

A Letter of Advice for Friends, Family, and Supporters of Survivors

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This past Sunday, [The Hunting Ground](#), an important documentary about the epidemic of sexual violence on college campuses nationwide, [aired on CNN](#). While this film is a must-see for every student, parent, and alum, sexual assault is also a very difficult subject to discuss in our society. But sexual violence, and the indifference of so many institutions, is particularly tough to process at the time of year when many students are returning home for Thanksgiving break, some of whom are returning for the first time with the label of survivor. This week, the week students make their way home for Thanksgiving, marks the end of the period known as “[the red zone](#),” a period of time that begins at first year orientation, and is the time frame when college students are the most likely to be sexually assaulted.

The harrowing reality is that [20% of college-aged women sitting around Thanksgiving tables are survivors of sexual assault](#).

There is not one way survivors respond to trauma. It is not easy to tell someone you love that you have been assaulted, and many survivors remain unable, even years later, to tell those they love that they were violated out of shame and other emotions. Some, for fear of safety and lack of support, know they cannot tell their family. Yet there are other survivors who will tell those they love immediately and ask for support.

Therefore, our staff wanted to share with you some basic information, based on trauma informed research, our own experiences, and the experiences of the hundreds of survivors whom we have supported.

To any parent, guardian, friend, or family member of a survivor:

- **Believe them.** The rate of “false” reporting is [between 2-8%, which is the same rate as that of other violent crimes](#). No one asks for or deserves to be sexually assaulted, and it is important to say “I believe you” loud and clear.

- **Respect the language they use.** It is not up to you to define their assault. If someone tells you “something horrible happened,” it is not up to you to tell them that they were “raped.” Give them time to identify what words work for them.

- **Validate their feelings.** Even if your loved one says something you disagree with, like, “this was my fault,” it is important to validate that feeling before addressing any other points, and say “I understand why you feel that way, but remember that it is not your fault.”

- **Help your loved one to regain control by letting them make decisions; do not try to take over.** Rape is not about sex; rape is about power and control. Help your loved one regain control that they might be feeling like they lost by supporting their choices and empowering their decisions. Offer options if asked, but do not tell individuals what they should do or what you would do.

- **Recognize that people respond to trauma in different ways.** Some survivors might want to tell their whole story immediately. If so, listen. If they do not want to share at this time (or ever), then do not poke and ask questions. Give them space, time, and support.

- **Do not ask victim blaming questions.** For example, do not ask your loved one if they were drinking, on drugs, or otherwise incapacitated. Do not ask them what they were wearing or why they went

somewhere. If they want to share this information with you, they will, but by asking these questions, you make make them question whether or not they were responsible for the assault, and no matter what, it is never the survivor's fault.

- **Do not force them to go to the hospital, report to the police or go to therapy.** Remember that trauma impacts each person differently, and that sharing an experience of sexual assault with the police or undergoing a physical examination can be harmful to survivors if they are not ready. Also recognize that some survivors, particularly survivors of color, undocumented survivors, and LGBT survivors might feel unsafe going to the police or a hospital. It is your job to trust the decision the survivor makes.

- **Do not interrupt them.** Let your loved one talk, or not. If they are silent, let them be silence, and remember that silence is okay. If you are feeling uncomfortable, that's normal, but do not make your feelings the center of this conversation.

- **Do not hug them or touch them without their permission.** Ask "would you like a hug? or May I hold your hand?"

- **Do not insist that they tell other people.** Keep their confidentiality if they ask you to.* If your loved one disclosed to you, it is up to you to ensure that they have control of the situation. You can tell them how much their community may want to support them, but do not force them.

- **Do not try to play detective.** This means, while you might be curious to know more details, do not ask them a lot of unsolicited questions about their assault. It can be very difficult for a survivor to recount the actual instance of rape or assault. Do not insist they do so, as it can be incredibly re-traumatizing, and they also might not want to share everything. Recognize that healing is a non linear process that looks different for everyone.

As the loved one of a survivor of sexual assault, you also need to take care of yourself. You may feel angry, helpless, sad, and afraid, and

that is okay! Remember: you cannot support a loved one unless you practice self-care. Many loved ones of a survivor, people who are known as secondary survivors, might need to find support in other places, like a mental health professional, to process their emotions. While all of your emotions are completely valid, and for some might bring up their own trauma, this situation is about your loved one and their wishes, not yours.

By simply telling your loved one, “I believe you, I care about you, and I support you” you are making a difference in their lives.

