

What can YOU do when a loved one is sexually assaulted?

A sexual assault is a devastating experience for an individual to endure, both in terms of the immediate personal violation entailed as well as its long-term mental and physical consequences. The effects of a sexual assault often extend beyond the victims themselves, and impact their family, friends, co-workers, and others who care about them.

No "one way" to respond. Everyone responds to the situation differently. Spouses of victims may experience feelings of helplessness, anger and loss because they could not prevent the sexual assault or proactively repair the damage that has been sustained by the person they love most. Friends of the victim are often at a loss as to how to help the victim, as the emotional impact of the assault on both the victim and themselves may seem overwhelming.

For members of the U.S. military who are sexually assaulted, the effects of these crimes may be especially damaging due to the natural loss of trust in other people that they may experience following the assault. This loss in trust may impact the overall level of camaraderie and mutual reliance among Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, and Airmen in a given unit, and affect its ability to successfully fulfill its given mission. As a result, the victim's life may be greatly affected in both professional and personal aspects, and spouses, partners or other family members of the victim are often the primary source of support for the victim as they embark on their personal healing process.

In the case of a sexual assault, it is common for a spouse, partner or parent to experience

a broad spectrum of feelings about the assault and its effect on the person they care about. Such feelings may include shock, disbelief, rage, helplessness, and even resentment. If your spouse or partner has been sexually victimized, you may be unsure about how to help them through this difficult time.

Don't over protect. One common reaction is for spouses and partners to engage in "over protection" of the victim, and attempt to influence or control the victim's subsequent daily behaviors, actions, or choices. Although well intended, this approach does not typically provide relief to the victim. Rather, such attempts to control a victim of sexual assault reinforces the loss of control they experienced during the assault themselves, and may inhibit their

ability to regain that control over their life and advance in the healing process.

Several steps you can take. There are several constructive steps you can take to help your spouse or partner should they experience a sexual assault.

First, you must recognize that a sexual assault is a crisis for everyone who cares for the victim, and that it is very important for you to acknowledge your feelings about the assault and to seek help in dealing with them when necessary. There are many counseling resources available in each of the Military Services to help you confront the often complex and wide range of emotions that you may experience. By seeking help, you will allow the victim to concentrate. By seeking help, you will allow the victim to concentrate on their own needs, and increase the chances of everyone involved of achieving recovery and emotional healing.

Second, let your spouse/partner know that you support them in how they choose to approach their recovery. By encouraging your spouse to make independent decisions about how they deal with the aftermath of the sexual assault, you will provide valuable assistance to them in their recovery process. The victim must make their own decisions regarding who is told about the assault, what they are told, and when this information is to be disclosed. This sense of independence and choice generally allows a victim to symbolically regain some of the control that he or she lost after the assault, and reinforces basic trust in the relationship they have with you.

Third, educate yourself on how the military responds to sexual assaults. You can more effectively support your spouse/partner in their decision making if you clearly understand how DoD's sexual assault reporting and response processes work. Your local Sexual Assault Response Coordinator (SARC) can assist you by explaining the process of reporting and accessing services available to the victim. In addition, he or she can direct you to resources that may assist you as you embark on your own healing process.

For information on reporting visit www.myduty.mil

To contact to find your local SARC, contact Military OneSource 24/7 at:

Stateside: 1-800-342-9647 Overseas: 00-800-3429-6477

Overseas Collect: 1-484-530-5908

Resist the urge to "over protect" the victim. Such attempts may reinforce the loss of control felt during the assault and may inhibit a victim's ability to regain that control over his or her life and advance in the healing process.