

A GUIDE FOR FAMILY & FRIENDS

OF A SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVIVOR

There are some basic responses that can be helpful if someone close to you has been sexually assaulted. By acting with thoughtful understanding and support, you can help to minimize the trauma.



RAPE IS A CRIME OF POWER AND CONTROL.

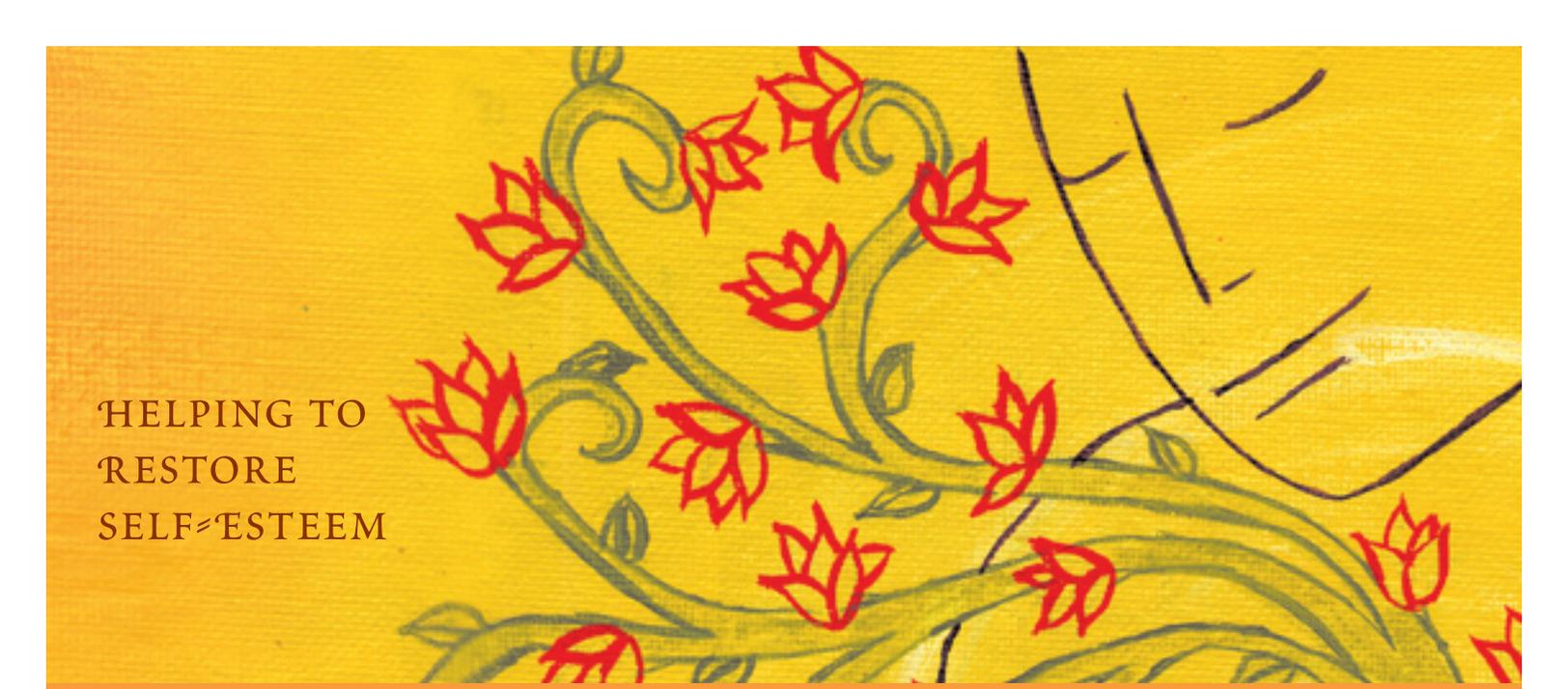
Acts of sexual violence are aggressive means of dominating the victim—not attempts to achieve sexual fulfillment. Many sexual assaults involve threats of bodily harm or other forms of intimidation and humiliation. Victims suffer severe psychological injury and often physical injury as well.

A SURVIVOR IS NEVER RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ASSAULT.

People often mistakenly assume that the survivor could have somehow prevented the assault by doing something differently. Some people also believe that if the survivor did not actively resist the attack, then she/he must have given consent. This unfairly suggests that they are responsible for the assault.

THE TRUTH IS THAT NO ONE KNOWS.

No one knows how they will respond when placed in a life-threatening situation. They may fight back or they may become paralyzed by fear. They may also recognize the futility of fighting back and submit to their basic survival instinct. Implying that the survivor bears some responsibility in the assault will only build emotional distance between you. What she/he needs now is unconditional support.



HELPING TO RESTORE SELF-ESTEEM

Let the survivor know that you love them and support them.

Your instinct may be to want to take control and right this situation for your loved one. **It is important for you to understand that control has been taken away**, and the greatest gift you can give right now is the freedom to make their own choices on how best to proceed. Follow your loved one's lead. Tell them you will support the decisions they make, and then do so.

Do not blame the survivor, regardless of the circumstances.

They are looking to you for support. Blame and judgment have no place in support. Don't ask WHY? Why didn't you...? Why did you...? "Why" questions have the impact of backing someone into the defensive corner. This will not be conducive to their recovery or to your relationship.

Do not press for details of the assault.

You can unintentionally humiliate the survivor by requesting the intimate details of the assault. Allow them to decide when and with whom they will talk about it. Respect their decisions as to who will know about the assault.

The recovery process is unique and individual for every survivor. The length of time it requires will depend greatly on their personality and support system.

There are a variety of ways survivors may react.

These do not always reflect the amount of trauma they have experienced. Their reaction is a direct parallel to their coping skills. Allow them their feelings, whatever they may be.

The need to do something may be great. Be careful that you're not forcing your friend or family member to take action they're not ready to take (i.e. counseling, talking, reporting, etc.).

Your feelings of anger and helplessness may be very high right now. Be careful that this doesn't get conveyed as anger toward the survivor. Resist overprotecting.

Trying to convince a survivor to move back home, or to another apartment or housing arrangement, may reinforce the view that they are vulnerable and powerless. This can discourage the

survivor from mobilizing their own resources for coping. You do not want to promote an unhealthy dependence on others. What they need is help in rebuilding the self-confidence and independence that has been temporarily taken away.

Don't limit the survivor's independence by making decisions for her/him. Respect their judgment concerning dating, seeing friends, going out, etc.

Understand and respect her/his need for privacy.

If you personally have experienced a sexual assault in the past, be mindful of your own reactions and fears, and be careful not to project them onto the survivor.

If the survivor is male, don't jump to the conclusion that he is gay or make other judgments.

One of the primary obstacles for males in reporting an assault is the fear that others will project a sexual orientation onto the survivor.

PROVIDING MEANINGFUL SUPPORT

Be a good listener.

If you hear your voice more than the survivor's, you're talking too much and not listening enough.

Don't feel or act as though you have to have all the answers. That is not your role.

Know that each experience is unique.

If you know others who have experienced sexual assault, avoid making comparisons.

Don't let the focus of every discussion that you have with the survivor revolve around this topic.

There was more to your relationship and to both of you prior to this and there will be again.

If your loved one is not taking control over her/his situation, it doesn't mean that you have to jump in and do it. Let them sort out where they are heading and be there to support their decisions.

It is not uncommon to feel an intense anger and strong desire to seek revenge against the person who did this.

This is normal and understandable, and yet, not the best way to respond. Right now, reasonable judgment and calmness are most beneficial. Threatening to "take care" of the situation only adds to the emotional burden the survivor is already carrying, shifting attention away from the survivor's needs to your own.

Do not ever suggest that the survivor secretly enjoyed the experience.

It is important that you reassure the survivor that the sexual assault is not being equated to promiscuity or cheating.

If you have a sexual relationship with the survivor, let them decide when or if they are ready to resume sexual activity. Let the survivor be the guide and don't take lack of sexual desire or arousal personally. You may want to consider counseling to help with the changes in this relationship.

ASSURE THE SURVIVOR THAT YOU WILL ENDURE THIS CRISIS WITH THEM AND THAT YOUR FRIENDSHIP AND LOVE WILL REMAIN INTACT.

DISCLOSING A SEXUAL ASSAULT

Friends and family often wonder why it took so long for a survivor to tell them about the assault. It's often easier to tell a stranger rather than a family member because the emotional attachment isn't present. Respect their boundaries. Don't press for details. They will disclose to you what they are comfortable with.

Understand that anytime a disclosure happens or begins to happen, the survivor is carefully waiting for your reaction, verbal or non-verbal. If there is any indication that what they are saying is not accepted or believed, this will greatly diminish their ability to continue.

SOME REASONS FOR NOT DISCLOSING:

- * *Fear*
- * *Blame/Judgment*
- * *Embarrassment/Humiliation*
- * *Family already in crisis with other issues*
- * *Not wishing to cause worry*



SELF=CARE FOR THE SECONDARY SURVIVOR

Because you care for the victim of this crime, it affects you as well. The feelings you have are completely normal and very real – find the help you need to both take care of yourself and be supportive of your loved one.

As much as possible, continue with your life and routine as usual. This may seem very difficult to do, but it allows both you and the survivor to broaden the perspective beyond this experience.

Do not isolate yourself or the survivor from friends who are aware of the sexual assault. Your true friends will be supportive and understanding.

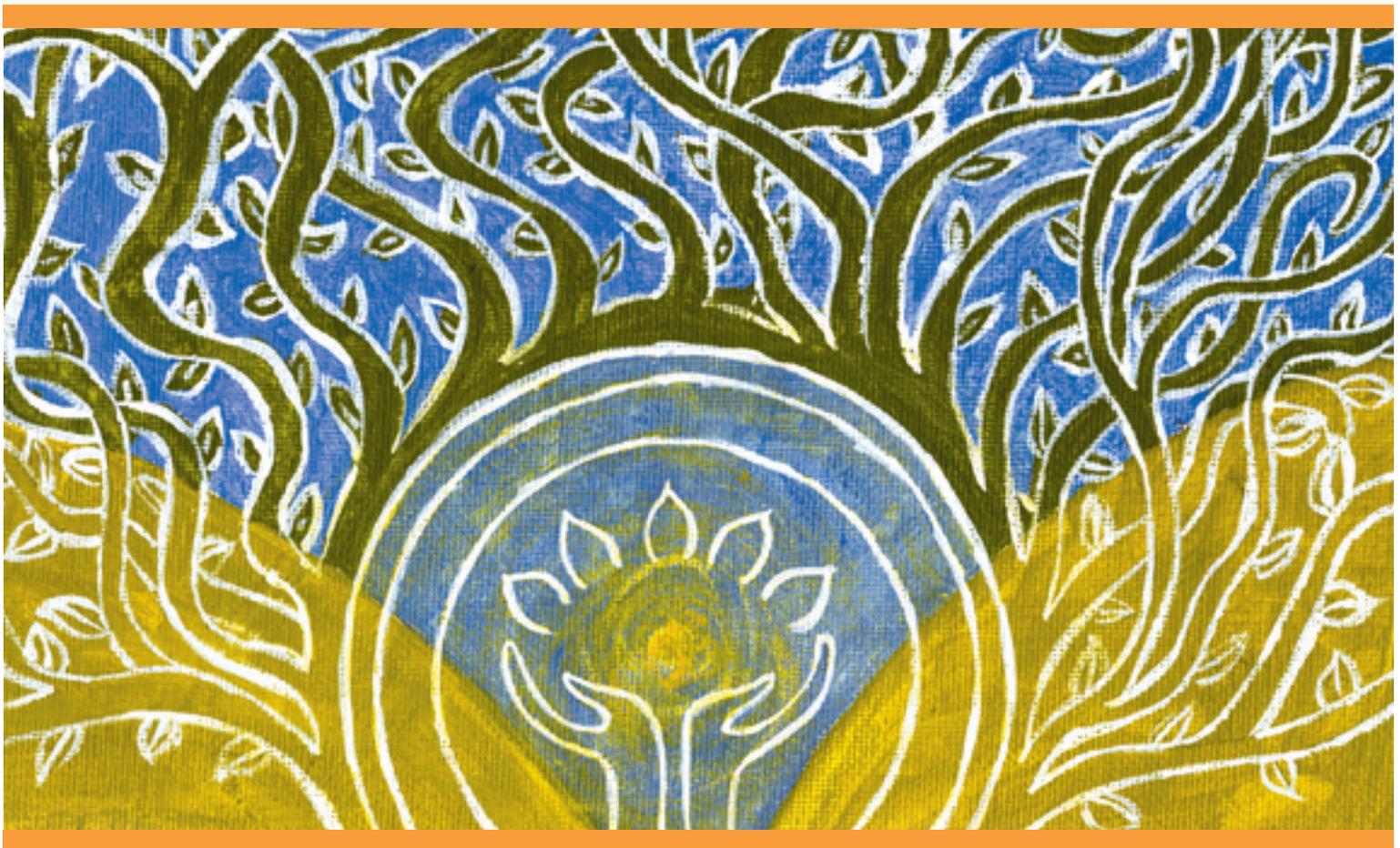
Know that there is no set period of time for your own recovery. It is an individual process that cannot be predetermined.

WHAT TO SAY WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY

“I don't want to force you to talk about this when you don't want to. I just want you to know that I'm willing to listen if you decide that you do.”

“I want you to know that I don't know what to say, but I'm your friend, I believe you and I will support whatever decisions you make.”

“Tell me how I can help you.”



IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT AVAILABLE RESOURCES OR MAKE AN APPOINTMENT TO SPEAK WITH A THERAPIST, PLEASE CALL THE RAPE RECOVERY CENTER.

Crisis Line 801-467-7273

Office 801-467-7282

According to a report issued by the Utah Commission on Criminal & Juvenile Justice in August 2005, one out of three adult women living in Utah has experienced sexual violence. Rape is the only category of violent crime in which Utah's rate exceeds the nation's average.