

## HOW TO HELP SOMEONE WHO HAS BEEN RAPED

This person you care about has been the victim of a violent, brutal attack which has temporarily stripped her/him of all personal power. He/she is suffering terror and feelings of helplessness which are perfectly rational responses to the experience. She/he needs time and support to work through these feelings.

**BELIEVE** the experience without question. Do not blame the victims. Whatever the circumstances, they were not looking or asking to get raped. Remember they have been through an extremely punishing experience they wish desperately had not happened. If they are suffering self-blame—thinking "if only I had done this or that differently, this wouldn't have happened"—reassure them that:

- 1- The blame for rape rests squarely and only with the rapist.
- 2- There is no way of knowing what would have happened if they had acted differently.

**RESPECT** their fear. Rapists commonly threaten to kill the victim if she/he does not comply. Most victims aren't sure whether they will live through the experience or not—they are in terror for their very lives. This fear does not go away when the rapist does—it is real and realistic. Help them find ways to increase their safety.

**ACCEPT** their strong feelings. Being supportive does not mean that you necessarily have to do something. It is an attitude of acceptance of feelings, an atmosphere of warmth and safety that they can rest in. Tolerate his/her moods, be there for her/him.

**LISTEN** without making judgments or giving advice. Try to understand what he/she is going through. Do not criticize his/her actions or feelings. He/she did the very best he/she knew to do in a deadly situation. He/she survived. Give him/her credit.

**PAY ATTENTION:** take the victim seriously. This will help to validate the seriousness of his/her feelings and the need to work them through. Rape is a shattering experience which a victim does not get over quickly or alone. It may be months or years before they feel fully recovered. Recovery is a process of acceptance and healing which takes time. One of the most important factors in the amount of time needed is the kind and extent of support the victim feels from people around him/her.

**CARE** about the victim's well being. In order to care about your friend, you may need to cope with some difficult emotions of your own. If you are experiencing rage, blame or loss of feeling yourself—you can be most helpful by finding ways of coping with your own emotions. Honestly examine the source of your feelings; are they on behalf of your friend's hurt, or your own ego? Though anger is a normal healthy response to rape, venting extreme rage towards the rapist, threats of vengeance and such, in the victim's presence may just increase his/her fear. They need you to be there for her/him, more than against the rapist. If you feel blaming toward the victim, look at your own feelings or responsibility. Do you believe it is your duty to protect your friend at all times? If so, perhaps the rape gives you a sense of failure. Remember, no one can protect another person at all times without making that person a prisoner. If you fear loss of feeling for her/him or have sensed that she/he has been defiled, understand that these feelings MAY arise from your wanting exclusive possession of the person. These are not appropriate feelings to have for a person and will further hurt and dehumanize your loved one. If you are having a difficult time with your own feelings, it may help to talk with a counselor.

**ENCOURAGE** the victim to relax her/his self-expectations, and take it easy as much as possible. This means relaxing your expectations, too. Life may seem gray for awhile. Whatever brings ease and brightness will help.

**LET THE VICTIMS MAKE THEIR OWN DECISIONS.** Do not pressure them into making decisions or doing things they are not ready to do. Help them explore all their options. It is essential, for instance, to respect confidentiality. Who to tell about the rape must be their decision, including whether or not to report it to the police.

**OFFER PHYSICAL COMFORT AND WARMTH** if they desire it. Let them know your feelings have not changed and you will be there when they are ready.