



RESPONDING TO DISCLOSURES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE: FRIENDS AND FAMILY GUIDE

A guide for friends and families of sexual assault survivors and anyone hearing disclosures of sexual violence in a non-professional context.

WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

This guide is for **friends and family of sexual assault survivors**, and **anyone hearing disclosures of sexual violence in a non-professional context**. Disclosures can range from quick and vague, to more detailed and involved. How you respond will depend both on the tone of the disclosure and your relationship to the survivor. This guide provides you with some background information on trauma, helpful things to say, and common pitfalls to avoid.



UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA



“Trauma is not what happens to you; trauma is what happens inside of you as a result of what happens to you. – Gabor Maté”

The actual number of people with PTSD is likely even higher, but systemic barriers can prevent people from accessing a formal diagnosis.

Often when people think about trauma, they think about refugees escaping war or soldiers coming home as different people. While these are absolutely traumatic experiences, most people haven't experienced war or displacement. And yet, we know that **76%** of Canadians are exposed to events that are sufficient to cause post-traumatic stress reactions, and **1 in 10** Canadians experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)¹.

Trauma can happen whenever our nervous system is overwhelmed and isolated. It is not defined by scope or intensity, and what is traumatic for one person may not be for someone else. People can be traumatized by a one-off event, or by multiple experiences over time that slowly erode one's sense of safety and connection.

In order to respond sensitively to disclosures of trauma, and particularly of sexual violence, you don't need to know all the ins and outs of psychology or neurobiology. The big thing you need to understand is this:

Trauma isolates. Connection heals.

By disclosing to you, your friend or family member is reaching out a hand for connection. You don't need to solve all their problems or heal all that hurts, you just need to be with them in a way that communicates that they're not alone.

¹Staniloiu, Dr. Angelica and Dr. Anthony Feinstein. "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Canada". The Canadian Encyclopedia, 09 February 2017, Historica Canada. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd-in-canada>.

HOW TO RESPOND

The goal for responding to personal disclosures is to connect, so it's important that your response be **validating**, **empathetic**, and **supportive**.

It can be a fine line to walk between validating someone's emotions, and normalizing their experience. We never want to make it seem like sexual violence is a normal experience, even though it is an unfortunately common one. Saying things like "that happens to so many people, it's so awful" often sends the message that sexual violence is something we have to accept (because it's so common), rather than the intended message that the survivor is not alone.

Helpful things to say include:



COMMON PITFALLS

When someone discloses to you, it can be easy to jump into problem-solving mode or to try and make them feel better by “looking on the bright side” or finding some sort of “silver lining”. It’s also common to try to bond with someone by sharing a similar experience that’s happened to you. In this section, we’re going to talk about why those urges are misguided and what you can do instead.

PROBLEM SOLVER

- ❌ **Why it’s not helpful:** This approach often skips right over the emotional impact of what someone has just told you, and goes straight to logic and solutions. Trauma isn’t a logical experience though, and by focusing on trying to “fix” the trauma you’re missing the opportunity for connection.
- ✅ **What to do instead:** Focus on the feelings. This doesn’t come easily for some people! Listen for the feeling words, and reflect those back. “That sounds really hard/scary/overwhelming”. If they’ve said something that you think you have a solution for, ask before offering it: “Are you looking for solutions, or do you just need me to listen?”





POSITIVE POLLY

- ✗ **Why it's not helpful:** Even though you have good intentions, this can often be experienced as you being unable or unwilling to “sit in the shit” with someone. Fairweather friends are fun, but sometimes people need someone who is willing to sit with their sadness, their grief, their anger... someone who can see them at their worst and still want to know them.
- ✓ **What to do instead:** Be with them. Listen to what they share and be genuine about how bad it sounds. At the root of the “silver lining” urge is a desire to make it better; you can share that desire without undermining the hard time that they’re having: “I’m so sorry this happened to you. I wish I could make it better. I’m here to help, even if that’s just listening”. If you don’t know what to say, be honest about that: “That sounds awful. I don’t know what to say”. Remember that the thing trauma survivors often need most is connection, not solutions.





“THAT REMINDS ME OF WHEN I...”


-  **Why it's not helpful:** Telling a story about a similar thing that happened to you may be your way of trying to connect, but this particular way of connecting is often experienced as you turning the tables and making the situation about you instead of them. It puts the person disclosing in a situation where they're now having to take care of and listen to you, rather than you taking care of and listening to them.
-  **What to do instead:** Save your story for another time. There might come a time when finding out that you've been through something similar is comforting to the survivor, but the moment of disclosure is usually not it. Focus on them and what they're saying; you can use your knowledge of what helped you, but be open to the fact that they're a different person who might need different things:


I'm extremely overwhelmed.


4:45 PM

I could _____ if you want? 

cook dinner 

help out with the kids 

run some errands 

come over and sit with you 

EMPOWERING THE SURVIVOR

Sexual violence is an incredibly disempowering experience, and a large part of healing from it involves the survivor reclaiming their power. This will look different for everyone, which is why it's so important to let the survivor lead the way.

Many of us have been taught that when a crime has been committed, we should go to the police. It should always be up to the survivor whether they want to talk to the police, and whether they want to pursue charges. Reluctance to report does not mean that they are lying. The legal system is complicated, and can be re-traumatizing for survivors. It is never a survivor's responsibility to go to the police in order to protect others from the perpetrator.



“What about innocent until proven guilty?”

You believing your friend or family member when they tell you that they’ve been harmed has no bearing on the legal system or the rights of the accused. If you find yourself in a position where you are close with both people involved, don’t try to referee or get each person to “see where the other one is coming from”. Even if someone’s intent was not to cause harm, it’s important to acknowledge the impact of their actions.

If the survivor does not want to have contact with or talk about the person who harmed them, you need to respect that boundary. Don’t try to force contact, relay messages, or encourage forgiveness: let the survivor decide what they need for their healing.

Remember that two people can walk away from the same event with two very different understandings of what happened. It is not your job to try to figure out the truth, but rather to listen to their truth. Not being believed is one of the biggest reason survivors don’t come forward, and your reaction might determine whether they continue a path towards healing, or stay quiet and hurting.

