Top 10 Do’s in Helping a Survivor of Sexual Assault

1. Be Supportive
There are many ways to be supportive of an individual who discloses to you that they were sexually assaulted. The first step in supporting the survivor is to BELIEVE them. Then review their options (medical, legal, and emotional) and support their decisions. Remember that the violence that occurred took away the survivor’s power and control. It is highly important for the survivor to be allowed to be in control and make his or her own decisions (even if you do not like the decision he or she makes). Supporting the wishes of the survivor will help him or her in beginning to heal from the assault.

2. Communicate
Communicating the following messages with the survivor can increase their openness in disclosing to others in the future.
“I believe you.”
“I am sorry that it happened to you.”
“You did what you needed to survive.”
“It's not your fault.”
“Help is available.”

3. Listen
As a friend or family member, it is important that you LISTEN to what the survivor tells you. Sometimes assault victims need to talk about the attack. Be non-judgmental and non-blaming. You weren't there; the survivor is the only one who knows what it was like. Let them tell you what they want, when they want. It is more important to listen than to talk or give advice.

4. Be Patient
Be aware that the recovery from sexual assault can be slow and that there is not a set period of time for healing. Let the survivor proceed at his or her own pace and continue to be available for support throughout the process.

5. Be Sensitive
Let the person know that you do not subscribe to any of the common myths about sexual assault. Understand that the person has suffered extreme humiliation. Let them know that you do not see them as defiled or immoral.

6. Allow For Space
Ask the survivor how he or she wants to be treated, especially when doing anything that may violate his or her personal space. Even if you mean well and want to offer comfort, remember that the person who assaulted the survivor took away his/her control over her/his body. He or she may not want to be touched or accompanied. Ask for permission before touching or holding the survivor. Comments like these can be helpful “I want to offer comfort, could I do anything that would be comforting to you?” or “I’d like to give you a hug, but I don’t know if this would be ok with you or not.”
7. Know the Options
Assist the survivor in getting the help her or she wants and needs. This may mean providing phone numbers, transportation, information, etc. Informing the survivor of their options can be critical. If you do not know about the options available, you can seek assistance from a counselor or advocate at the Oasis Program or The Center Against Sexual Assault.

8. Be Non-Judgmental
The manner in which you respond can increase or decrease the likelihood that the survivor will continue to seek needed assistance. Getting a judgmental response often decreases one’s desire to reach out to others and may hamper the survivors healing from the assault. Your job as a concerned other is not to judge, or say what you would have done differently, but to be supportive and appropriately attentive to the individual.

9. Help in Gaining Safety
Asking the survivor questions like “what would help you feel more safe?” can reveal options for increasing safety. The survivor may want you to stay the night, stand outside the door when using a bathroom, accompany them to the hospital, medical facility, or counseling office, help them make a report to police, or to screen calls.

10. Self-Care and Knowledge
Educate yourself about sexual assault and unwanted sexual contact. Having friends and family who know about sexual assault can be very useful to the survivor. It is important, though, to remind yourself that you do not know everything about the survivor’s experience. However, dispensing any myths that you have about sexual assault, learning about what to expect during the healing process and increasing your understanding of this issue in general can be useful to you as well as the survivor.

Seek support for yourself. Become aware of your feelings about the trauma and the stress of supporting your loved one. It is best to avoid communicating your biases and negative emotions to the survivor. However, it may become important for you to speak with someone about how you are feeling. This can be particularly important if your loved one’s assault is triggering your own experiences of trauma. The staffs of the Oasis Program and the Southern Arizona Center Against Sexual Assault are available to speak with you about your experiences in the role of a support person as well as your experiences of being a survivor.

Top 10 Don’ts in Helping a Survivor of Sexual Assault

1. Don’t Blame
Do not place blame on the victim. Perpetrators of these crimes are the only ones to blame for their actions. There is no excuse for rape. If someone does not want to have sex, this is enough. There is never an excuse for force or coercion. This is true even if: the survivor has had sex with that person before, is in a committed relationship with the perpetrator, has been drinking or using drugs, has flirted with the perpetrator, or did not fight back. It does not matter what the person was wearing or doing - if they did not give consent it is assault. Don’t ask why the survivor didn’t scream or fight. Don’t ask if he or she did anything to "lead him/her on." Also, if the assault involved alcohol or drugs, don’t question why her or she drank or criticize him or her for not watching her or
his drink “carefully enough.” The assailant made a choice to commit an assault; he or she could have chosen otherwise. Remember attackers are responsible for their Actions; rape is never the fault of the victim.

2. Don’t Make Assumptions
This is a good general rule. Allow the person to tell you what happened, what they want, how they are feeling, or what they need. Do not assume that you can imagine this person’s experience. Even if you have survived similar trauma, it is likely that your experience is less similar than you assume. Also don’t assume that what was helpful for you will be helpful for them. Ask the survivor.

3. Don’t Give Advice or Tell Him/Her What to Do
Instead, review options with the survivor and then support their decisions. Allow them to take control over their own life, even if you believe you would do something differently or if you believe they may regret their decision. Don’t press the survivor to report the incident to the police. Don’t insist that he or she talk to someone about it. Doing nothing is a valid option and needs to be supported.

4. Don’t Make Threats
Don’t make comments against the perpetrator such as “I am going to find him and kill him.” Threatening to take care of the situation only adds to the emotional burden the survivor is already carrying. Illegal retaliation is not an option and threatening harm is not helpful to the survivor. Learn healthier ways of taking care of your own anger. The survivor does not need to feel as though he or she needs to take care of your anger or help you resolve it.

5. Don’t Question or Criticize
Don’t criticize or question the survivor for not telling you sooner about the incident. The very reason for not telling you was most likely fear of your rejection. Honor the survivor’s timing and thank him or her for disclosing this information to you. This is not the time to inquire about why they hadn’t spoken with you about this before. It does not mean that the person does not trust you or does not care about you.

6. Don’t Gossip
Do not break the survivor’s trust by telling others about the assault without permission. The survivor should have the control over who knows, when, and with whom he or she talks about it.

7. Don’t Be Overprotective
Resist overprotecting the survivor and respect his or her judgment concerning dating, seeing friends, going out, staying in school, etc.

8. Don’t Prevent Talking
Don’t prevent talking about the rape if the survivor wants to. Remember that you can’t be there 24 hours a day to do so, but you can offer options for the survivor to speak with advocates or counselors.
9. Don’t Lose Patience
Comments such as “Why aren’t you over this yet?” or “You constantly talk about this like it is the only event in your life” are not helpful. Remember that the recovery process can be slow and lengthy and will vary with each individual.

10. Don’t Perpetuate Rape Myths
To learn more go to Resources: Educational: Sexual Myths