



How to help a friend

No one wants to think that our friends or acquaintances might have been sexually assaulted or abused. Yet statistics suggest that we all know survivors, whether or not we're aware of it. Sexual assault and abuse survivors who receive positive social support are less likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, or substance abuse issues. Friends can help set the tone for the recovery process by focusing on the survivor and how to help, rather than focusing on the attack.

Supporting a friend after an assault, or during/after an abusive relationship, is hard. Often your friend might not recognize their partner as abusive, at least initially, or will struggle to name their experience of violence as such, particularly if they don't identify as female, or if they were assaulted by a good friend or partner (as most people are). It's scary to watch someone you love grapple with violence, regardless of whether it's ongoing or ended, and the best ways to support them are often counterintuitive. Below are some tips on how to help — and take care of yourself too.

Listen to and believe your friend. If someone comes to you with an experience of violence, recognize that it takes a lot of courage to come forward. Be fully present, and listen to what they are saying without judgment and with empathy. Do not interrupt them, try to solve the problem for them, or tell them how to feel. There is no “correct” way to deal with sexual violence or assault. Know that many survivors choose *not* to report to the police, for any number of reasons; this is normal and a valid choice, and does not reflect at all on the legitimacy of their experience.

Try: *Thank you for telling me about this... or What can I do to help you?* Try not to press for answers to questions they don't seem comfortable discussing.

Maintain confidentiality, but know your limits. Avoid telling other friends about what your friend has disclosed, even if you think that the survivor wouldn't mind or the friend wouldn't tell; but also know that you are not a trained therapist.

Try: *I'm available if you want to talk, but it might be helpful to talk to a counselor about your options. I can help you find a good person to talk to. I'm here for you.*

Direct your friend to other resources. Educate yourself about options for counseling and outside sources of help. Learn about Title IX and about the services and accommodations WPI may be able to provide your friend to help them feel safe.

Trust that your friend knows what's best for them. Don't force them to do something, just because you believe it is the "right thing to do." There are many valid, healthy choices a survivor can make in the wake of violence. If you have not experienced violence, it can be impossible to put yourself in their shoes. If you have undergone violence, understand that your experience, even if it seems very similar, might be quite different from your friend's experience.

Ask your friend how you can help. Sometimes the best thing you can do is just be a good listener, but sometimes it can be helpful to offer to walk a friend to class or to a therapy appointment, approach a teacher or parent with them, or help them develop a plan to stay safe at home and at school.

Support dating violence survivors. It can be hard to watch a friend experience dating violence, but it's important to stay connected and committed to helping your friend even (and especially!) if they choose not to end the relationship. Know that isolating someone from their circle of friends and support is a common tactic abusers use; to resist that, try to stay in touch and available if/when your friend needs help or support. Express your concern for their safety without using judgmental language and offer to help them get help.

Take care of yourself. Supporting a friend can be difficult. Make sure that you are taking the time to take care of your needs. If you are unsure of whether you are exercising good self-care, make an appointment with SDCC for a check-in.

Some phrases that might be helpful in supporting your friend:

- I believe you.
- It means a lot that you trusted me with this.
- You did not cause this.
- How do you want me to act when I see (the person accused)?
- May I look for some resources that might help?
- Tell me as much or as little as you want.
- If you need someone to come with you, I will.
- I'm here for you.
- I'm sorry this happened to you.
- I won't share this unless you ask me to (unless you are required to report, then be up front about what that means).
- It wasn't your fault.
- Want to hang out or do something fun?
- The decision about what to do next is yours.
- What would help you feel empowered and safe?
- How are you doing?
- I'll support whatever you choose to do.
- What can I do to support you?

Below is a list of frequently asked questions for friends wanting to help:

Why aren't all cases of sexual assault turned over to police automatically?

Anyone can file a report of a crime with the WPI Police Department or any other police agency; WPI does not make that choice for them. Those who want to file a report with law enforcement are encouraged to do so. WPI PD officers are fully-sworn police, with full powers of law enforcement and arrest, and with special training in crimes of interpersonal violence and sexual assault. If a student decides to turn to the police with a complaint of sexual misconduct, WPI will simultaneously conduct its own investigation of the allegation and takes appropriate action, as required by Title IX.

What if I hear of something but I'm not sure it's a Title IX offense?

Contact the Title IX Coordinator or a Deputy Title IX Coordinator with the information that you have. This person will get the necessary information to proceed accordingly. If it's not Title IX related, you'll be referred to someone on campus that can assist.

How can students help?

We are all responsible for preventing discrimination on campus. One of the best things students can do is stay involved in this conversation—to keep learning, thinking, and talking together. We are all working toward a safer, more respectful campus and the Title IX office welcomes your suggestions and input. It is particularly important to lend support to anyone considering filing a complaint; people need to know that their communities are behind them. Students should consider getting involved in SAVE or SPARC. More information can be found at: <https://www.wpi.edu/student-experience/resources/sexual-assault-violence-prevention/get-involved/prevention>.

For more information:

<https://centers.rainn.org/>

<https://www.unh.edu/sharpp/helping-friend>

<http://kyix.veracitymedia.com/for-friends-and-fami/>

<https://1in6.org/get-information/sorting-it-out-for-yourself/>

<http://www.thetrevorproject.org/pages/get-help-now>

What if I cannot find an answer to my question on this page or the Title IX website?

You can direct any additional questions to Melissa Pierce, Title IX Coordinator, mapierce@wpi.edu, 1-508-831-6514, or to one of the following deputies:

Deputy Title IX Coordinators

For students Emily Perlow, Assistant Dean of Students
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