

Be Strong

Best Practices in Responding to a Sexual Violence Disclosure

Sexual violence can happen to anyone. Survivors may choose to reach out to disclose their experiences to anyone. Sexual violence is a highly personal event that may be traumatizing. Many people choose not to disclose at all, or they may choose to respond to someone that they trust, not necessarily seeking out a “professional”.

It is important for all our community to be **STRONG** in how we respond. You don’t need to be an expert to respond supportively/compassionately to someone who tells you (discloses) about their experience with sexual violence. It’s okay to not have all the answers immediately at hand. All you need to remember is this **STRONG** message.

S

START by listening.

You don’t need to ask many questions. Don’t pry for information. Just listen without judgement. Be comfortable if there is silence.

T

TREAT the person with empathy.

Try to understand what the person is feeling, but don’t assume or tell them about your own personal thoughts or experiences.

R

RESPECT Confidentiality.

Sexual Violence is very personal. It is important to ensure the person’s confidentiality, recognizing that there may be limits to confidentiality. If it is necessary to report the disclosure to anyone, it is important that they understand how, with whom and why you will share the information.

O

OFFER Validation.

All someone needs to hear when they share an experience of sexual violence with you is “I believe you.” Don’t judge, question or blame.

N

Focus on what the person NEEDS in the moment.

Ask them what support or help looks like to them. Let go of assumptions and your own personal beliefs. Individuals will choose the support and reporting options (if any) that fit their needs.

G

Be GENEROUS with yourself.

Being trusted with a disclosure can have an impact on you. Do the best you can. Treat yourself with kindness. Always keep confidentiality in mind, but it is ok to ask for help if you need it.

1. Try to Provide a Safe Space

You may not have much control over when and where someone chooses to disclose, but whenever possible try to ensure that you are in a space that provides privacy. You want to ensure that you let the person know that you care about what they are saying, so try to minimize any distractions, like phones and computer notifications. People may feel vulnerable, so avoid touching them without their permission.

2. Maintain Confidentiality & Inform of Any Limits to Confidentiality

Before someone discloses full details, it is necessary for you to inform them what your obligations are with respect to confidentiality. There may be some instances (such as when there is an imminent safety risk for them or others) when it will be necessary for you to disclose minimal details to the BIT Team or Human Resources. Wherever possible, you want to ensure that the information that is trusted to you will be kept in confidence, so that the survivor can choose to whom and what they wish to share.

3. Listen Empathetically and Acknowledge their Experience without Judgement

Just listen. Try to make sure that your body language is open and be aware of your facial expressions and physical response to what you are being told.

Supportive statements would include things like:

- ▶ Thank you for trusting me to tell me this.
- ▶ I believe you.
- ▶ I'm sorry this happened to you.
- ▶ What I'm hearing is that you feel _____, is that right?
- ▶ There isn't one way you should be feeling. What you are feeling is ok.


This is the time to avoid:

- ▶ Making statements about where they were or what they were wearing
- ▶ Giving advice
- ▶ Suggesting in anyway that the survivor is to blame
- ▶ Asking if they were drinking or if there were drugs involved

4. Support the Individual to Make their Own Choices

No one chooses to be sexually assaulted. It is a crime of power and control, making it all the more important for the survivor to be in control of their own processes. Assiniboine respects the individual's right to make decisions for themselves concerning their next steps. Depending upon the circumstances and the nature of their disclosure, their choices may include:

- ▶ How much information they want to share and to whom
- ▶ Reporting or not reporting it to the police
- ▶ Contacting Assiniboine Security
- ▶ Seeking or not seeking medical attention (Seeking medical attention is the one follow-up that should be gently encouraged as to prioritize the survivor's well-being, health and safety.)
- ▶ Deciding whether or not to seek external counselling services
- ▶ Assiniboine's Sexual Violence Education & Prevention Policy



Once someone has shared what they wish about their experience, a good way to support their choices are to ask questions like:

- ▶ What would you like to do?
- ▶ Would you like me to call anyone for you?
- ▶ How can I help you?
- ▶ What's your biggest concern right now?

You aren't expected to support the individual throughout the entire journey, but these answers may help you connect them with people who will be able to support their next steps.

5. Recognize Your Own Limitations

You probably aren't an expert in sexual assault. You may not know all of the resources available in the moment. That's ok. Someone trusted you to tell you something that was incredibly personal and impacting.

From that point on, you need to know where to go so that you can provide someone with the information and resources that they need in order to make informed choices. Refer to the Assiniboine On and Off Campus Sexual Violence Resource List document to learn more about the resources available for support both on and off campus. This information is also available on the website.

6. Take Care of Yourself

Being trusted with a disclosure can be a stressful and it may have an impact on you. You may wish to seek the support of a counsellor to discuss any feelings that you may have about it. Employees and their families also have access to free and confidential counselling services through Homewood Health.

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