



## How to Help a Survivor of Sexual Violence

By Laura Zárate, Arte Sana

### **DON'T...**

**Don't tell a victim that it was God's will they were raped, or that they are being punished.** The survivor needs to hear that it was God's will that they survived! Your comments regarding God should focus on mercy and the power of healing, rather than malicious punishment.

**Don't tell a victim "it was 'just' sex, you weren't hurt" or "it's no big deal."**

Healing from this type of trauma can be an enormous challenge, as triggering and intrusive flashbacks may become a part of everyday life for a while. Family support may also be lacking and a survivor may feel completely abandoned.

**Don't lecture a victim on how they might have avoided it, or ask if they couldn't have done something differently during the attack.** No one plans to be sexually assaulted. A victim makes the best choices she or he can to survive. The fact that they were able to escape death proves that their instincts were right and their strategy worked. Their survival skills need to be praised rather than criticized.

**Don't sympathize with the abuser.** The survivor needs your absolute loyalty.

### **DO...**

**Believe the survivor.** Even if they sometimes doubt themselves, even if their memories are vague, even if what they tell you sounds too extreme, believe them.

Survivors don't make up stories of sexual abuse or rape. Let them know that you are open to hearing anything they wish to share, and that although it's painful and upsetting, you are willing to receive their words with respect.

**Be clear that the abuse or rape was not the survivor's fault.** No one asks to be abused or raped. No behavior, manner of dress, or action can ever justify the crime of rape. It is always the fault of the perpetrator.

**Validate the survivor's feelings: their anger, pain, and fear.** These are natural, healthy responses. They need to feel them, express them, and be heard.

**Join with the survivor in validating the damage.** All sexual abuse & rape is harmful. Even if it's not violent, overtly physical, or repeated, all sexual abuse and rape has serious consequences.

**Respect the time and space it takes to heal.** Healing is a slow process that can't be hurried.

**Encourage the survivor to get support.** In addition to offering your own support, encourage them to reach out to others. Familiarize yourself the local rape crisis center or services and offer the hotline number as a possible source of free and confidential support. Get support for yourself. You will have many feelings about the abuse or rape also. You need to take care of yourself so you can be there for the survivor.

**Resist seeing the survivor as a victim.** Continue to see them as a strong, courageous person who is reclaiming their own life. Accept that there will very likely be major changes in your relationship with the survivor as they heal. They are changing, and as they do, you may need to change in response.

**HELPFUL INFORMATION ONLINE:** To do a search for the nearest rape crisis center by using either a zip code, city, or state visit <http://www.rainn.org/counseling.html>  
To access information in Spanish and Arte Sana's national online directory of centers that offer victim services in Spanish visit: <http://www.arte-sana.com/recursos.htm>

References: "Parenting the Sexually Abused Child" by Rosemary Narimanian and Julie Marks, National Adoption Information Clearinghouse 1990.

"Things Not to Say to a Survivor" by Gayle Crabtree 1996-2001 Feb05