

# Self-Care for Friends and Family

It's important to know that there is no normal or one way to react when you find out someone you care about has survived an act of sexual violence. Regardless of what you're feeling, these emotions can be intense and difficult to deal with. Learning how to manage these feelings can help you support the survivor in your life and can help you feel less overwhelmed.

## How am I supposed to react?

There is no "right" reaction to hearing that someone you care about has survived an act of sexual violence. You may experience some of the following emotions:

- **Disbelief.** When you first hear about the assault you might be surprised or shocked, and you might have trouble believing the assault happened. After a traumatic experience, it's common for survivors and those around them to experience denial. It's important to focus on believing the survivor and acknowledging their story.
- **Anger.** You might feel anger for a number of reasons: towards yourself for not being able to protect the survivor; towards the survivor for telling you about something that is hard to hear, or because they waited a period of time before telling you; or towards the perpetrator for carrying out the assault and hurting the survivor. It can be difficult to keep anger from affecting the way you communicate. Let yourself acknowledge this emotion and find another outlet to express it.
- **Sadness.** When you learn that a trauma like sexual assault happened to someone you care about, it's normal to feel sad, hopeless, worried, or powerless. You might feel sad for the survivor or mourn how this has changed their life. If you know the perpetrator, you might feel sad for how this has changed your life as well. Self-care strategies and coping skills can help you move through these feelings.
- **Guilt.** You may feel guilty that you could not prevent the assault from happening or that the survivor didn't feel comfortable telling you about the assault right way. You may feel guilty that something so terrible happened to someone else and not to you. It can be helpful to refocus your energy on making the survivor feel supported as they move forward.
- **Anxiety.** You might feel anxious about responding the "right" way or worried about how this event will impact your relationship with the survivor. Reassure the survivor that the assault was not their fault and that you believe them. These can be the most powerful and helpful words for a survivor to hear.

- **Confusion.** You might feel confused by what you're hearing. You might not understand how it could happen or why it has happened. Sadly, sexual assaults are more common than we'd like to think. Although you may be struggling with feelings of confusion, especially if you know the perpetrator, you should try to always believe the survivor. They are never to blame for the assault.

### How do I practice self-care?

Good self-care enables you to better care for others, especially if there is someone in your life who has survived sexual violence. The principles of self-care for friends and family are similar to the self-care concepts for survivors, but there are some additional aspects to consider.

- **Maintain your lifestyle.** It can be difficult to stay emotionally strong if you are mostly focusing on the sexual assault. Maintaining your lifestyle and continuing to do what you enjoy is important for your emotional wellness. If you enjoy painting, cooking, exercising, spending time with friends, or other activities, keep them up. It may seem challenging to make time to do these activities, but they can be helpful self-care strategies in the long-run.
- **Reach out and talk about it.** It's normal to have a difficult time processing the sexual assault of someone you care about. It can continue to be difficult as time goes on and the survivor begins the healing process. You can call the Caps sexual Assault Support Service Crisis line on 0800 883 300 or visit at [helpline@capshauraki.co.nz](mailto:helpline@capshauraki.co.nz) to chat with someone who understands what you're going through. You can also consider talking to someone who is trained professionally to help you deal with these thoughts and feelings.
- **Make plans.** Sometimes talking what happened can help you cope with your feelings, and other times it can make you feel more stuck. Make plans that give you a break from talking or thinking about the assault. It could mean starting a new hobby or revisiting one you already enjoy. You could go to dinner with a group of friends who understand this isn't time to discuss what happened. Maybe you prefer a solo activity, like going on long walks. Let this be a time where you can take your mind off the assault.
- **Take time to relax.** Relaxation looks different for everyone. You might consider meditation or deep breathing exercises. Maybe journaling helps you sort through your thoughts and find peace. Build time into your day for these moments of relaxation so that you don't skip out.

**CAPS Hauraki Sexual Abuse Support Service**  
24/7 Sexual Abuse Support Helpline 0800 88 33 00  
(From a mobile select 3 then 2. From landline select 2.)  
Text (business hours) 027 732 7000  
Email [helpline@capshauraki.co.nz](mailto:helpline@capshauraki.co.nz)

