

Employee Guidebook: Responding to Disclosures of Sexual Violence

This guidebook is a brief reference guide for MacEwan University staff and faculty who may find themselves responding to disclosures of sexual violence from students or coworkers. Please use this guide to review the key steps and skills to use when responding to a disclosure. This book was produced by MacEwan's Office of Sexual Violence Prevention, Education, and Response (OSVPER). The Office of Sexual Violence Prevention, Education and Response supports survivors of sexual violence and raises awareness about this issue in the MacEwan community. Contact us to talk to someone about an incident you've witnessed, experienced, or are providing support around.

**Office of Sexual Violence, Prevention,
Education, and Response**
780-497-4365

osvper@macewan.ca

6-213, City Centre Campus
10700 – 104 Avenue, Edmonton, AB

**Sexual Violence Response
Coordinator (SVRC)**
780-497-4365

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Important Definitions/Concepts

What is Sexual Violence?

MacEwan's Sexual Violence Policy defines Sexual Violence as: *Any sexualized act or act targeting a person's sexuality that is committed, threatened, or attempted against a person without that person's Consent. Sexual Violence varies in severity, can be physical or psychological in nature, and may include but is not limited to all forms of sexual contact, sexual humiliation, sexual exploitation, degrading sexual imagery, sending unwanted sexualized text messages, cyber harassment, indecent or sexualized exposure via electronic or social media or otherwise, Sexual Harassment, Sexual and Gender Discrimination, Stalking, and Sexual Assault.*

In short, sexual violence is any sexual interaction, physical, verbal, written, in person, or online that occurs without consent.

What is a disclosure?

When someone chooses to inform a Member of the University Community about an incident where they were subjected to Sexual Violence.

What is a complaint?

A report of Sexual Violence submitted to the University in accordance with this policy and the Responding to Sexual Violence Procedure. A formal complaint is carefully explored with the discloser by people who act as complaint intake points on campus like the SVRC.

Do all disclosures become complaints?

No! People disclose experiences of violence for many reasons, and many times do not wish to make a complaint. The decision to make a complaint is always up to the impacted individual, other than some rare exceptions (see page 8).

What is the role of staff and faculty who receive disclosures?

Your role is to provide support for the person who disclosed to you, and then connect them with the supports and resources they are looking for. You can also facilitate some of their requests if they are within your capability and scope of responsibility.

What about confidentiality?

All disclosures should be treated as confidential unless the discloser has given you permission to share their identity with others. You can still seek out support or consultation, but do not share identifying information in those conversations unless you have been given explicit permission.

Who can I talk to about this?

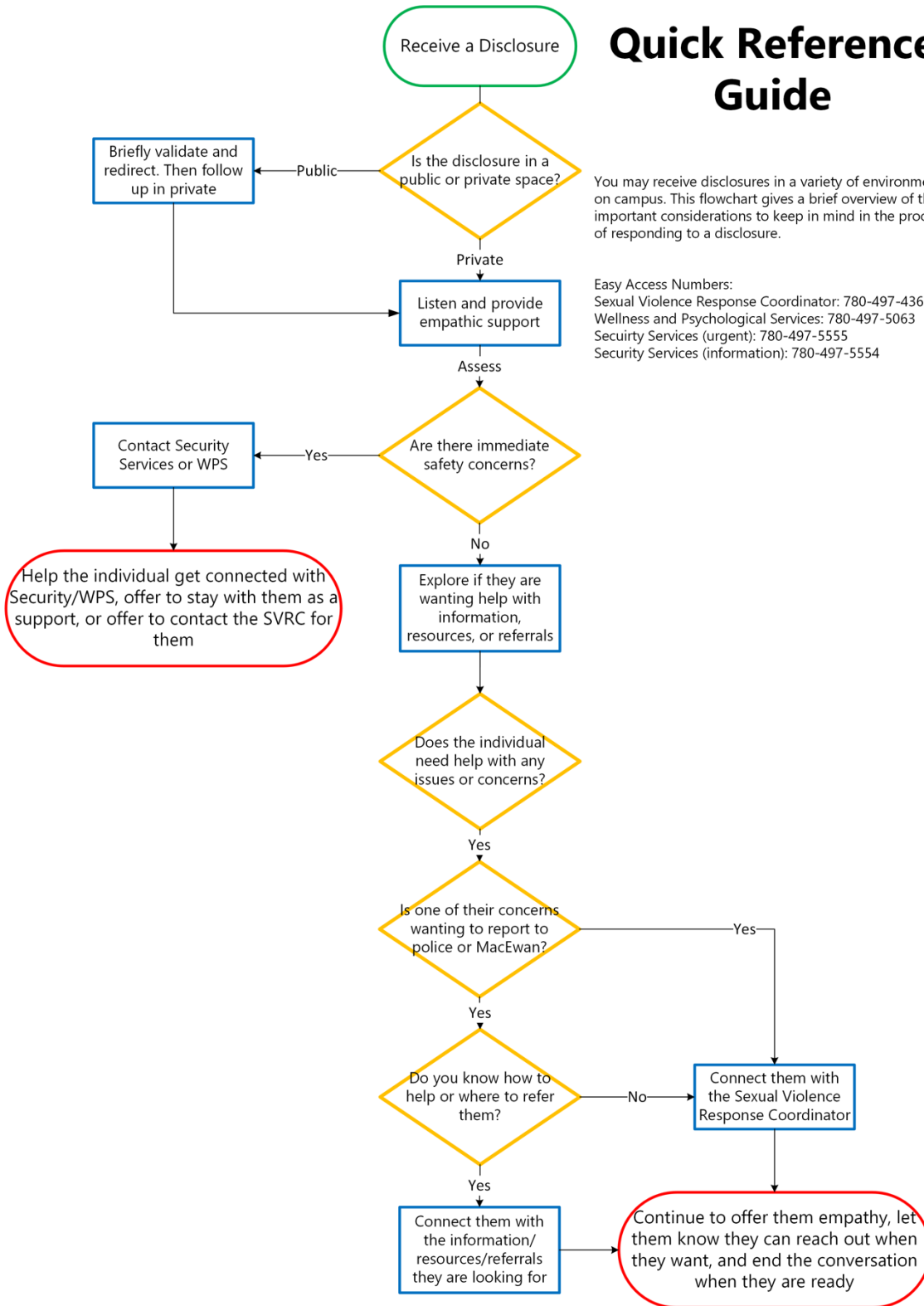
The Sexual Violence Response Coordinator is an immediate point of contact you can consult with or seek support from. You can Sexual Violence Support Guides or your direct supervisor. Just remember to respect the disclosers confidentiality when you do so.



Quick Reference Guide

You may receive disclosures in a variety of environments on campus. This flowchart gives a brief overview of the important considerations to keep in mind in the process of responding to a disclosure.

Easy Access Numbers:
Sexual Violence Response Coordinator: 780-497-4365
Wellness and Psychological Services: 780-497-5063
Security Services (urgent): 780-497-5555
Security Services (information): 780-497-5554



Is the disclosure private or public?

If you hear a disclosure in a public space it would be ideal to find somewhere private to talk further about it. However, in spaces such as a classroom or team meeting you may not be able to fully respond to a disclosure in the moment. For example, if a student disclosed in the middle of a lecture, the instructor might not be able to pause the lecture to fully check-in. The instructor can provide a brief supportive response, possibly mention that OSVPER is available to all MacEwan staff and students, then follow up individually after the class.

How to provide an empathic response to disclosures of sexual violence

There are simple things you can do to support someone. Listen to them without interrupting. Let them know their feelings are ok, whatever they are. Take them seriously and believe them. Let them know that it was not their fault. Show that you care and are paying attention with your tone of voice and body language. (See pages 5-7)

Are there immediate safety concerns?

If a disclosure gives you a sense that there is an immediate risk of harm to someone then you should seek help in responding to the situation. If the discloser is saying they are suicidal, accompany them to Wellness and Psychological Services (WPS). If this is outside of WPS hours, contact Security Services.

If the discloser is in fear of their immediate safety (e.g. an abusive partner is on campus looking for them), contact Security Services.

If the threat isn't immediate, but there are still large safety concerns (e.g. the discloser fears violence when they return home, or that the person who hurt them may come to campus later that week), offer to help them contact the Sexual Violence Response Coordinator, or the Student Support Coordinator to help make a safety plan. If it is outside of office hours offer to help them contact Security Services.

Explore what they are looking for

Some people may be disclosing because they want support or resources for a specific issue. Others may just want to have someone to talk to, be believed, or have a space to feel safe. It is important to let them be the one to choose what they want to do. It is not your role to tell them what you think they should do, even if you disagree with their decisions.

Do you have the knowledge about the resources/referrals they are looking for?

If you feel confident in being able to help connect them with the resources they are asking for then do so. The fewer places the discloser has to go to access the help they want the better. It's also ok to not know and it is ok to be honest about that. If you aren't sure how to help them please connect them with the SVRC.

Are they wanting to file a complaint or report to Police?

If they are wanting to file a complaint through MacEwan's Sexual Violence Policy, they will have to be referred to the SVRC. You can still give them information on the process if you are familiar with it (pg. 11), but the SVRC is the intake point for complaints related to sexual violence on campus. Do not file a complaint intake form for them yourself.

If they are wanting to report to the police that can only be done directly through Edmonton Police Services. Still offer to connect them with MacEwan's SVRC if they want to speak to someone about the criminal reporting process, what it looks like, and possible resources to assist them in that process.



Key Messages of Support

We know that responding to a disclosure can often feel like a scary or overwhelming experience. Many people worry that they don't know how to support people or are worried that they will say the wrong thing. We believe that everyone has the capability to be a supportive responder. After all, almost all of us have supported friends, family, or loved ones in our lives through tough situations. But we also have some key messages or themes that people can keep in mind when supporting someone who has been subjected to sexual violence.

“I Believe You”

Many people don't disclose their experiences of sexual violence because they fear that they won't be believed. Because of this fear it is important for supporters to realize how impactful the first response of “I believe you” can be for someone disclosing their experience of sexual violence.

The message of “I believe you” can be communicated word-for-word, but can also be said and shown in a variety of different ways. We communicate belief through our facial expressions, our tone of voice, the words we use, and the questions we do or do not ask. For example, it is best practice to avoid asking prying and judgmental questions. We do not need to know the details of what happened to someone in order to support them. Similarly, it is important to avoid asking “why” questions, because they can often sound judgmental and blaming even if that is not their intention (e.g. “Why didn't you call me right away? I would have helped”). It puts them in a position of having to explain their actions. If you are required to ask lots of questions (e.g. an investigator collecting a report), it is important to be as transparent as possible about the process and why you need to ask potentially intrusive questions.

Someone disclosing an experience of sexual violence is being incredibly vulnerable with us, perhaps after already being disbelieved by others. By simply believing them we are identifying ourselves as a supportive individual.

“It is Not Your Fault”

Many people who have been subjected to sexual violence experience feelings of shame and blame themselves for what happened. They often feel as though the violence was their fault, that they brought it on in some way, or that they did something that contributed to it happening.

One of the main messages we can convey is that it was not their fault, no matter what. It is important for people to know that no matter who they are, what they were doing, what clothing they were wearing, whether they were drinking, flirting, or dancing, none of it makes what was done to them their fault. The fault and responsibility of sexual violence always lies 100% with the person who chose to be sexually violent towards another person.



This message is important, but some people won't be in a place where they believe that it wasn't their fault. Our society is filled with messages that teach people, women in particular, that they are responsible for defending themselves from sexual violence. Accepting that the assault wasn't their fault can challenge a person's sense of safety and control in their life. If we are supporting someone and they are really holding onto that self-blame we can still tell them we don't believe it was their fault. For example, we could say "I know you feel responsible for what happened, but I just want you to know that I don't believe it was your fault".

"Your Feelings Are Valid"

When someone has experienced sexual violence, they may be feeling lots of different things and showing those feelings in different ways. What support people often expect is for people to be visibly upset, crying, and quite shaken by the experience. However, this is not always the case. Someone may be presenting that way, but they could also be silent, deadpan, laughing, cracking jokes, or appear to be chatting with us as if it were any other day. People have a wide range of emotional experiences and presentations following an experience of violence and they are all completely valid.

The people we support can have these expectations as well though. They might be surprised at their own emotional reaction. We can be there to validate that what they are feeling, no matter what they are feeling, is totally ok. There is nothing wrong with them for not emoting or reacting in a particular way.

This is also where it is important for us to remember that feelings aren't always going to be one dimensional. When we think about how most sexual assaults are committed by someone known, we can begin to imagine how complex the feelings around that can be. Some people may be struggling with their conflicting emotions around the person who assaulted them. Again, our job is to let them know that it is ok to have those mixed feelings about the situation.

"I Support Your Decisions"

Acts of sexual violence are acts in which someone's control was taken away from them. One of the ways we can help people feel that sense of control again is by supporting their decisions. We let them take the lead on what their path to recovery will look like. This means that we need to be careful about what our biases are about what people "should" do after an experience of violence and make sure we don't let those biases impact how we are supporting someone. For example, you could think that after a sexual assault someone should take at least 2 weeks off of work to recover, but for the person you are supporting going to work as usual helps them retain a sense of normalcy in their life.

When someone is coming to talk to us they might not necessarily know what they want to do. We strongly encourage exploring options with them together rather than just telling them what they "should" do. Let them know what is available to them and talk to them



about how each option might fit best in their life. Once you've explored all the options, make sure to let them be the one to make the decision.

A lot of this requires us to be aware of what some of our own biases around sexual violence can be. We encourage people to reflect on what their opinions are on what recovery from sexual violence can look like and how it might impact the way they support an individual. For example, if someone strongly believes that all sexual assault should be reported to police, but the person they're supporting doesn't want to report, how can they work on not letting that impact the way they support someone.

Listening Skills

When we listen, we are giving our full attention to the person in front of us. By giving them our full attention, we are showing that we care about the person and their story. Our attention can be shown both non-verbally and verbally. This skill of giving our full attention to someone is often referred to as active listening.

Non-verbal active listening skills include:

- **Eye Contact:** direct but relaxed eye contact can show the speaker that you are paying attention to what they are saying.
- **Posture:** focus your body on the person talking and keep your body language open and inviting – avoid crossing your arms or legs.
- **Mirroring:** subtly mirroring the facial expressions and body language used by the speaker can be a sign of attentiveness, responsiveness, and empathy.
- **Attending Behaviours:** responding to what the person is saying by nodding and using other subtle non-verbal cues shows that you are focused on the person speaking, conveys that you are concentrated on what they are saying, and encourages them to continue sharing.

Verbal active listening skills include:

- **Paraphrasing:** saying back to the speaker in your own words what you hear them say. Paraphrasing lets them know that you understand what they are saying, or gives them a chance to correct if there is a misunderstanding.
- **Reflecting Feelings:** listen for feelings expressed by a speaker and identify them – whether they were expressed verbally or nonverbally - without expressing your judgment or opinions on those feeling.
- **Clarification:** ask questions of the speaker to ensure that you've understood them correctly. Using open-ended questions enables the speaker to expand on certain points as necessary. Open ended questions are questions that can't be answered with a yes or no. Remember that it's important to only ask questions that elaborate on something a survivor has already told you, and that you should avoid asking 'why' questions so that you don't inadvertently come across as blaming the survivor.



Confidentiality and Evaluating Safety

When someone is disclosing an experience of sexual violence it is important to respect the privacy and confidentiality of that person's experience. However there are some situations when confidentiality is limited. The MacEwan University Sexual Violence Policy states:

“All representatives of the University involved in responding to a Disclosure, Complaint and/or investigation of Sexual Violence are expected to maintain confidentiality of information as required by law and University policy, and where otherwise appropriate. The University treats Disclosures and Complaints as confidential, subject to the following limitations:

- *When an individual is at imminent risk of harming self and/or others;*
- *There are reasonable grounds to believe that Members of the University Community or wider community may be at risk of harm;*
- *In order to promote fairness of process for all parties; or*
- *Disclosure of information, reporting and/or conducting an investigation is required by law, by the University's policies, or by an external body with appropriate authority.”*

In general, if you are unsure about whether a disclosure you receive has factors that limit your ability to keep confidentiality, contact the Sexual Violence Response Coordinator to consult. Or accompany the student to the Office of Sexual Violence, Prevention, Education, and Response. If you are in a situation where you have to share information with others, explain to the person you are supporting who you are contacting and why you have to do so.

Some scenarios and who you can contact:

- If someone is a high risk of suicide: Contact WPS for students, or the Employee Family Assistance Program for staff. If outside of WPS hours contact Security Services.
- If someone is saying they are going out to immediately hurt another person: Contact Security Services
- If the person you are supporting is in immediate danger (e.g. an abusive partner is outside or on campus looking for them): Contact Security Services
- If there are non-immediate safety concerns: Offer to connect the discloser with the SVRC or Student Support Coordinator. If the student refuses then consult with the SVRC.
- If you become aware of a high risk to the MacEwan community, such as hearing about serial assaults, use of weapons in an assault, or an employee assaulting someone they are in a position of power over: Contact the SVRC for a consultation
- If you hear about anyone under the age of 18 being harmed: Contact the SVRC or WPS for consultation



Exploring Options

We use the phrasing of exploring options because when we are supporting someone it is not our role to tell them what they should do. It is important to ask them what they would like to do, or what they feel they need right now, and then provide them with the support, options, and information around those stated needs.

Some areas you can explore with them:

- Do they have any medical needs (injuries, STBBI concerns, pregnancy options)?
- Do they have ongoing support people in their life?
- Do they have any mental health needs (counselling)?
- Are they safe?
- Are they wanting to make a complaint through MacEwan?
- Are they wanting to report to the police?
- How are they feeling about other stressors in their life (workload, school stress, financial stress, other life events)?
- Do they need help managing any of the above?

You don't have to know how to help someone with any of the issues they have going on, and it is ok to be transparent about not knowing all the answers. What you can always do is say you will do your best to connect them with resources that can help.

Remember that even if you would like to see them connect with particular resources or go with particular options, it is not up to us, it is up to them. This can be hard sometimes, especially if we feel they might still be in an unsafe or difficult situation. If you are ever wanting to talk through a situation please reach out to the SVRC for consultation or support.

Resources

The Sexual Violence Response Coordinator

The SVRC can be referred to for anything connected with sexual violence. The SVRC can assist individuals looking for support, information and/or assistance with accessing resources, accommodations or modifications with school/work/residence, accompaniment, or information and/or assistance with reporting. The SVRC is also the intake point for people wishing to make a complaint through MacEwan's sexual violence policy. If the person you are supporting is looking to make a complaint, connect them with the SVRC.

osvper@macewan.ca

780-497-4365

OSVPER's website also has lists of campus and off-campus resources

<https://www.macewan.ca/campus-life/office-of-sexual-violence-prevention-education-and-response/support/campus-resources/>



Counselling Resources

- MacEwan Wellness and Psychological Services (WPS)
 - 780-497-5063
 - wps@macewan.ca
- Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP)
 - <https://www.macewan.ca/about-macewan/careers/pension-benefits/index.html#efap>
- Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton (SACE)
 - 780-423-4102
 - info@sace.ca
- Saffron Sexual Assault Centre
 - 780-449-0900
- Private Psychologists

Medical Resources

- Sexual Assault Response Team (SART)
 - <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/findhealth/Service.aspx?id=5591>
- MacEwan University Health Centre (MHC)
 - 780-250-6842
- Women's Health Options
 - 780-484-1124
 - info@whol.ca
- STI Clinic
 - <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/findhealth/Service.aspx?id=1001498>
- Family Physician

Legal Resources

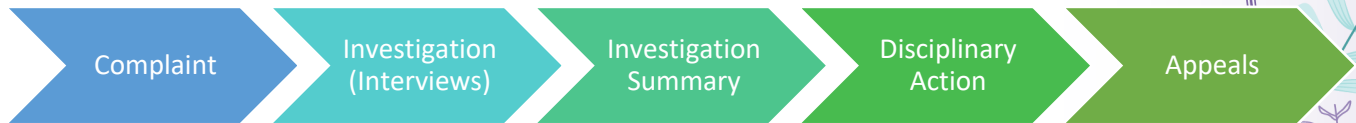
- SACE Police and Court Support Program
 - 780-423-4102
 - info@sace.ca
- Elizabeth Fry Independent Legal Advice for Survivors of Sexual Violence
 - <https://www.efrynorthernalberta.com/independent-legal-advice-for-survivors-of-sexual-violence>
- Edmonton Community Legal Centre (ECLC)
 - 780-702-1725
 - intake@eclc.ca
- Student Legal Services of Edmonton
 - <https://www.slsedmonton.com/contact>

Reporting Resources

- SVRC. Anyone interested in filing a MacEwan University complaint related to sexual violence should be directed to the SVRC.
- Edmonton Police Service. If someone wishes to report to the police they can do so directly through EPS. However, they can also connect with the SVRC first to get more information about the criminal investigation process as well as additional resources they can access for support through that process.



MacEwan University Student Complaint Process



Complaint

If a student files a Complaint with the Sexual Violence Response Coordinator, they will be asked to provide a written statement summarizing their Complaint. Within 3 business days, the Sexual Violence Response Team (SVRT) will conduct an initial review of the written statement and determine whether the Complaint falls within MacEwan University's jurisdiction to investigate under the Sexual Violence Policy. If the Complaint falls within MacEwan University's jurisdiction, SVRT will inform the Student Conduct Officer, who will begin an investigation.

Investigation

An investigation can include interviewing the Complainant, the Respondent, and any relevant witnesses, along with collecting additional evidence relevant to the Complaint. During the investigation, the Student Conduct Officer and SVRT may impose interim measures¹ to ensure the safety of the Complainant and Respondent. Interim Measures are not considered disciplinary action.

Investigation Summary

The Student Conduct Officer will share a summary of the investigation findings with the Associate Vice President, Students (AVP Students). They will review the investigation findings and decide whether there has been a violation of the Policy, and if so, which disciplinary actions are recommended. The standard of proof for the finding of a breach of the policy is on a balance of probabilities (more likely to have occurred than not).

Disciplinary Action

If the AVP Students determines there has been a violation of the Sexual Violence Policy, there is a range of disciplinary actions they may recommend. A Respondent has the right to appeal disciplinary decisions.

Disciplinary action can include:

- A written warning or reprimand
- A discretionary sanction, such as being required to issue a formal apology
- A signed agreement of behavior expectations
- Loss of privileges, including denial of non-essential services or restriction of access to University property
- Imposition of terms and conditions on continued student status
- Suspension, on approval of the Associate Vice President, Students
- Expulsion, on approval of the Provost and Vice President Academic
- Permanent notation on official University transcript, on approval of the Provost and Vice President Academic