

## When someone you care about has been sexually assaulted, it affects you too.

We hope that the information inside this brochure will help. If you have any questions, or want someone to talk to, we're here for you.

Our Center is staffed by professionals who are experts in the field of trauma and victimization.

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## *sexual assault*

### A GUIDE FOR FRIENDS AND FAMILY OF THE SURVIVOR

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## ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT

You may be feeling angry, confused or frightened. You may be feeling guilty. Above all, you may be feeling helpless. These are normal reactions for survivors of sexual assault – and for their families, partners and friends. Your reactions can help you to understand what your loved one may be feeling. Following are some facts about sexual assault:

1. Sexual assault is never the victim's fault. Regardless of the circumstances, it is the rapist who has committed a crime, not the victim.
2. Just as sexual assault is never the victim's fault, it is also not your fault. You did not cause it to happen by being somewhere else, by not "knowing" it would happen, or for any other reason.

3. Sexual assault is not only committed by strangers. In fact, in approximately 80% of sexual assault cases, the rapist knows the victim.
4. Sexual assault is not sex. It is a violent act in which sex is used as a weapon. Many people who have been sexually assaulted react more strongly to the feelings of terror, humiliation and powerlessness than to the sexual aspects of the crime.
5. An attempted sexual assault can be just as traumatic as a completed assault. The feelings of terror, humiliation and powerlessness are the same whether or not the rape was completed.
6. Sexual orientation is not a factor in sexual assault. Both heterosexuals and homosexuals are sexually assaulted.

The majority of rapists are heterosexual males. Remember, sexual assault is an act of aggression – not an expression of sexual attraction.

7. Reactions to sexual assault vary. Some people cry or get angry, others may seem calm and composed. There is no "correct" way to behave after a sexual assault. The way in which your loved one copes with the shock and trauma should be respected. Sexual assault is a traumatizing experience for both the survivor of the assault and for those close to the survivor.
8. It is the survivor's choice whether or not to report the crime to the police. Respecting her or his decision, no matter what your own feelings are, is an important way of showing support for your loved one.

## HOW CAN YOU HELP?

It's important that a person who has been sexually assaulted should feel physically safe. Make sure that the survivor has someone to stay with, at least for the first few days. If the survivor insists on being alone, make sure people are available by telephone, especially during the night. Ask if there is anything that you can do to help her or him feel safer.

Self-blame is one of the most common and devastating emotions experienced by more survivors. Emphasize that the assault was not the survivor's fault and make it clear that you do not blame the survivor. This is one of the most important ways you can help.

The survivor may or may not want to talk about the sexual assault during the first few days. If you're not sure, ask.

Don't minimize the survivor's experience by saying things like "It's over now, just forget about it" or "It could have been worse". Such comments usually make a survivor feel worse.

Your relationship may make it easier for the survivor to talk with you; it could also make it more difficult. Many survivors want to protect the people they are close to from distress. If your loved one finds it difficult to talk with you, encourage him or her to speak with someone else. Remember, the sexual assault has brought up feelings of powerlessness. Encouraging the survivor to talk to someone is more helpful than insisting that she or he talk to you.

Asking specific questions about the details of the sexual assault is usually not helpful. Instead, ask about the survivor's feelings, for example "what bothers you most?". Such questions are less threatening and will help you understand better how you can help.

If you have been involved sexually with the survivor, try to discuss at an appropriate time how your partner feels about resuming sexual activity (an appropriate time is not right after the sexual assault). Let your partner's comments guide you in deciding whether you have chosen a good time to discuss it or whether you should wait until another time. Some people may want to resume normal sexual relations as a way of forgetting the sexual assault; others will be more hesitant. Take your cue from your partner.

Your loved one will have some good days and some bad days – days when it seems like everything is "back to normal" and days when it is more difficult to cope. Remember, the staff at the Crime Victims Treatment Center is here to help you and your loved one with medical, legal, and emotional issues. Our services are free and confidential.