



## **Faculty Against Rape**

### **How to Respond When a Student Discloses Sexual Assault**

One-in-five female students and 6% of male students will experience sexual violence during their college years. Behind these alarming statistics are human beings whose lives have been shattered by violence. In our work with student survivors, about half of rape survivors end up transferring to another school, taking time away from college, or dropping out of college altogether. Campus sexual violence is a Title IX issue because it affects the academic experience in significant ways. Students often exhibit signs of trauma that are apparent to faculty, including:

- Withdrawal in the classroom
- Missing class
- Missing tests and assignments
- A significant decrease in work quality

If a student approaches you to disclose an experience of sexual violence, or if you are thinking of approaching them, it is important to keep in mind that:

1. Not everyone affected by this type of violence is ready or willing to speak up in private or publicly. While faculty should reach out to students whose academic work appears to be slipping due to trauma, we should do so without putting any pressure on the student to disclose.
2. Male survivors and student of color face additional social barriers to disclosing experiences of sexual violence. Make sure that *all* survivors know that you are an ally, and that you create a space for disclosure for underrepresented students.
3. Faculty should be careful not to impose language to describe the trauma or the person affected by it. The labels “victim” and “survivor” are identities that only the person affected by violence can claim for themselves.
4. Some people who experience gendered or sexual violence are often hesitant to disclose their trauma because they fear that they will be not be believed, and that they will be blamed and shamed. Empathy and compassion may gradually offset the effects of isolation and fear and allow people to open up and seek the care and support they need.
5. Many campuses require faculty to report cases of sexual violence to campus authorities, so some students who want to disclose to you will not do so. Learn what your school requires so that you can best assist students in a survivor-centered way.
6. The most important tip is to let the survivor know that you believe him/her.

Here are some tips faculty can use to work with people impacted by gender or sexual violence:

- ***Bear Witness; Sit with/ in the trauma and pain***

The pain that you will witness and the stories that you will hear are likely to have a strong effect on you. Initially, you will feel the urge to say something or to “fix” the situation. If you choose to work with people impacted by violence, you should prepare yourself to simply BE THERE with the person as they confront their trauma and pain.

- ***Listen patiently, carefully, and holistically***

One of the most important factors in supporting people who experience trauma is to gently listen. This means giving your full attention to the person and keeping your reactions in check. Take a deep breath before the conversation starts to center your focus on gentle listening. Be comfortable with silence and let the person know that this conversation is important to you. When the person offers some insight into their experiences, listen with a knowing ear to what is being said and pay careful attention to the person’s body language and to your own. **Being heard and understood can be an empowering experience and the beginning of a transformative process, not only for the individual but for the community.**

- ***Express empathy and compassion***

If the student asks you for input, verbally or non-verbally, you might say something like, “I feel sad to hear that you had been treated so badly,” instead of, “I feel so sorry for you.” This response expresses your empathy and compassion without perpetuating an experience of victimization. Other suggested responses include:

- “What happened wasn’t your fault.”
- “You are not alone.”
- “How can I support you?”

- ***Do not make assumptions***

Even if you are a survivor, you have not had this person’s personal experience. Do not make assumptions about what they have experienced or the effects of their experience.

- ***Believe the story; Avoid probing questions about the abuse***

There are often unconscious issues about the trauma that the student has not yet addressed. Asking probing questions may come across as doubting their story, even if that is not your intention.

- ***Avoid venting your anger***

You may feel genuinely angry at the perpetrator, but avoid dumping your anger onto the lap of the person as s/he may already be carrying a heavy emotional load.

- ***Remember that the person you are talking to has many aspects other than the trauma.***

After showing your support for the person, inquire about their life apart from the abuse.

- ***Refer the student to resources***

Get to know the ins and outs of the sexual violence reporting process on your campus so that you can quickly direct survivors to resources and support. All schools are required to offer mental health support and safety accommodations to students who file a report. Most schools process sexual violence claims through the Title IX office. Some campuses have on-line reporting options, but most schools require survivors to file a report in person. If the survivor would like to disclose confidentially, refer them to the confidential reporters on campus (mental health professionals and clergy).

- ***Follow up with student***

If the student decides to report the sexual violence, follow up to see how they were treated and what response they received.

- ***Self-care***

Working with people who experience trauma can be emotionally draining. Make a plan to take care of your emotional and physical needs. Working with fellow faculty members is a great way to vent, reduce the stress, and share the burden. Other self-care tips include counseling, journaling, regular exercise, support groups, and meditation.

