

How to respond to disclosures of sexual violence

How to prepare in case someone discloses to you.

By NATALIE SAMSON | AUG 29 2018

According to [data](#) released by Statistics Canada in 2017, nearly half (47 percent) of all self-reported sexual assaults in Canada were committed against women aged 15 to 24. About 41 percent of all incidents of sexual assault were reported by students. (Similar data for men wasn't available though an American study from 2007 concluded that about six percent of college-aged men were survivors of sexual violence.) Many sexual assaults that involve Canadian university students and campus community members happen within the first eight weeks of the academic term. With the advent of popular survivor-centric movements like [#MeToo](#) and [#TimesUp](#), more people are coming forward to disclose – though not necessarily to formally report – experiences of sexual violence. Responding to such disclosures in a compassionate and consistent way can seem overwhelming, but thinking about it ahead of time will increase the likelihood of a positive interaction.

What do to if someone discloses an experience of sexual violence

- Provide a safe and comfortable space: do not touch or hug the person without their permission; choose a space where other people can't overhear the conversation; limit distractions by silencing and putting away your phone, or shutting down your desktop email. You might ask the person if they'd like to relocate, or where they'd like to sit.
- Clearly communicate any limits to confidentiality: don't be afraid to interrupt to explain that under certain circumstances, you have an obligation to act on information they provide. This allows the speaker to make an informed choice about whether to continue with the disclosure, and how much information to share.
- Listen with empathy and patience: The best way to seek to understand what has happened and its impact is to listen closely and without judgment. Use open body language and allow the person disclosing to set the pace for the conversation. Don't rush, press for information, or give unsolicited advice such as, "You should report this to the police." You're not conducting an investigation.
- Validate and acknowledge the person's experience with statements like "I believe you," or "I'm sorry this happened to you": People who have been sexually assaulted often experience feelings such as anxiety, guilt, vulnerability and fear. There is no standard reaction to a traumatic event and no correct way for a person to talk about it.
- Support the individual to make their own decisions: individuals have the right to make choices for themselves and have these choices respected. You might ask, "How best can I help?" or, "What's your biggest concern right now?"
- Provide information and resources while recognizing your limitations: you don't need to be an expert, you just need to understand what your role is in the disclosure. Admit when you're not sure how to proceed and offer to make a call or to search relevant websites for requested information while the person is with you.
- Acknowledge that this may be more than a one-time conversation: the person disclosing may change their mind about how they wish to proceed. Ask if it's OK to follow up by email. Due to time constraints around some of the decisions the person may face, any requested referrals or accommodations should be made as quickly as possible.
- If you choose to take notes or otherwise document the meeting in which the disclosure took place, be careful and considerate – there are circumstances under which you may be required by your institution or by law to share your records with external authorities.
- Take care of yourself. Debrief with a supervisor or co-worker (without using identifying or specific information). Consider rescheduling or cancelling appointments following the disclosure if you'd benefit from some time to process what you've discussed. Seek additional supports from your employer, such as counselling through an Employee Assistance Program.

At Ryerson University, the office of sexual violence support and education sums up this advice using the acronym [BRAVE](#): begin by listening; respect confidentiality; ask what support should look like; avoid assumptions; validate the person disclosing; empathize.

How to prepare before a disclosure happens:

- Familiarize yourself with your institution's sexual violence policy. Standalone [policies are mandatory](#) at institutions in Ontario, Manitoba, British Columbia, Quebec, Nova Scotia. Institutions outside of these provinces will also have policies that address sexual violence, but these may be part of documents such as the student code of conduct, residence code of conduct and workplace sexual harassment policy. If you're unsure where to find your university's sexual assault policy, contact human rights, the ombuds, student services, or your institution's [sexual assault prevention coordinator](#).
- Your duty to act on information disclosed by a campus community member depends on your role in the institution. Know what's expected of you in these situations and when your responsibilities may impact your ability to maintain confidentiality (for example, when there is imminent harm to the community). The limits to confidentiality can be difficult to determine so consider seeking guidance from the human rights office, sexual violence prevention office, etc.
- Prepare a statement that explain the limits to confidentiality. Practice it.
- Ask your supervisor to share and review with your department the university's sexual violence policies and procedures (including workplace sexual harassment policies, and procedures around special leave or accommodations).
- If your institution does not have a central, easy-to-navigate website with information on sexual violence policies, procedures and resources, make a case for one to the appropriate administrative offices at your institution.
- Get to know and, if possible, visit the on-campus resources available to staff and students dealing with sexual violence. This may include counselling services, the human rights office, security services, a sexual violence prevention office, etc.
- If you are an administrator: allocate funding and time for training employees on sexual assault policy, protocol and resources, including bystander-intervention training. Make this training an information available on an ongoing basis.

- If you are a faculty member: provide appropriate academic considerations, such as extensions, supporting a request to drop a class or to work remotely; promote opportunities for on-campus training, lectures, workshops or events relating to sexual violence and prevention; discuss the institution's sexual violence policies clearly and considerately in class at the start of the term and consider linking to appropriate resources on course websites and syllabi.

Compiled from resources provided by Jackie Gruber, human rights and conflict management officer at the University of Manitoba, and Ryerson University's [office of sexual violence support and education](#).