

## How Do I Know if Someone has been Sexually Assaulted?

There is no one way to identify if someone has been sexually assaulted unless she or he or someone close to them tells you that this has occurred. However, there are several signs/symptoms of rape trauma or post-traumatic stress which may help you identify if someone has been raped or sexually assaulted:

- Sleep disturbances: Nightmares, difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Change in appetite (has no appetite or eats more than usual)
- Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Difficulty concentrating
- Fears about personal safety
- Exaggerated startle response (jumps at a small noise, or if their name is called)
- Numbness, uncommunicative
- Depressed – she/he may experience feelings of hopelessness
- Has difficulty being touched or expressing loving feelings
- Withdrawal or disinterested in participating in activities they once enjoyed (doesn't feel like going out, going to movies, seeing friends, volunteering or participating in students groups, etc.)
- Seems detached from others

## How Can We Help?

Whether the assault occurred recently or a long time ago, it is helpful to:

- **Believe them**
- Maintain a calm manner
- Listen without interrupting
- Allow for tears and expression of feelings
- Convey genuine concern
- Allow them to make her or his own choices
- Set judgments aside
- Maintain confidentiality
- Let them know that "It's not your fault" (You cannot say this enough!)
- Let them know that there are people who can help and that they don't have to go through this alone.
- If you do not feel qualified to help them, refer the person to someone who is trained and encourage them to go. They trust you. That is why they are talking to you. You can use that influence to help them to reach out for help

Some common responses to sexual assault are **not** helpful. These responses are part of a natural attempt to gain control over the situation and cope with your own feelings about rape, but they are ultimately not useful in helping the survivor to get help or recover. Try to avoid the following responses:

- Do not place blame or question the survivor's actions
- Do not ask what or why questions, for example:
  - "What were you doing alone at 2:00 in the morning?"
  - "Why did you drink so much?"
  - "Why didn't you ask someone to walk you to your car?"
  - "Why did you go to his room?"
    - Questions like this may make the person feel blamed or guilty and may decrease the chances of their being willing to speak to a counselor who can help them.
- Do not ask for details about what happened or ask too many probing questions. You can be just as helpful without knowing the details of what happened. You can be most helpful by helping to get the assault survivor to a counselor who can assist them.
- Do not tell the survivor what to do – they need to feel in control of what is happening to them.
- Do not tell others about the assault or gossip about it. Unless you have the survivor's permission and are making a referral to someone in a professional capacity, do not talk to others about the assault. It is critical that you respect the confidentiality of the person who has been assaulted. Their trust in themselves and others has already been severely damaged by the assault. You don't want to accidentally make things worse.
- Do not dismiss their feelings or minimize what happened by comments like "It's ok now, or "I know just how you feel."

[Excerpts taken from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Violence Preventions & Response Program](#)