available 24-7 at 800-656-HOPE.
- There are some decisions that survivors have to make within five days of the assault.

If you are a part of a larger mentoring organization, consider contacting your local rape crisis center to have them come to your site to train your mentors group on these topics and more. To find a center near you, visit centers.rainn.org.

Finally, a disclosure of sexual violence from a mentee may trigger you emotionally, regardless of whether you have a personal history of sexual violence. Seek help and support for yourself so you can continue being a positive force in your mentee's life.