Helping A Friend In Crisis
What To Do If Your Friend Is Sexually Assaulted

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Introduction: When a Friend Is In Crisis

This handout discusses how to understand and help a friend who is in crisis. It focuses on the crisis caused by sexual assault, but many of the principles apply to helping any crisis. In general, someone is in crisis when the stresses they are dealing with overwhelm their ability to cope. Stress can take the form of any challenge or hazard. As such, stress is associated with growth and change; it is also associated with injury and loss. People deal with stress by problem-solving, social support, relaxation, and other coping skills. Usually there is a balance maintained between the level of stress and one's coping efforts.

A crisis occurs when this equilibrium is disrupted. Like a struggling swimmer who panics and grabs the lifeguard around the neck, or the depressed person who drinks more alcohol, a person in crisis often loses perspective and the ability to solve problems in organized and realistic ways. A person in crisis needs extra support and a reduction in stress to re-establish their equilibrium. As a result, friends of the person in crisis often feel new demands and challenges in their relationships.
When a Friend is Sexually Assaulted

People who have been sexually assaulted often experience a range of emotions and reactions, and no two survivors of assault will feel exactly the same way about their experience. There are some "red flag" indicators that your friend has been sexually assaulted or is generally in crisis:

- Depressed or irritable mood
- Loss of interest in most activities
- Changes in sleep patterns (sleeping a lot, or difficulty sleeping)
- Changes in appetite or weight
- Changes in energy level, exhaustion
- Nightmares, flashbacks
- Fear for one's own safety
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Excessive guilt, self-blame, or feelings of worthlessness
- Difficulty concentrating
- Anxiety
- Thoughts of suicide
- Being excessively alert and easily startled
- General mistrust and avoidance of certain situations

These reactions are not unique to sexual assault; anyone in crisis may show some of these behaviors. They can be understood as indicators that your friend's general ability to cope has been thrown way out of balance and your friend is now struggling to manage trauma. Many of these symptoms are common following any severe attack, loss, or injury. Your friend may have "flashbacks" (intrusive, vivid memories) about the assault. Your friend may have specific fears and anxiety reactions related to the appearance of the assailant or the location where the attack took place. As a friend, you may also experience similar symptoms because your friend's difficulties may stress you directly and strike personal chords with crises you have had in your own life.

For some people, you will see no "visible" indications of crisis because all of their coping efforts are taking place inside of them. In fact, some people cope by making an extra effort to "look normal" and only gradually let on that something terrible has happened to them. This coping strategy may be adaptive as long as it does not go on long. Sexual assault experts have found that the best way of truly recovering from an assault is by acknowledging it to oneself and opening up about it to trusted people.

As a friend, you are a good judge of what emotions and behaviors are common for your friend. If your friend, for no apparent reason, begins to act in an atypical manner, don't be afraid to ask directly what is wrong. You may be the first person to respond to
your friend's problem, and for a victim of sexual assault, this is the starting point of recovery.

**Helping a Friend in Crisis**

Here are some steps you can take to truly help your friend:

- **Believe your friend unconditionally.** Don't ask a lot of probing questions and don't express skepticism. Expect a friend in crisis to be confused and don't criticize.

- **Don’t Pass Judgement.** Don’t comment on what could have been done differently.

- **Let your friend know he or she is not alone.** Offer support, offer your time, and remind your friend of available resources.

- **Let your friend know it is not his or her fault.** Don't blame your friend. Don't start searching for things your friend should have done differently.

- **Empower your friend.** Help your friend understand and consider options, let your friend make decisions, and offer to go along for support.

- **Ask your friend what he or she wants from you.** You don't have to guess or try to read your friend's mind; go ahead and talk about what kinds of support he or she needs. Keep talking about this because your friend's needs will change as he or she works through the crisis.

- **Tell your friend directly when you see a serious problem.** Your friend may have lost perspective or may be struggling to pretend that things are not that serious. When you have good evidence for your concerns, go ahead and share it with your friend. The additional information will probably help him or her consider more realistic options.

- **Get outside help when needed.** In a crisis, your friend needs more help, not less. A trained therapist may be essential to helping your friend work through the assault and resume more effective coping. Your friend may need other forms of support, like dropping classes or changing his or her place of residence. Your friend may also need limits on self-destructive behavior following an assault, such as excessive drinking, risk-taking, or suicidal behavior.

- **Don't exclude other people from helping your friend.** Don't try to do the job of people who have training to do it (such as therapists). If you do all the problem-solving, your friend may miss opportunities to learn new ways of coping. He or she may also be reluctant to confront important but painful issues in therapy if they have already been discussed with you.
KEEPING A FRIEND

- **Try to pace yourself so you can stick with your friend for the long run.** Don't be one of those friends who disappears two weeks after the assault because you have taken on a role so lopsided that it cannot be sustained.

- **Keep the rest of your life on track.** For example, it is okay and necessary for you to keep up with your class and study obligations. You also have to keep up with other friends and relationships.

- **Say "No" when asked to do things for your friend that are more than you can handle.** You have a right to be taken care of yourself and you don't want to let your friend down by taking on responsibilities that you cannot sustain. Don't be afraid to redirect your friend to their therapist or other support person.

- **Pay attention to your own needs and express them to your friend and others.** Your friend's crisis doesn't automatically change who you are.

- **Insist your friend seek help if the crisis escalates** to the point of being worried about your friend's safety or long-term well-being.

- **Seek support and outside help for yourself** if you find yourself deeply affected by your friend's crisis.