How to support survivors of rape and sexual assault?

Date: 2021-10-08

Source: https://guardian.ng/opinion/how-to-support-survivors-of-rape-and-sexual-assault/

It is never an easy thing to know what to say when a loved one or friend tells you they have been sexually assaulted or raped.  
  
For a survivor, disclosing their abuse to a close friend or relative can be very difficult. When someone has been sexually assaulted they feel very vulnerable and are very careful who to open up to. They are often afraid they will not be believed or that they will be blamed for the assault.  
  
  
  
One of the best things you can do is acknowledge how difficult it was to say something and that you are honored they trusted you enough to talk about what was done to them. There are certain comments survivors find judgmental, hurtful, and unsupportive.  
  
Sexual trauma can involve feelings of grave personal violation, loss of control, fear, and humiliation, so routine instructions and questions may feel disrespectful and threatening. The choice of words matters a whole lot when communicating with someone that has been sexually assaulted. The following are examples of statements to avoid when speaking to a survivor:  
  
• You should be over this by now  
  
  
  
• Why don’t you remember everything that happened?  
  
• You really need to report this to the police. (It is okay to advice a survivor whether or not they want to report to the police, but empower survivors to make their own decisions and not mandate them to report.)  
  
• Why did you or didn’t you (stay with him so late after you’d been drinking or fight back).  
  
  
  
Sexual assault is common and has a significant impact on survivors’ health and well-being. The role we play when a loved one has been raped or sexually assaulted is important to their healing journey. The following are ways to support a survivor of rape/ sexual assault;  
  
1. Listen Non-Judgmentally: As with disclosures of other sensitive topics, your most important task when a loved one discloses a sexual assault experience is to actively listen without judgment, express support, and  
  
avoid re-traumatizing the survivor.  
  
2. Believe the Survivor: The most common reason people choose not to tell anyone about sexual abuse is the fear that the listener won’t believe them. People rarely lie or exaggerate about abuse; if someone tells you, it’s because they trust you and need someone to talk to.  
  
  
  
3. Choose words that support and empower: Using a gentle, receptive, and kind tone of voice when responding to a survivor helps them feel comfortable talking about this difficult subject.  
  
4. Reassure: Rape/Sexual Assault is NEVER the survivor’s fault. No one asks to be sexually assaulted by what they wear, say or do. Let the survivor know that only the perpetrator is to blame.  
  
5. Be Patient: Don’t ask for details, let the survivor decide how much they want to share. Ask them how you can help. Survivors have to struggle with complex decisions and feelings of powerlessness, trying to make decisions for them may only increase that sense of powerlessness.  
  
  
  
6. Encourage: Encourage the survivor to seek medical attention, report the assault. Remember, the survivor must ultimately make the decision as to what to do. Don’t push. Remember, support your friend’s choices no matter what they decide.  
  
7. Respect Privacy: Don’t tell others what the survivor tells you. Let the individual decide who they will tell. It is important not to share information with others who are not involved. If you do need to share information for your friend’s safety, get permission by letting your friend know what you will share and with whom it will be shared.  
  
  
  
8. Things you can say: It is hard to know what to say to a friend when they confide in you. Refrain from asking a lot of questions, instead, support your friend with these phrases:  
  
• It’s not your fault  
  
• I’m sorry this happened  
  
• I believe you  
  
• I am glad you told me  
  
• I’ll support your choices  
  
• You’re not alone  
  
For a survivor, the healing process can feel like two steps forward, one step back, but any sort of progress deserves recognition as it is important to be patient even if the survivor chooses to get justice for what was done.  
  
If you have been raped or you know someone who has, please visit us at the WARIF Centre – 6, Turton Street, off Thorburn Avenue, Sabo, Yaba or call our 24-hour confidential helpline on 08092100009.