

When Someone You Love Is Raped

The period immediately following a rape is likely to be an emotionally charged, confusing and extremely anxious time for the victim. Not only has she been terrorized and totally violated as a person, but she now is faced with many additional worries. Some things that might be of help for both of you are stated below.

- * It is important to realize that rape can happen to *anyone*, regardless of age, income, appearance or personal "reputation".
- * Rape is a violent crime that is neither sought nor caused by the victim. While your feelings are important, helping her to recover should be your first concern.
- * How and what you communicate to her is of great importance in determining how she interprets the rape incident and how she feels about herself.
- * It is essential you communicate to her that she is not responsible for being raped. She needs to know that you do not blame her for failing to resist the rapist or for being in a situation that resulted in rape.
- * Not only should you avoid implying cooperation on her part, but you absolutely should avoid suggesting that she secretly may have enjoyed the experience. Rape is a violent and frequently painful act that is not a source of pleasure for the victim.
- * In no way should your frustration and anger towards the perpetrator be directed towards her. It is also important that you do not personally contact the rapist, even if his identity is known to you. Such actions can create legal problems for you and place the woman in the position of having to deal with additional fears concerning your safety.
- * Sexual assault robs the woman of a sense of control over her life. She needs to regain this sense of control. Therefore, it is important that she be encouraged to make decisions about any and all events which affect her life (e.g., whether to report the crime, go to trial, tell family and friends, seek counselling, etc.). Do not attempt to make these decisions for her or demand that she follow a particular course of action.
- * It is important for you to communicate your unfailing support for her in whatever decisions she makes.
- * She needs to feel that she is not alone. It is important for her to know that others have endured similar events and that regardless of what happened, your love and support remain intact.
- * Don't expect or demand immediate, open communication with the victim regarding how she feels or the vivid details of the rape. Accept the fact that she will discuss with you her feelings when she is ready. When she does, allow her to be angry, sad, etc.
- * Pay special attention to recurring themes she raises with you in conversation. These topics might be clues which will provide insight into issues which are especially troublesome to her.
- * At some point in time, it is important for the two of you to discuss the impact of the rape on your relationship. Consider relationship counselling for the two of you.

- * Family members' anger can be expressed verbally, perhaps to you or a family counsellor, but should not be expressed in the presence of the victim. Constant expression of anger and frustration only serves to heighten her anxieties and confusion about the incident. She may even feel guilty for "imposing" such an emotional burden on those she loves.
- * Family members should be dissuaded from overprotecting the victim. The danger is that these actions may reinforce the woman's view of herself as vulnerable and powerless.
- * Continual "distraction" of the woman by family members and friends should be discouraged. Attempts to deny or repress the rape are only temporarily effective and communicate to the victim that the incident is too awful to discuss or even think about. It slows down her attempts to express and work through her emotional reactions.

Stages that rape victims may experience:

- * **Acute distress** - begins immediately following the incident. Responses may include: shock, disbelief, confusion, anxiety, crying, and other signs of emotional disorganization. She may seem to be extremely controlled on the surface. Physical symptoms may appear over a period of several weeks following the rape: soreness and bruising, vaginal or rectal bleeding, tension headaches and fatigue, sleep disturbances (e.g., nightmares, insomnia, inability to go back to sleep after awakening, crying out in her sleep), stomach pains, nausea and lack of appetite, vaginal infection, and difficulty in urinating. Emotionally the victim may experience fear, anger, embarrassment, and self-blame. Abrupt changes in mood are quite common. **All of these things are normal.** Remind her of that and that she is not going "crazy" and she is not *neurotic*.
- * **Apparent readjustment** - is an outgrowth of the first phase. She may attempt to resolve her anxiety and confusion by rationalizing the rape and her feelings about it. She may give every outward appearance that the rape no longer troubles her.
- * **Reorganization or integration** - is marked by emergence or re-emergence of a number of troubling responses experienced earlier; stomach pain, tension headaches, nightmares, etc. These responses are actually a sign that she is beginning to confront and deal with issues and feelings that she may have previously denied or rationalized. *This is the time when real healing takes place.*