

## **A Brief Guide for Effectively Responding To Victims and Their Loved Ones: What is Helpful, What is Not, and Other Considerations**

The responses and treatment victims receive from those they first encounter have an enormous impact on their recovery. Our responses are powerful and have the potential to mitigate or exacerbate a victim's experience. Consider what to say and how it might be perceived by a victim or loved one first. Even well-meaning, well-intentioned statements can come out sounding wrong. If it does sound victim-blaming or insensitive, it's best to acknowledge that and rephrase the statement. What follows are suggestions for appropriate responses, along with some ineffective or inappropriate responses.

### **Examples of helpful and appropriate things to say:**

"I'm glad you told me this. I appreciate how difficult it must be to talk about."

"I'm sorry about what happened to you."

"That must have been confusing (frightening, hard to believe, etc.)."

"No matter what, your victimization is not your fault but that of the person who did this to you."

"We can talk for awhile. I'm not a confidential source but I can help you find one."

"The community has several resources you may find helpful."

### **Examples of ineffective or inappropriate things to say:**

"Are you sure?"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You're making that up/lying."

"What did you do to him?" (vs. "what did he make you do?")

"Why did he/she do that?"

"Maybe you misunderstood."

"But he/she is such a nice (talented) person."

"Did he/she maybe misunderstand?"

"He/she just jokes around."

"He/she didn't mean anything by it."

"Why, I've known him/her for a long time. I don't think he/she would do that."

"I know that girls/women don't ask for it but you have to be careful."

"Let's go talk to him/her."

"Do you want me to talk to him/her?"

### **Important considerations when responding to victims include:**

- Victims experience changes in their outlook on the world and those around them. Terror, anxiety, and uncertainty replace confidence, self-esteem, and well-being. If the perpetrator is known to the victim, betrayal becomes a core issue, causing the victim to question who around them is safe. When a victim reaches out, it represents an enormous risk on the victim's part, taken in hope of finding help and support.
- All reactions of a victim should be considered normal; victims cope differently with extreme stress and trauma. A victim must be considered in crisis, even if he or she appears calm.

- Often, a perpetrator will make their victim feel complicit in the victimization by telling the victim that he/she victim asked for it, made the perpetrator act the way he/she did, or that the victim was really a willing participant. Likewise, a victim may feel complicit, often believing the same myths (for example, the victim “asked for it”, or “should” or “should not” have done something differently).
- Relatively speaking, when the perpetrator is a stranger, it is easier for both the victim and other people to believe the victimization and refrain from most victim-blaming.
- When the perpetrator is someone the victim knows, the perpetrator grooms both the victim and others (e.g., officials, parents, and other community members) by creating a false narrative in which nothing happened, or that the perpetrator is innocent and is the victim of an aggressive or vindictive individual.
- Although it is widely asserted that false reporting is common, fabrication of sexual assault reports are no greater than other major crimes (an estimated 2%-4%). That is not to say that there are not crimes reported in which facts don’t add up. In those cases, fabrication or other explanations become evident. Unfortunately, valid claims are more likely to be dismissed, often because people think that false reporting is common, malicious, or vindictive.
- We offer the best responses by avoiding making judgments.
- Whether we are speaking with a victim or respondent, resources are available to help them cope.
- For more information regarding responding effectively to a victim, visit [www.rvap.org](http://www.rvap.org).