



Chapter 14

SUPPORTING FAMILY & FRIENDS OF SURVIVORS

Sexual violence is traumatic for survivors, and may also be traumatic for people who are close to them. This manual refers to these individuals as concerned others. Other terms such as affected others or secondary survivors might also be used to refer to this group, which includes family members, intimate partners, friends, acquaintances, and co-workers.

Concerned others can also include clergy, mental health providers, law enforcement officers, and other professionals who assist survivors. Concerned others can be some of the survivor's most valuable resources for help with healing. Concerned others also may struggle with ways to provide support. It can be difficult to know what to do for survivors while also caring for themselves and wanting to express their own feelings.

Concerned others will call the statewide sexual assault crisis and support line to seek help with their own emotions, as well as to better support survivors. It is important that concerned others have the opportunity to talk about how they are feeling without being concerned about how their response will affect the survivor. Concerned others may experience intense emotional reactions, many of which are similar to those experienced by the survivor. When a loved one has been sexually violated, those who support that person may experience a variety of feelings that can include being frightened, infuriated, helpless, or confused.

At the same time, some of what concerned others might want to say about their own feelings to the survivor could be unhelpful to the survivor or negatively affect the survivor's healing. One-on-one conversation with an advocate provides concerned others with support and validation, while also discussing the survivor's needs. They can also talk about ways the concerned other can be supportive through words and actions. Advocates can support concerned others, while supporting the needs of the survivor.

Common Reactions

Concerned others, like survivors, may be familiar with the issue of sexual violence and have the skills and knowledge to react supportively when a loved one experiences sexual violence.

Concerned others may have never confronted issues of sexual violence and may not be sure where to begin. On both ends of the spectrum, concerned others may struggle to regain a sense of control. They may experience a wide range of feelings and reactions and not understand their responses.

The advocate's role is to help the concerned other to identify their feelings and explore helpful ways to manage their reactions, while also supporting the needs of the survivor.

Concerned others' reactions may include:

Difficulty communicating emotions:

Being unable to talk about their emotional reaction to the sexual violence. They may cry when they try to talk about it. While these reactions are understandable, survivors may feel that they have hurt the other concerned by disclosing what happened.

Believing myths: Believing socialized myths about sexual violence, while not unusual, distorts their picture of the survivor's experience and can threaten the survivor's healing process.

Threatening revenge: Responding to sexual violence against a loved one by striking out against whomever they believe caused that harm. While this may be an understandable response, it does little to help the survivor. It may set the survivor up to feel they need to defend the offender's safety in some way. Survivors may also think the anger is directed towards them.

Controlling information: Trying to gain support by telling friends and others about the sexual violence, or insisting that the survivor tell no one, cutting them off from support and possibly introducing or reinforcing shame. It is important for survivors to make their own decisions regarding whom to tell.

Protection issues: Assuming that they know what the survivor needs, and providing either too much or too little protection. To ensure that survivors receive the help they need, concerned others and survivors might want to have specific conversations about when the survivor feels unsafe and what others can do to help.

Protecting children: Discussing what they want to tell the children in the household or situation. In some cases,

the survivor may prefer that the children are not told; in other cases, they may want the children to know.

Rushing healing: Beginning to wonder why the survivor has not been able to return to "normal." They may have expected the survivor's healing to proceed along a particular timetable. If the survivor's healing has not happened as quickly as they expected, they may withdraw support from the survivor.

Making decisions for the survivor: In order for survivors to regain a sense of control over their life, it is important that the concerned other support survivors to determine the course of their own healing.

Demanding justice: Feeling strongly that survivors should report the act of sexual violence to law enforcement, and telling the survivor that this will prevent any further sexual violence by offenders to anyone else. This mistakenly puts the responsibility for an offender's future behavior on survivors and may leave survivors defending their choices rather than focusing on healing.

Seeing the survivor as "damaged goods:" Not understanding that although the act of sexual violence impacts the survivor, it has not left the survivor "damaged." Healing is possible.

Guilt: Feelings that they should have known what was happening or noticed signs of abuse before.

Sharing traumatic experiences: Personal trauma histories may be triggered by the survivor's experiences. This may result in a concerned other wanting to share personal experiences with the survivor in an attempt to offer support. The reality is that concerned others revealing a personal experience to the survivor may take the focus off the survivor, minimize the survivor's experience, or cause the survivor to compare circumstances rather than focusing on individual healing needs.

Self-care for Concerned Others

It can be emotionally exhausting for concerned others to be supportive to survivors. It is important that concerned others find people they can safely talk to about their own feelings, always keeping in mind the survivor's experience and needs. The helpline is available to concerned others for help with this, as are other professional service providers such as therapists. By



talking about their feelings with someone, concerned others will be better able to provide continuing support to the survivor.

In cases when concerned others' feelings about their own past experiences of sexual violence are raised, it can be helpful to seek out additional supports. This includes the helpline, where they can talk about the impact this event is having on their lives.

It is perhaps most important that concerned others recognize their limitations in helping someone else through an experience of sexual violence. Survivors may need others besides, or in addition to, the concerned other to help them. Concerned others themselves may need others as well, if they are experiencing the impacts of violence.

Reactions from Intimate Partners

Partners of survivors may experience any of the reactions listed above, and because of the complicated nature of intimate partner relationships, they may experience additional reactions as well.

Advocates have no way of knowing the relationship history or how that may impact the situation. A survivor may be in a healthy relationship, or may have a partner who is dangerous and abusive. Any of the following reactions from intimate partners can become extreme, even including further acts of sexual violence against the survivor, if the partner is abusive.

Jealousy: This happens mainly when the survivor's partner does not understand that sexual violence is an act of power and control and is not about consensual

sex. The partner might wonder if the survivor enjoyed the experience or if it was an act of infidelity.

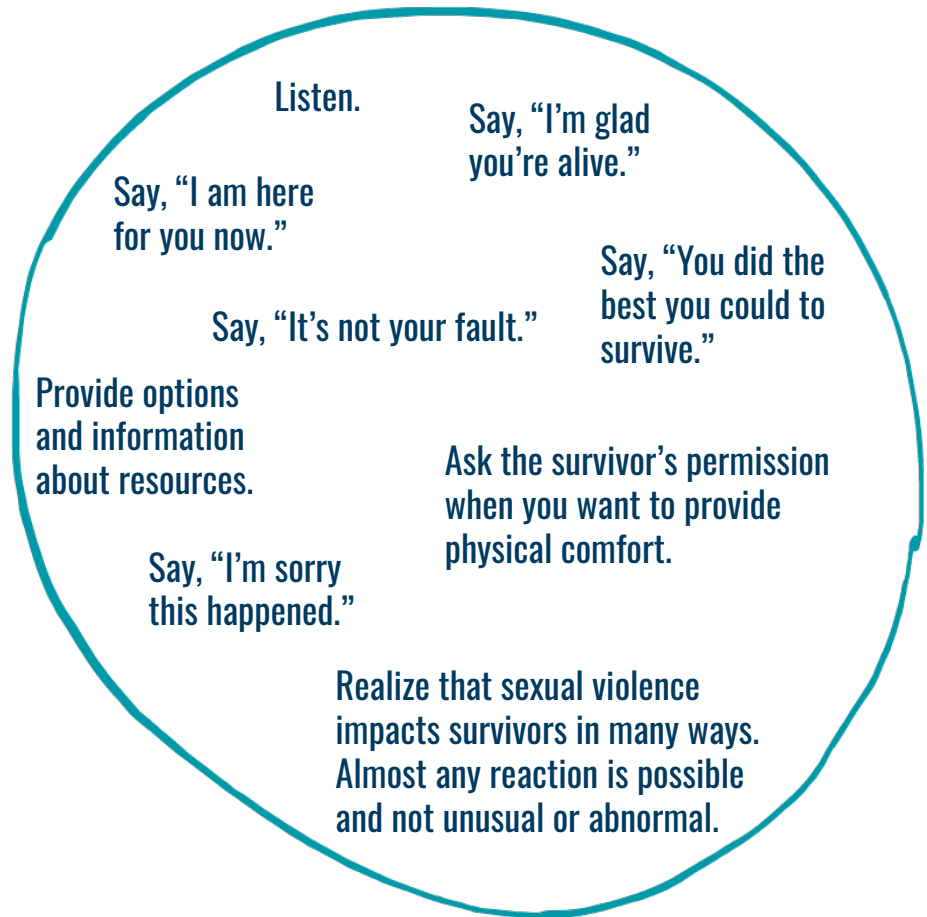
Rejection: Both the partner and the survivor may experience feelings of emotional or sexual rejection. They may not be able to attend to each other's needs as they might have before the act of sexual violence. Both may need time to process how sexual violence has impacted them and their relationship. Keeping the lines of communication open can help avoid misunderstandings while helping partners to be supportive to one another.

Control: Sexual violence may bring up control issues in some survivors' partners. People who love one another feel it is their role to protect that person, and when the individual is harmed it can feel like a serious threat to this role. Partners may react to the feelings of loss of control in different ways. Often when people feel as if they have failed in some way, they may become defensive and try to place blame elsewhere. They may blame the survivor for doing something they had been warned against. Or, they may become overprotective in the belief that they must protect their partner from future harm.

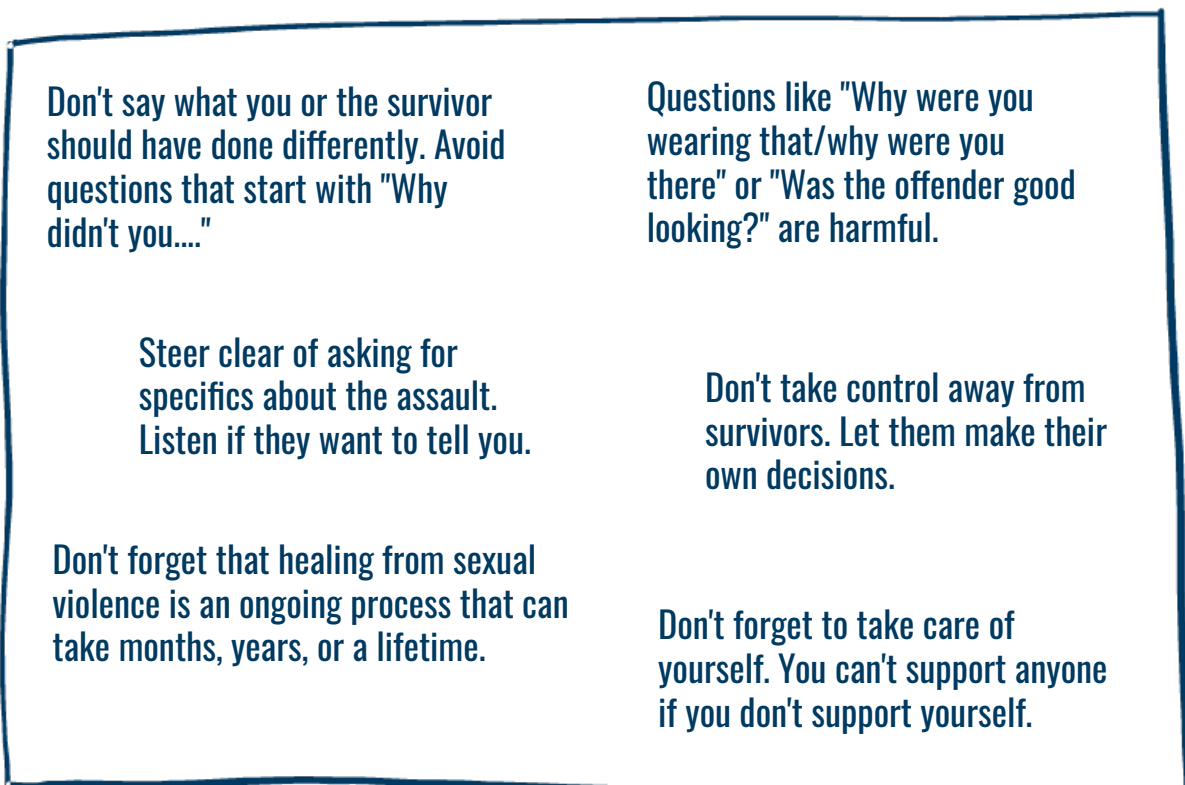
Changing roles: A partner may feel left behind as the survivor seeks resources and support for healing from sources outside the relationship. In a relationship where certain roles were assumed by each partner, challenges may arise when the survivor becomes more empowered and independent. Partners may benefit from finding time to share together while exploring options to seek separate activities for recreation and self-care.



Actions Concerned Others Can Take to Support Survivors¹



Actions for Concerned Others to Avoid to Support Survivors



When the Survivor is an Adolescent/Child

When a child has been sexually abused or assaulted, it is common for concerned others to experience intense feelings of outrage, sadness, and helplessness. Concerned others may have the knowledge and skills to provide support and validation to an adolescent or child survivor, or may have challenges doing this.

Some common challenges a concerned other may experience are as follows:

Guilt: Concerned others may feel guilty if a child experienced sexual abuse or violence, and they didn't know. They may look back and see clues and wonder why they did not notice them at the time.

Denial: They may find it extremely difficult to accept that the survivor has experienced sexual violence. Concerned others may also be in denial because it is difficult to cope with a young loved one being violated in this way. If the concerned others knows the offender they may

be in denial because they knew and trusted them. They may find it hard to believe the offender could do something so hurtful.



Face changes: When a child discloses, concerned others must make certain decisions, and may blame the survivor for forcing them to make these difficult decisions. For example, the concerned other must decide whether to believe

the offender or the child. If the offender lives with the child and the child's family, the family will likely need to ask the offender to leave so the child is adequately protected. This decision may cause difficulties if the offender provides the main source of income. Family member may minimize the effects of the abuse to avoid making these difficult changes. However, it is important to remember that while the change may present challenges, there is nothing more important than the increased safety of an individual.

See the child as "damaged goods:" Some may believe that the trauma the child has experienced is too serious for them to heal. They may act as if the child has been

irreversibly ruined by sexual violence.

Fear that the child will become an offender: Many people think that a child who experiences sexual violence is likely to become an offender. This is a false assumption. Research generally does not measure the number of children who experience sexual violence who do not become offenders. The fact that a certain percentage of offenders experienced sexual violence as children does not mean that the same percentage of children will become offenders.

Concerns about who the child talks to about the act of sexual violence: It is important for children have some input about whom they want to talk with about sexual violence. It is important for children to be allowed to talk if they want to or avoid talking if that makes them uncomfortable.

Engaging with the child protective system: A concerned other may witness the act of sexual violence, or may be the person to whom the child discloses. Considering whether to involve Child Protective Services or law enforcement may be a concern for concerned others that they want to talk about with advocates. Advocates must always keep in mind that the advocate's obligation to make a mandated report is not affected by whether the caller chooses to report.

People in Professional Relationships with Survivors

A survivor may need support in addition to what family and friends are able to provide. Helping professionals such as clergy, mental health providers, law enforcement officers, and others may play key roles in survivors' healing. Survivors may feel more comfortable speaking about their experience with helping professionals because they provide an objective perspective that a family member or friend may not have.

While helping professionals provide an objective perspective, they may also be affected by the survivor or concerned other's experience. They may call the helpline to express concern, look for resources, or ask for support with how to help a survivor or a concerned other. It is important that professionals be self-aware, knowing their own limits as well as personal biases, and that they seek consultation and support from their colleagues/supervisors to determine how to proceed. Professionals have an ethical obligation to the individuals they are working with, and not being able to fulfill this obligation can be detrimental to the survivor's healing process.



Chapter 14

Sexual violence deeply affects survivors' close circles and greater communities. Advocates serve survivors who are directly impacted by sexual violence, as well as friends, family, and community members who may also need support because of what has happened to the survivor.²

Common reasons friends, family, and significant others may seek help:³

- A friend, family member, or the survivor themselves may have recommended they seek support.
- They may be looking for help processing their own emotions and establishing coping methods.
- They may feel helpless and unsure of how to help the survivor.
- They may feel scared and alone.
- They may be feeling triggered related to past experiences with sexual violence.
- They may be having a hard time understanding what the survivor is going through.
- They may feel guilty or responsible for what happened.
- They may want to understand what resources are available for themselves, other family/friends, and survivors.

Special care should go into maintaining privacy and boundaries when working with friends and family of survivors to ensure that each person who is seeking support has their needs prioritized and that what they share remains confidential.⁴

Endnotes

¹ Seattle Rape Response. (1992). *Do's and Don'ts [pamphlet]*. Seattle, Washington.

² Used with permission from and thanks to: National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (n.d.) *Foundations of advocacy training manual*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nsvrc.org/foundations-advocacy-training-manual>. p. 287.

³ Ibid, 288.

⁴ Ibid.

