

SUPPORTING SURVIVORS

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

It is estimated that 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men will experience some form of sexual assault in their lifetime - there is a good chance that someone close to you is a survivor. Survivors are often blamed for their own sexual assault, discouraged from speaking out, and are often faced with disbelief or are not taken seriously when they do disclose. These are a few of the reasons why it can be very frightening for survivors to talk about what they have experienced, and makes getting help more difficult.

The following **communication strategies** can help you be a supportive friend, family member, partner or ally when someone confides in you that they have been sexually assaulted.

ATTENDING

Attending is the ability to pay attention and focus on what the survivor is communicating and feeling. Attending skills include paying attention to the survivor's face, body posture, and positioning, and knowing how to use your face and body posture to convey that you are listening. Attending also means that you are aware of blocks to communication and how to avoid them.

ACTIVE LISTENING

This skill includes trying to understand the survivor's ideas, values and feelings by listening to the person and then responding in a way that conveys your understanding. It means listening for cues that indicate the person's feelings (voice tone, choice of words, speech patterns, sighs), acknowledging the feelings you hear, and verifying what you think you understand (your perceptions).



Active listening also helps you to keep focused on the survivors concerns and feelings rather than your own.

See the Supporting Survivors: Active Listening handout for more details

PERMISSION GIVING

This involves "allowing" the survivor to express emotions freely. It involves your understanding of the difficulty they may have in expressing emotion. Many people were punished or humiliated as children for crying, being afraid, or expressing anger. Most adults will suppress feelings seen as negative because of such conditioning. It is important to acknowledge this, while at the same time giving the survivor information about the importance of expressing pain so that healing can take place. Let the person know that it is ok to cry and to express any feelings of shame, grief or anger.

EMPOWERING

This involves conveying respect for a survivor's actions and choices, helping the person feel heard, providing tools that can be used for healing, and facilitating (but not taking over) someone's own process of staying safe and moving forward. Sometimes this can also involve helping a survivor's family or friends find positive ways to express their concern and support without overprotecting or projecting their own fears. By empowering survivors you foster the development of a person's ability to act.



HELPFUL RESOURCES

ON CAMPUS

Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC)
SGW H 645, 514-848-2424 ext. 3353

Counselling & Psychological Services
SGW H-440, 514-848-2424 ext. 3545
LOY AD-103, 514-848-2424 ext. 3555

Health Services
SGW GM-200, 514-848-2424 ext. 3565
LOY AD 131, 514-848-2424 ext. 3575

Office of Rights and Responsibilities
SGW GM-1120, 514- 848-2424 ext. 8659

Centre for Gender Advocacy
2110 Mackay St., 514-848-2424 ext. 7431

OFF CAMPUS

Montreal Sexual Assault Centre (designated centre)
(8 a.m. - 5 p.m.) 514-934-0354

Montreal General Hospital (designated centre)
(5 p.m. onwards) 514-934-8090

Sexual Assault Centres
(CALACS) 514-529-5252

Crime victim's assistance centres
(CAVAC) 514-277-9860

**Help and information centre on sexual harassment
in the workplace** (GAIHST) 514-526-0789

Sexual Assault Provincial Helpline (24/7)
1-888-933-9007 or 514-933-9007 in Montreal

QUESTIONING

This skill enables you to help the survivor explore emotions, needs and decisions. Open-ended questions that can be answered with more than a 'yes' or 'no' encourage survivors to respond in any way they choose. Closed questions restrict a survivor to a limited number of responses. You may need to ask some closed questions in an initial crisis stage, but open ended questions will be useful in long term support and communication with survivors. "How" and "What" questions are usually open-ended and allow a person to express themselves more fully. "Why" questions tend to imply wrongdoing or guilt.

SUMMARIZING

This involves pulling together the feelings and information given to you by the survivor. This enables you to make sure you have understood everything accurately and helps the survivor focus on the important elements of the situation from their own point of view. It also provides a way of moving on from exploration of feelings to problem solving and making required decisions.

¹Ministère de la Sécurité publique, Statistiques 2008 sur les agressions sexuelles au Québec (2008 statistics on sexual assault in Québec), Québec, MSP, 2010. Government of Quebec.

Orientations gouvernementales en matière d'agression sexuelle (Action plan for the setting up of governmental guidelines in matters of sexual aggression), Québec, 2001.

LEARN MORE AT: concordia.ca/sarc

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