

Supporting
someone who
has experienced
sexual violence:

INFORMATION FOR FRIENDS

**RAPE
CRISIS
SCOTLAND**



Supporting your friend

This booklet is for people who are supporting a friend who has experienced any form of sexual violence.

It gives information about sexual violence; how it might affect your friend, you and your friendship; and how you can help your friend while taking care of yourself too.

Background to this information

Survivors of sexual violence often experience trauma, whether the abuse happened:

- Once, occasionally or often
- In adulthood or childhood
- With one or several or different perpetrators¹
- Once or at different times
- Recently or many years ago

This can affect survivors' relationships with their friends and friendship groups. It can be very hard for friends to understand or know how to respond to the strong feelings and reactions which such trauma can cause, or how to help. And friends may also feel shocked, horrified and angry about what has happened to the person they care about.

Friends sometimes feel guilt or blame, even if they were not around, for not stopping the violence. Finding out that your friend has been raped or sexually assaulted may be very frightening and distressing.

Often friends feel guilty about having these feelings. But it is natural to have them. It can be traumatic to hear about abuse that has happened to a friend. Being affected by what you hear can lead to you experiencing some of the same after effects as the survivor, sometimes called 'secondary' or 'vicarious trauma'.

¹ In this booklet, **RCS** calls the person who harmed your friend the 'perpetrator'.

It also can be hard to see someone you care about in distress, in difficulty or changed. It can be stressful for you too and affect your friendship. If the perpetrator is one of your friendship group or someone you are close to or connected with, this can make things more complicated.

Whether the sexual violence is still happening or happened in the past, you can be a vital support to your friend.

It is possible for your friend to heal from the experience. Having support, feeling safe, and time all make a big difference. There are things that you can do to help with this.

It is also vital to look after yourself because you are an important person too. Sometimes that may mean realising that you cannot offer what your friend needs.

We have tried to make this information helpful whatever the circumstances. But you may need to find out more or ask for advice, for example from the **RCS Helpline**, depending on what is happening for you and your friend. You can phone or email the helpline any day between 6pm and midnight on freephone **08088 01 03 02** or at: **support@rapecrisisScotland.org.uk**. The helpline can tell you about support in your local area for you or for your friend.

There is also more information on our website. Our leaflets are mostly aimed at survivors but they contain information which friends will also find helpful.

Note:

*If there is a child involved who is at risk of serious harm of abuse you must protect them. Contact the police or your local social work department. You do not need to give your name. Or, you can contact the **RCS Helpline** and we can help you with this or contact services for you.*

Some basics

Friends can often feel helpless. But think about the times in your own life when you have faced some sort of crisis or upset, and remember what helped you most then. It probably wasn't any one thing - simply knowing that your friends believed you, were on your side, and wanted to see you through. That is how you can help now.

You can be a good support if you:

- Listen to your friend
- Accept and don't judge
- Reassure them that you won't tell anyone else (unless a child is at serious risk of harm)
- Be patient with your friend
- Take the lead from your friend - it is important that they are in control
- Don't try to push them into making decisions such as reporting to the police if they don't want to
- Avoid asking intrusive questions about the abuse
- Learn about sexual violence and its effects
- Learn about ways of coping with these effects
- Avoid feeling responsible or trying to fix things
- Ask your friend what they need from you
- Look after yourself too

Forms of sexual violence

There are different forms of sexual violence such as:

- Rape
- Sexual assault (which can include unwanted touching or kissing or being forced to perform or watch sexual acts)
- Childhood sexual abuse
- Sexual harassment at work or elsewhere (this could include posting sexual images of someone on social media)
- Stalking
- Forced marriage
- Female genital mutilation (FGM)
- Commercial sexual exploitation (such as prostitution; pornography; lap dancing; trafficking)
- So called 'honour-based' violence

Sexual violence is common. Anyone can experience it.

Everyone has the right to 'consent' to sex. The law says that consent is 'free agreement' which means someone freely wanting to do something and understanding what they are agreeing to. The law understands that there are many reasons why a person may not be able to freely agree or consent. A person cannot consent if they are under 16 or asleep or intoxicated (with alcohol or drugs) or unconscious or pressured or forced. Your friend might have thought that they should agree to sex because someone gave them gifts or money or took them on a night out. But you can't buy consent because if someone feels pressured that is not free agreement.

If someone experiences sexual violence, it is not their fault. It is always the responsibility of the person who harmed them. Sexual violence does not 'just happen'. People commit sexual violence because, at some level, they decide to do so.

This person (or people) may have been a complete stranger. But they are more likely to be someone your friend knows such as a family member, partner or ex-partner, a friend, colleague or other acquaintance. This can mean that your friend finds it very hard to trust anyone - maybe even you. How you support your friend can help to build up trust.

Although there are different forms of sexual violence, the effects are similar because the experience is frightening and shocking and difficult to cope with. This is partly because of the abuse itself. But it is also because there may be other factors which make a distressing or frightening experience much worse. There may be unique stresses, threats or barriers which make it difficult for your friend to tell anyone what happened, to ask for help, and to be safe from further abuse. For example:

- The perpetrator of the violence may be a friend, partner, close family member, member of the community (in the widest sense including area, friendship group, religious group and so on), a work colleague, a teacher - and have some kind of hold over your friend or a presence in your friend's life and family
- The perpetrator may have threatened to harm your friend or other people if they say anything. If your friend is LGBTI, the perpetrator may have threatened to 'out' them, for example to their family or employer
- Even if your friend does tell someone what happened they may not be believed. It is still common for people to think that the survivor is to blame for what happened. Your friend might believe that too (especially if the perpetrator has told them that they are). You may struggle with your own beliefs about responsibility and who is to blame. It is OK for you to have doubts, but it is not helpful for you to say that to your friend. Instead, discuss this with the **RCS Helpline** or a professional so you can understand your reaction and more about sexual violence

Blame and shame

It is very common for survivors to think that they somehow caused the abuse, and that, had they done something or behaved differently, or been somewhere else, it would not have happened. Likewise, friends often have strong feelings such as guilt, shame, helplessness and anger. They may think that they could have done more to protect the survivor, or that they should have known about or prevented the abuse, especially if they were around at the time or if it involves a mutual friend.

How sexual violence can affect survivors and friendships

Everyone's experience of sexual violence is different. And it also affects people in different ways. Much depends on what happened; the help someone gets at the time; and the other circumstances of their life.

Some common effects of sexual violence and the trauma which can result from this are:

- Fear and shock
- Pain and injury
- Feeling ashamed, guilty and responsible for the abuse
- Feeling trapped, silenced, lonely and powerless
- Short and long-term physical and mental health problems
- Sleep disturbance, nightmares, panic attacks, flashbacks, feeling disconnected
- Anxiety, anger, depression, aggression
- Unhealthy ways of coping such as eating too much or too little; drinking too much alcohol; or taking too many over-the-counter or illegal drugs; self-harming and suicidal thoughts

These effects can last for a long time, even after there is no immediate threat. Sometimes, mental and physical health problems emerge later on in life.

Your friend may or may not realise the effect that the abuse has had on them, you or your friendship. If you can, try to 'cut them some slack' and not have too many expectations of them. They may not be able to be much of a friend to you, for now.

Your friend may be being stalked by an unknown perpetrator and that could make your friend very suspicious of everyone, even you. Your friend may not be able to trust anyone.

You may have mutual friends or belong to the same group(s) as the perpetrator. This is common because often the perpetrator is known to the survivor. If the abuse is known about, other friends/people may take sides. This can be difficult for your friend and your wider friendships. Reassure your friend that you support, respect and believe them. It will help your friend, and you, if the people around you are people you can trust.

Although it is important to make allowances for behavior that probably stems from the abuse, if your friend's behavior is causing serious problems to your friendship, it is fine for you to say that. You have the right to discuss problems in your friendship, without that being seen as unsupportive

You may find that your friendship, although different, becomes stronger rather than weaker as a result of the experience.

Some ways you can help

There is a lot you can do to support your friend.

You cannot put yourself into your friend's shoes. Even if you have experienced sexual violence too, your reactions, responses and circumstances are likely to be different. What works or worked for you will not necessarily work for them. If you find that hearing about your friend's experience is bringing things up for you, or if you're finding it difficult to cope, call the **RCS Helpline** for support.

It can be hard to 'stand back' because you care about your friend, and you may be frightened for them or worried about the effect on your friendship. It is up to them to decide whether or not to accept your help or advice. Your help and advice also have to come at the right time for them. It is important for your friend to have some control. This is because, when people experience sexual violence, control is taken away from them.

Some suggestions are:

Listen to and believe your friend

- Listen to your friend. Give them time to talk. It can be tempting to tell them about your own experiences. Try not to do that as they need you to listen to them for now
- Good or 'active' listening means you help your friend to develop their own thoughts so they can look at options and make their own decisions. It means not taking sides, and not making decisions for your friend.
- Become comfortable with silence. Your friend may be thinking about how or whether to say something. They may not want to talk.
- Many survivors want to protect their friends from hearing about abuse, or are worried about how their friend will respond or that it will get you into some sort of trouble. The abuse may involve a mutual friend. So they may not want to tell you much
- If you need to ask questions - keep them open 'how are you feeling about that?' rather than 'are you feeling OK/angry/bad?' Avoid loaded questions and comments such as 'you could have done such and such couldn't you?' or 'you must be feeling terrible'
- Questions are not always helpful. You don't need to know the details of what happened in order to help someone. Also, it may 're-traumatise' your friend to have to go over it/try to remember it/and say the words
- Accept and believe what your friend says. Perpetrators often tell survivors that no-one will believe them. It is very hard for people to talk about abuse. Imagine what it must be like to pluck up the courage to talk about it.

- Don't judge your friend's story or be surprised if what they tell you does not fully add up. They may not tell you everything. They may not remember everything that happened, especially if it was a long time ago. Memory can also be affected by trauma or ill-health or shock or fear. They may have been asleep at the time, or unconscious, or a very young child
- If your friend talks to you about the sexual violence, it is good to tell them how brave they are for telling you, rather than ask why they never told you before

Accept how your friend reacts and what they decide to do

- However your friend reacts to abuse, accept and try to understand their reaction, even if you do not find some of these reactions very likeable or acceptable
- Rather than questioning what your friend does or did in order to cope with the violence, accept that they did and do what they think best to cope and to protect themselves and any children involved. For example, if someone raped your friend, self-protection may have meant not 'fighting back' as some people might think they should have been able to do. 'Freezing' is a natural survival response to danger (other survival responses are to run away or to fight). The brain takes over - people don't choose how they will react; it is automatic
- Your friend may have certain ties to the perpetrator and the wider family and/or community. If their partner or an ex-partner abused them, there may be children involved. If it was a family member or from your friendship group, they may still be around. This can affect other friends - and can become complicated. You may have concerns for your friend's safety, for your own safety or for the safety of others in your friendship group. It can be helpful to talk this through and plan how to make your friend or yourself/others safer, the **RCS Helpline** can help you with this
- Remember that your friend is not responsible for the abuse. If your friend blames themselves, it may help if you say to them that they are not to blame, that the perpetrator had a choice about how they acted

Respond safely and without directing them

- You want your friend to be safe and supported, and it can help to tell them so
- Listen and understand without trying to find solutions. You may think that a certain course of action is clear, but your friend needs to decide for themselves and find their own solutions. If you try to fix the problem for them, it might not be a good solution for them, or they might not be able to follow through on it. This could undermine your friend's confidence. It is important that they can set their own boundaries in order to take back control.
- Although you may think your friend should report the abuse to the police, it is not for you to approach the police or other services on your friend's behalf, unless they ask you to do that or unless a child is at risk (or you are very scared and think your friend is in immediate and serious danger)
- If you do not respect your friend's desire for confidentiality and privacy, that could also put your friend in danger. They may not have told you everything. They have 'insider' knowledge and may have a more realistic idea of the options, limitations or the risks they face than you.
- If they do want to report, you may be able to help. Your friend may appreciate your company if they go to see lawyers, police and so on. You can also help by taking care of any children while they attend appointments, take notes at appointments or help with transport. You may also be able to give evidence to support the case
- Don't take things into your own hands such as confronting the perpetrator, threatening them, assaulting them, telling them to 'lay off' and so on. This is unhelpful, unsafe and could also be criminal.
- Be patient and avoid putting pressure on your friend. It can be tempting to think or say things like 'you've just got to get on with it' or 'it's time to move on' or 'it happened years ago, forget about it'. But abuse, trauma and their effects are persistent. Even after someone has come to terms with what happened, and has healed from the immediate trauma, they may react to some trigger years later.

Practical ways in which you may be able to help

- Be consistent. If you offer your support then be there for your friend and do what you say you will do or be how you say you will be
- Try to find out what your friend needs from you, if anything. Don't assume what they want or need. Just let them know that you are there for them
- If your friend has panic attacks or flashbacks or nightmares or is self-harming or talking about suicide, it is useful to find out more about these symptoms of trauma, and learn what can help so that you can help your friend. The Rape Crisis Scotland website has a series of self-help leaflets with practical techniques. There are leaflets on:
 - **Anger**
 - **Coping after sexual violence**
 - **Dissociation**
 - **Flashbacks**
 - **Healing from sexual violence**
 - **Nightmares and sleeping problems**
 - **Panic attacks**
 - **Relationships**
 - **Self-harm**
 - **Sexual health**
 - **Suicidal thoughts/feelings**
 - **Trauma**
- You can find them at www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/help. Also tell your friend about these leaflets.

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- Your friend may not want to spend all (or any) of their time thinking or talking about the abuse. They may feel lonely at times. Think about nice things which you could do together, or which you could encourage them to do for themselves or with others. This could include walking or relaxation or going for coffee or to a film or watching TV together or other simple pleasures or treats which nurture them and make them feel cared for. These do not need to cost money and they can help your friend feel better about themselves and also see that they are worth caring for
 - Respect your friend's privacy. They may or may not want other people to know what has happened. You may want to keep it secret for your own reasons, for example, because it involves a mutual friend. But it is best if you can take the lead from your friend because secrecy may reinforce their feelings of shame and humiliation; forced secrecy may have been a significant element of the abuse
 - Encourage your friend to get help if you think they need this. This could include medical support for physical health issues; or support from a local Rape Crisis centre. Remind them that the [RCS Helpline](#) provides phone and email support

Look after yourself too

It is important to look after yourself too. You are likely to be more helpful, and a more effective friend, if you are OK. This may include:

- Asking for help for yourself and speaking to someone else about what is happening. Organisations which support survivors of abuse are happy for friends, relatives and others to phone for advice and support too. This includes the **RCS Helpline** and local rape crisis centres. Some centres offer phone or face-to-face support for family and friends - singly or in groups
- Setting limits about what you can and cannot do. Remember that you are not responsible for your friend or for the abuse. And you can't change what happened
- Finding an outlet for your own feelings - whether this is through sport or exercise or yoga or something else that suits you. It will not help you to simply deny your feelings (such as being upset for your friend). It will not help if you take your feelings out on your friend
- Finding out more about abuse and its effects so you can understand what is going on and why your friend is reacting the way they are:
www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk
- Taking time for yourself, your own interests and the things that you enjoy.



Rape Crisis Scotland National Helpline

Confidential support by phone and email

08088 01 03 02 (every day 6pm to midnight)

www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk

support@rapecrisisscotland.org.uk

The **RCS Helpline** offers free and confidential support and information by phone or email. It is for anyone over age 13 who has been affected by sexual violence, no matter when or how it happened. We also support friends, families and relatives.

The helpline has a minicom service for Deaf or hard of hearing people. The minicom number is **0141 332 2168**. We can arrange for language interpreters for those whose first language is not English.

We can put people in touch with local rape crisis centres or other services for longer-term support.

Many local centres have projects for young people and their friends; some centres offer one-to-one and group support for friends, partners and other family members.

The **RCS Helpline** aims to be inclusive and welcoming to all regardless of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership status, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, gender identity, intersex status or sexual orientation.

Other useful contacts

Scottish Women's Rights Centre

08088 010 789

Tues: 6-9pm

Wed: 1.30-4.30pm

free and confidential legal information and advice

www.scottishwomensrightscentre.org.uk



ChildLine

0800 1111

free and confidential support to children and young people of any age by phone, email, chat

www.childline.org.uk

Calls to ChildLine are free and confidential and do not appear on home phone bills; nor do calls from 3 (Three), BT Mobile, EE, O2, Orange, T Mobile, Virgin or Vodafone mobiles

NSPCC Scotland

0808 800 5000

information about child protection

www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-protection-system/scotland

WithScotland

information about child protection services

www.withscotland.org/public

Scottish Child Law Centre

0131 667 6333

free legal advice for and about children

Freecall under 21s

landlines: **0800 328 8970**

mobiles: **0300 3301421**

www.sclc.org.uk