

RESPONDING TO A SEXUAL ASSAULT DISCLOSURE

PRACTICE TIPS FOR UNIVERSITIES & COLLEGES

Sexual assault is a deeply serious, traumatic, and humiliating experience, and telling someone about it is often terrifying. A sexual assault survivor's physical injuries may not always be significant, but the unseen psychological injuries may be severe. A survivor's long-term ability to feel safe in the world, concentrate, earn an income, trust themselves and the world around them, and have relationships may be directly affected by the crime, but may not be obvious at the time of initial disclosure, nor be easy to prove. You do not need to be an expert in the area of sexual assault response, but how you respond to a disclosure is critical to a survivor's well-being and recovery. These Practice Tips aim to better equip you to respond to a sexual assault disclosure using a trauma-informed approach and empower students/survivors by helping them identify options and resources.

WHAT IS SEXUAL ASSAULT?

As outlined in the Criminal Code, sexual assault is **any** form of non-consensual sexual contact.

- Consent must be given freely. It is not consent if there are threats, fraud, manipulation, or coercion.
- Consent must be continuous, and can be withdrawn at any time.
- Consent to one form of sexual contact does not mean consent to all forms of sexual contact.
- Consent cannot be legally given if a person is intoxicated, drugged, unconscious, or asleep.
- Consent cannot be given where the perpetrator induces the victim to engage in sexual activity by abusing a position of trust, power, or authority.

SOME TRUTHS ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT

- 1 in 3 women will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime.
- As many as 1 in 4 women will be sexually assaulted while obtaining a post-secondary education. Students are most at risk during the first year of their studies, with many sexual assaults perpetrated within the first eight weeks of the academic year.
- Approximately half (50%) of sexual assaults among university/college students involve alcohol.
- Sexual assault can significantly impact survivors' academic performance and progress, and may result in a survivor dropping out of school.
- While sexual assault can happen to anyone, at any age, girls and young women (aged 15–24) are most often targeted.

- In Canada in 2014, an estimated 633,000 individuals aged 15 years and older were sexually assaulted.
- The majority of sexual assaults are committed by men against women, but sexual assault also happens to men and people who identify as trans.
- Most people are sexually assaulted by someone they know (family or friend, acquaintance, intimate/dating partner, spouse), and most sexual assaults occur in a home or vehicle, or in a commercial or institutional setting.
- Most sexual assaults are premeditated – they involve planning, coercion, force and/or threats of some kind. Many sexual assaults are facilitated by alcohol and/or drugs, and most sexual predators are repeat offenders who deliberately target those they see as vulnerable.
- The trauma of sexual assault can result in lifelong impacts – physiological, psychological, emotional and/or spiritual. Sexual assault is the most frequent cause of post-traumatic stress responses for women.
- According to Statistics Canada, sexual assault is the most under-reported of all violent crimes. Only 5% of sexual assaults were reported to the police in 2014.
- False reports of sexual assault are extremely rare. They are no more common than false reports for any other type of crime (2–4%).

WHY IT MAY BE DIFFICULT TO DISCLOSE

It is not easy for someone to disclose that they have been sexually assaulted. A sexual assault most often includes profound humiliation and shame because sex and sexuality (including that which is healthy) are not talked about freely in society. Even though sexual assault is more about aggression, power and control, sexual assault involves a person's sexual body parts and behaviors that appear similar to sex, both of which most people are taught to be embarrassed or feel ashamed about. When there is physical violence (such as overpowering someone or using sex as a weapon), the trauma and shame can be deep. Sexual assault is intensely dehumanizing, and the survivor may feel like they lack control over their life.

It is likely that a survivor of sexual assault may:

- Feel deeply embarrassed, ashamed, or humiliated, especially if the assault was perpetrated by someone they trusted, or if there were drugs or alcohol involved.
- Fear they will not be believed or will be blamed, especially if this has been their experience in the past or they have seen this kind of thing in popular culture (e.g., television, movies).
- Be confused about whether or not it **was** sexual assault (especially if the survivor is young and/or unaware of the law).
- Fear for their safety, or the safety of their friends and family, especially if threats were involved.
- Feel conflicted about the perpetrator getting into trouble, especially if they were assaulted by someone they know (e.g., intimate/dating partner, spouse, friend, family member) or if the perpetrator is part of the same close community.

- Fear the response of the police and the justice system or fear nothing will come of reporting.
- Hope to put it behind them quickly by avoiding talking about it or avoiding having contact with the perpetrator.

COMMON RESPONSES OF SURVIVORS

All responses to sexual assault are adaptive attempts to survive this traumatic experience, both physically and emotionally. These responses can be particularly complex for survivors who have experienced early and/or repeat trauma. You might hear a range of experiences and observe a range of emotional responses during a disclosure of sexual assault:

- They may appear anywhere on a continuum from calm and collected to frantic and distraught. A survivor may also respond with anger, aggression, or even violence. All are ways of coping. If you are hearing about a sexual assault immediately after it happens, you may see the survivor expressing anxiety, confusion, shock and disbelief. They may also appear numb. They may be disoriented and their articulation of what happened may not seem coherent.
- Survivors often have responses that can be described as “fight, flight, or freeze.” A survivor may tell you that they fought back, or that they tried to get away. There is a growing understanding that many people freeze in traumatic situations, and find themselves immobile, unable to speak, or mentally removed from their bodies (a common traumatic response due to flooding of stress hormones or dissociation).
- Thanks to developments in neuroscience, we now know that trauma impacts how the brain encodes memory. The survivor may have clear memories of the assault, or may only remember bits and pieces and have trouble recounting events in chronological order. They may remember sensory details like sounds and smells, but may have no clear memory of how the assault unfolded. Sensory details often trigger flashbacks, and the survivor may feel like they are reliving the traumatic experience.
- You might hear the survivor describing anxiety, fear, nightmares, anger and/or sleep disturbances, invasive memories, changes in appetite, depression, self-isolating, self-blame, and difficulty trusting others.
- You may see attempts to numb emotional responses or regain a sense of control with drugs, alcohol, or self-harming behaviours (e.g., cutting).

You can help the student/survivor to recognize that these reactions are normal responses to trauma, and their way of coping with what has happened to them.

WHEN YOU RECEIVE A DISCLOSURE

You are a key person in the survivor’s experience. How you react to their disclosure can have a significant influence on how they make sense of what has happened to them, and could affect what they do or do not do next.

It is common to feel uncertain about what to say or do when receiving a sexual assault disclosure. Remember that the survivor is telling you because they see you as a safe and trustworthy person. You have an opportunity to empower the survivor and assist them in their path forward and in accessing additional supports.

Some **common pitfalls** when receiving a sexual assault disclosure:

- A judgmental, shocked, or over reactive initial response
- Disbelief, minimizing, or questioning the “truth” of a survivor’s story or reactions – especially if they seem to be very calm, or don’t want to report to police.
- Asking for unnecessary details, or focusing on the behaviour, appearance, and/or location of the survivor at the time of the assault.
- Focusing on your own emotional reaction (e.g., horror, sadness, anger, recalling a similar experience you may have had).
- Questioning why a survivor did not act in the ways society expects a sexual assault survivor to react (e.g., fighting back, reporting to police, discontinuing contact with the perpetrator after the assault).

AN EMPOWERING RESPONSE

LISTEN

- Find a private place to talk, and tell them you are glad they are telling you.
- Be patient and let them tell you as little or as much as they want at their own pace, without interrupting. Talking about how they feel can be as helpful or more helpful than talking about the details. Take their lead on this.
- Show them that you are actively listening through your body language (e.g., nodding, facing in their direction, sitting down at eye level) and words (e.g., “I hear what you’re saying”).
- Be aware that some people may find themselves flooded with emotions. If they are getting increasingly upset while telling you about what happened, they may be reliving the experience. There are several ways you can help to ground them if they are overwhelmed:
 - Encourage them to take slow deep breaths while gently planting their feet into the floor and holding on to their knees.
 - Ask them to keep their eyes open, even if just momentarily. This helps to bring them back to the present.
 - Ask them to look around the room and name some ordinary objects they see. Do this until they feel calmer.
- Respect their personal space, and do not touch them. Even if you think they want a comforting touch, resist your urge to do so. Always follow their lead. You can offer them something to keep them warm, like a blanket or your jacket (shock can involve feeling cold, shivering and shaking).

BELIEVE

- Validate their feelings and assure them that these are normal reactions to a very traumatic event, and avoid promising them that everything will be okay.
- Assure them that it was not their fault (many survivors struggle with blaming themselves) and that the responsibility for sexual assault lies solely with the perpetrator. This is true regardless of whether they were drinking, got into the perpetrator's car, brought the perpetrator to their home, etc. **It does not matter what the survivor did or did not do before, during, or after the assault – it is never their fault.**
- Reassure them that you will do whatever you can to help them get the support they need. If possible, stay with them or find someone they trust who can be with them.

EMPOWER

Sexual assault can result in a profound sense of loss of power and control. You can help them regain control over their life by trusting them to make their own choices about what to do next. You do not need to do everything for them; it is your role to help them get connected to appropriate resources and supports.

- Talk to them about their safety. Ensure they are in a safe place or help them find a safe place to go.
- Ask them about who their supports are (e.g., family, friends, professionals) and help them connect with these supports.
- Provide them with information about local specialized sexual assault response programs or Stopping the Violence (STV) counselling programs, as soon as possible. Support them in accessing these services.
- Find out if they need medical assistance. Encourage them to seek medical care with a specialized sexual assault program (if available) or with their family doctor or a nurse practitioner.
- Discuss possible accommodations (both academic and non-academic) that could be made through the university/college.
 - o Academic accommodations might include assignment extensions, switching classes if the perpetrator is enrolled in the same class, withdrawal from a course without penalty, and/or permission to miss class (to meet with those involved in responding to the incident, a victim service worker, or a counsellor on or off campus).
 - o Non-academic accommodations may relate to housing or employment on campus. For example, a student/survivor may request to change residence or housing if they no longer feel safe there.

Offer them options and resources, rather than telling them what to do or giving them advice. Keep your initial information simple and straightforward. Reassure them that, even if they feel overwhelmed by decisions, they can take their time. Feeling overwhelmed is a normal response to a traumatic event. Respect their decision about which (if any) of the options they choose.

DISCLOSURE AND REPORTING OPTIONS

There are several options available to sexual assault survivors. These include *disclosing* to someone to access emotional support and/or medical assistance, *reporting* to police or another authority, not reporting to police, or making a *Third Party Report*. A survivor may choose any of the following options, or any combination of options available to them.

No Report

The survivor may wish to disclose (i.e., tell *someone*) but not report to police or other authorities (e.g., campus security). Disclosing may help them access more support and/or needed assistance.

Student Misconduct

If the perpetrator is a student, the victim/survivor may wish to make a report to the university about student misconduct.

Report to Campus Security

The survivor may wish that campus security be made aware of what happened and may decide then to make this a formal or informal report.

Report to Police

The survivor may wish to report to police, ideally with the support of a sexual assault response worker, Stopping the Violence (STV) counsellor, or community-based victim support worker.

Third Party Report to Police

The survivor may make an anonymous report to police without making an official statement. This is called a 'Third Party Report,' and can be submitted through a community-based victim support worker. This type of report is not, in and of itself, a police investigation, but it can help the police identify sexual predators in order to protect others from being sexually assaulted.

Medical Assistance

It is advisable for anyone who has experienced sexual violence to seek medical attention because of the possibility of physical injury, pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Refer the student/survivor to the nearest hospital, health centre, or nursing station.

Forensic Medical Exam

Inform them that medical staff can conduct a forensic medical exam and collect forensic samples, ideally within 72 hours, but forensic samples can be collected up to 1 week after an assault. If the victim/survivor wants to report to the police at the time of the forensic medical exam, the forensic samples should be transferred to the police at that time. If the victim/survivor is unsure about reporting to police at the time of the exam, forensic samples can be collected and stored for up to 1 year while they decide whether or not to report. If possible, advise them to not shower, eat or drink, brush their teeth, or change their clothing before the forensic exam, as that may destroy some potential forensic evidence. Reassure them that if they have done any of these things, forensic samples can still be taken.

Civil Claim

The survivor may wish to contact a civil lawyer to inquire about taking the perpetrator to court for damages suffered. This option may be pursued instead of, or in addition to, police recommending criminal charges.

EMPOWERING VICTIMS THROUGH RESOURCES

Help them find the best possible resource(s) for emotional and practical support. Refer them to a local and accessible sexual assault response or community-based victim assistance program. Refer them to campus-based supports, such as health and counselling services or a campus sexual assault support centre (if available).

VictimLink BC is a toll-free, 24/7, confidential, multilingual (110 languages) telephone service. They provide information and referral services to all victims of crime, as well as crisis support to victims of sexual and domestic violence.

VictimLink BC
1.800.563.0808

TTY: 604.875.0885

Text: 604.836.6381

Email: VictimLinkBC@bc211.ca

Receiving a disclosure of sexual assault can be a difficult experience. It may be helpful to debrief or get support for yourself. However, it is important that details about the student/survivor and the assault remain confidential.

For other sector-specific sexual assault disclosure response practice tips and information about Third Party Reporting, **visit www.endingviolence.org**
