

How to show your support

People who have been sexually harmed or assaulted may feel a sense of shame, or believe people might view them negatively as a result. This can make it very difficult to seek help when they need it.

The decision to talk about their experience must always be the survivor's choice, and should only happen with their consent.

Many survivors find it helpful to speak to a crisis worker or counsellor. Crisis workers can also support friends and whanau.

It is common for survivors to feel a loss of control over their lives, so they may not make a disclosure straight away. If a survivor chooses to open up to you, here's how you can support them:

- allow them to talk about what happened, at their own pace.
- If they ask for advice, find options for support and respect their decisions about the next steps
- Be real: show your emotions, and let them show theirs
- Listen. Believe. Accept.

Survivor reactions to sexual harm or assault

Survivors experience a range of responses. Some common effects of sexual harm or assault are:



Remember that people react differently, but there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to react.

If you notice behavioural changes, and you are worried, offer your support, and respect (and accept) the survivor's choice of response.

The responsibility for harm always lies with the offender

Common reactions of support people

When someone you care about opens up to you about sexual harm or assault, you may find yourself experiencing intense or difficult emotions.

Just as there are a range of responses from survivors, as a confidante, you may experience:

- **Anger:** at yourself; toward the survivor; toward the perpetrator. Anger can be complicated, and can affect the way you communicate. If you are angry, acknowledge it, and find a safe way to express it
- **Anxiety:** about the 'right way' to respond; or about how this will affect your relationship with the survivor
- **Confusion:** about how or why this has happened
- **Disbelief:** you may be surprised or shocked. Denial is a common response after a traumatic disclosure – but it doesn't mean that the assault didn't occur. It's important to believe the survivor
- **Guilt:** because you couldn't protect the survivor or experience the assault instead of them
- **Sadness:** you may grieve for the survivor and their journey. You may know the perpetrator, and feel sad around the impact of this knowledge

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Words of support

Listen. Believe. Accept.

Words are powerful. They can help to heal.

You may be struggling with your own emotions and reactions, and it can be difficult to know how to talk to the survivor in this situation.

Here are some encouraging phrases:

- “I believe you. It took a lot of courage to tell me about this.”
- “It’s not your fault. You didn’t do anything to deserve this.”
- “You are not alone. I care about you, and I’m here to listen, or help in any way I can.”
- “I’m sorry this happened. This shouldn’t have happened to you.”

Self-Care

Looking after yourself is as important as supporting the survivor.

Find your **own** support network and resources, to help you stay resilient.

PLAN. PROTECT YOURSELF. PLAY

Continued Support

There’s no timetable when it comes to recovering from sexual violence.

It may be a long journey, but continued support is vital to the survivor’s wellbeing. This doesn’t mean that you have to do it on your own.

Here are a few tips to get through with your own wellbeing intact:

- **Be compassionate.** Recovery times vary, and no matter how long it takes, continue to show your support, belief and acceptance
- **Check in periodically.** Show your support and aroha for as long as it takes.
- **Know your resources.** You can’t be there all the time, but there is help at hand. Look for:
 - Your local sexual assault service provider, for information about counselling, medical and reporting options
 - The warning signs for suicide and support around prevention (**Lifeline:** 0800 543 345)

It is not the survivor’s fault

You are not alone

Help is available 24/7

Tautoko Mai Sexual Harm Support

Phone 0800 227 233

www.tautokomai.co.nz

Supporting a Survivor of Sexual Harm

tautoko mai
SEXUAL HARM SUPPORT